

Plans to put up eighty poles across the borough to denote part of the boundary of the country's first large-scale eruv have deeply divided both the Jewish and non-Jewish community in Barnet. What supporters say would be an

unobtrusive, almost invisible line-of-faith, easing the lives of young mothers and the disabled is to detractors an area which would end up isolating rather than integrating the Jewish community. For some, the prospect of wires stretched between poles carries

uncomfortable reminders of ghettos. Yet there are more than 100 eruvs already in existence in towns and cities elsewhere, mainly in North America but also in France, Australia, Canada and Gibraltar.

PAUL FRANCIS speaks to the Rabbi regarded as a leading expert on eruvs, looks at how one was set up in Washington and listens to the views of those who say the eruv would bring an end to Sabbath misery.

Battle lines

President Bill Clinton may not know it yet, but his new Washington home is in the middle of an eruv which has been in place for three years. The Keshet Israel Synagogue eruv provoked none of the hostility that has dogged the progress of the United Synagogue's application

EVERY Thursday, a small group of volunteers from the Keshet Israel Synagogue in the Georgetown district of Washington DC get into a truck and embark on a six-mile drive to examine some 350-odd telegraph poles.

It is a well-established weekly routine which arouses little interest.

As the truck drives around, checks are made to ensure there are no breaks in the wires which signal the boundary of the Keshet Israel's eruv.

Later, the information will be recorded on a "telephone hotline," which tells callers if the eruv perimeter is intact for the forthcoming Sabbath.

Covering a six square mile area, the Keshet Israel eruv is at the heart of Capitol Hill's diplomatic community, encircling both the White House and the Supreme Court.

At one point, the border runs alongside the Arlington Cemetery; at another it crosses the west bank of the famous Potomac River. Most of the boundary is represented by the river bank, roads and walls.

According to Rabbi Barry Freundel, the leader of Keshet Israel and the architect of the eruv, few people even know it is there. Fewer, if any, believe they are in the midst of a ghetto.

"I bet that if you asked people around here where the eruv was, they wouldn't be able to tell you."

Inspiration for the Keshet Israel eruv stemmed from Rabbi Barry Freundel's observation that young families were beginning to outnumber what traditionally had been an elderly congregation.

He viewed the eruv as a way of rejuvenating the relatively small 250-family congregation, offering couples with young children a reason to stay in the community.

It would be difficult to find a better model of how to establish an eruv without dividing a community or arousing hostility.

The irony that an eruv left Washington's "politically correct" community untroubled while a furious debate

continues to rage over one in London is not lost on supporters of the United Synagogue's application.

In fact, the Synagogue's ability to harness the goodwill of the local district planners, together with the company which owned the 350 telegraph poles, stands in stark contrast to the controversy which has overshadowed the eruv proposed for Barnet.

By the time the Keshet Israel eruv was complete, Rabbi Freundel had even received an unsolicited endorsement from then-President George Bush.

While years of personal experience and expertise advising on eruv projects across America clearly proved an advantage, persuading the authorities his eruv would not change the character of the Georgetown community, Rabbi Freundel says both the Jewish and non-Jewish community were unmoved by the prospect of wires being stretched between 350 poles.

"We had very little resistance. There was some concern about the aesthetic impact in certain areas, as you have had. But once we showed there would be little difference to the telegraph poles, that disappeared."

Early reservations among district planners unfamiliar with the concept were rapidly overcome, and no talk of the eruv creating a ghetto — a notion Rabbi Freundel dismisses as "ridiculous."

But eruvs elsewhere in America have not always avoided controversy.

In 1987, the American Civil Liberties Union unsuccessfully challenged plans for an eruv in New Jersey. It argued that the eruv placed permanent symbols of the Jewish religion on public property.

The Supreme Court ruled, however, that the boundary was "an almost invisible boundary in which its members may engage in secular activities on the Sabbath."

And the progress of an eruv in New York came to a halt when a group of non-Jewish residents appealed to the Supreme Court, alleging it created a "religious aura and metaphysical impact."

They, too, lost the case.

So what exactly is the point of an eruv?

THE ERUV campaign for the right to carry books and push prams on the Sabbath did not get off on the right foot.

This is the open admission of members of the Jewish Orthodox committee who put forward the plan for a seven square mile corral to ease the strictures of Rabbinic laws.

This symbolic enclosure would be marked out with posts along its borders around Hendon and Golders Green.

The name "eruv" is taken from the Hebrew word for blending and it creates a wider private area to relax some of the rules governing behaviour on the Sabbath. Mothers, for example, would be allowed to push prams along the pavement.

Jewish men have been getting round the carrying discipline by wearing their keys on elasticated belts for many years so they can lock up.

But for David Schreiber, executive officer of the United Synagogue Eruv Committee, the question of cheating is irrelevant.

Eruvs are not a bending of the rules, he insists. "Far from being a way of 'working round' a prohibition, we are positively encouraged to provide this amenity by defining an eruv."

Historically the private eruv zone is all that remains of the ancient town wall or the moat which surrounded a village.

There are already two small ones operating in Bell Lane, Hendon, and Woodlands Close, Golders Green.

The line of poles and wire does not have to be continuous. Actual buildings and natural features make up most of the nominal boundary which would follow roads, fences, and railways lines, including the M1 motorway and the Northern Line.

Just fear of the unknown?

ASK Rabbi Barry Freundel what he thinks about the United Synagogue's application to establish the first large-scale eruv in the country in Barnet and the answer is unequivocal.

"How can anyone be against something which allows mothers to take their children out, which enhances the quality of life for the people who use it and has absolutely no impact on those who do not?"

Such unqualified support from a man who has been the architect and adviser of 14 eruvs across the United States and one in Melbourne, Australia, is perhaps unsurprising.

He is the leader of the Keshet Israel Synagogue in Georgetown, Washington — where an eruv has been in place more than three years — and knows at first hand the hostility the concept can arouse.

"The opposition can be very deep. It does not surprise me that it has happened in a country like England which values its traditions so much. But there has really been no significant changes to those places which have eruvs now."

He bristles with indignation at suggestions that eruvs create ghettos, dismissing the argument as "ridiculous". He is equally contemptuous of claims that Barnet's eruv will end up isolating the Jewish community.

"That simply does not happen. If you are not using it, you do not know it is there. Nothing terrible happens to these communities."

He believes the much-publicised divisions and unease among detractors in Barnet stems from unease about an unfamiliar concept.

"There is no question that because it is the first one, there is this fear of the unknown. People tend to blow it out of all proportion because they are afraid."

In other communities where there was a hostile reaction initially, he claims, it rapidly evaporated once the eruv was in place.

"People simply become less conscious. Even people who use the one in Georgetown probably could not tell you where exactly the boundary is."

With three young children, Rabbi Freundel knows directly how eruvs can transform the lives of young families.

"My wife was stuck at home every single week and was out of touch."

Now her whole life has changed.

He predicts many other Jewish communities will follow suit if Barnet's eruv goes ahead — and with much less fuss.

"There will be nothing like the fighting which has gone on, I guarantee."

For Rabbi Freundel, the issue of religious tolerance which eruvs inevitably stir up is as important as the practical benefits they bring.

"You have to remember that you are not giving up very much, but we are gaining a great amount. It is extremely important for the Jewish community in terms of the free exercise of religion. People should be able to practise their religion unhindered. It would be a great shame if a modern democracy does not allow this eruv to go ahead."

For and against

LAST Saturday, Shoshana Maurer was able to leave her flat with her two young daughters for a short walk down the road for the first time in more than a year.

"It sounds crazy, but I did not think I could get as much pleasure as I did just by walking down the street. It was such a relief to get out."

Like many Jewish mothers with young children, Shoshana has anxiously been looking forward to the day when her 15-month daughter took her first steps. It means finally she will no longer be confined at home on the Sabbath because of the restrictions on carrying or pushing prams and buggy chairs.

Shoshana, who lives in Hendon, says it is almost impossible to convey the frustration and tensions being stuck at home can create — particularly on a day which by tradition is also supposed to be a family day.

"There have been times when I have cried out of sheer frustration. Living in a flat is worse because you don't even have a garden. I have not been able to invite friends over because they have been in exactly the same position as me. In the summer, the Sabbath is a very long day and if your children are misbehaving, it can be terrible."

Sara Orenstein, who also lives in Hendon, has three children aged three, two and one, and testifies to the misery that the Sabbath can bring.

"It is supposed to be an en-

joyable day for the family. But not to be able to see anybody else means it is more of a hardship for someone like me."

Young mothers like Sara and Shoshana are, unsurprisingly, among the most enthusiastic advocates of the eruv. But they acknowledge the painful divisions it has caused, even among their own close friends.

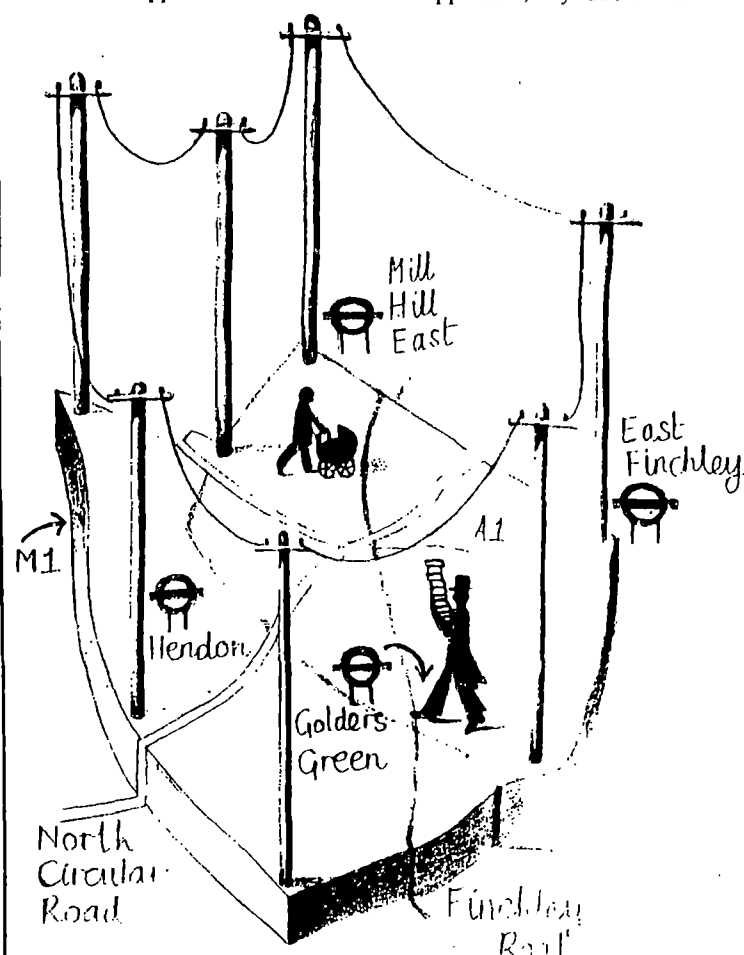
"It is sad that the Jewish community has split. They have this fear that it will cause a massive influx and there will be a sea of people walking up and down Golders Green Road every Sabbath. I do understand how people feel," says Shoshana.

For Beth Epstein, who has two young boys aged two and 18 months, the eruv has highlighted a difference in attitude between generations.

"Older people managed to do without one, so they wonder why we can't manage to do without one. But if you don't agree with it you don't use it."

All three regret that what is intended as a practical device to make their lives easier has led to such bitter division. If the eruv fails to go ahead, their disappointment will be all the more acute knowing that in scores of other towns and cities, the fears that have been voiced here have proved groundless.

"This is not a matter of throwing old principles out of the window but making life easier for people. If we get this far and it fails, I will be very disappointed," says Shoshana.



NICKY BOLSTER FINDS OUT HOW THE JEWISH MEMBERS OF BARNET COUNCIL FEEL ABOUT THE ERUV CONTROVERSY



● Julian Czarny: "There is nothing contentious."



● Joan Levinson: sees nothing to stop approval.



● Victor Lyon: religious aspects are irrelevant.



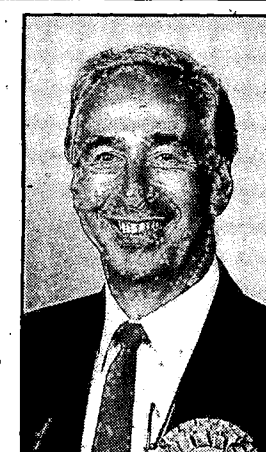
● Eva Greenspan: "It doesn't do any harm."



● Anthony Finn: "People are frightened."



● Helen Hart: "Every right to object to poles."



● Jack Clarfelt: "I hope it goes to full council."

Councillors as divided as community

FOR many of the Jewish members of Barnet Council — almost a third of the 60 councillors — the United Synagogue's controversial planning application to create an eruv poses a terrible dilemma.

Their views are as diverse as those of the Jewish community, and those representing wards where feelings are running high find themselves in an unenviable quandary.

Some feel the religious aspect of the planning application has nothing to do with the council and say the matter should be decided on planning grounds alone. Several have admitted they would benefit personally from the eruv while others welcome the difference it would make in the lives of Orthodox Jewish families.

The more secular councillors have no truck with the idea at all and believe the eruv, which would take in Hampstead Garden Suburb, Golders Green, Hendon and parts of Child's Hill, could have adverse effects on the community.

An eruv is a symbolically enclosed area within which Sabbath laws can be relaxed to permit carrying and the pushing of prams and wheelchairs. The United Synagogue eruv committee is seeking consent to put up poles between which they plan to span wire to mark parts of the boundary not defined by existing features such as the M1.

Liberal Democrat Jack Cohen, one of the councillors for Child's Hill ward, which is earmarked for a substantial number of the poles and home to a number of the most vocal objectors, said it was difficult to object on planning grounds. But he has not yet totally made up his mind how to use his vote on the planning committee.

"If you look at the wider issues it is problematic. Firstly my ward has the majority of poles and the most vociferous objectors. I understand their views, which are that it could cause division. They have put those views to me very strongly. An elected councillor has to take those into account — I can't ignore the strength of feeling."

His position is made even more difficult by the fact that more than 300 residents of his ward have signed the pro-eruv petition. His original view was that it would make people's lives easier.

"I still hold that view. I don't think it is any job of the councillor to make decisions about the religious aspects of it. I take the view that the application is a genuine one. It comes from the mainstream. Orthodox institution and as such it is very valid indeed."

At the planning meeting he would be putting forward the sensible objections which have been made to him. "There have been a lot of crazy things said and a lot of distressing and disturbing things. Some objectors who met with the eruv committee came away a lot happier. I think some fears are exaggerated."

He had listened to the people who would have poles outside their houses, and some locations had been changed. "I can't win whichever way I vote. I feel I need the judgement of King Solomon. I am not sure even he would be able to make the right decision."

"I wish the residents would make as much fuss about all the cuts in education and other services which are much more important."

Planning committee member Frank Davis, a Tory, said he was going to vote against the eruv.

"It is my impression that most of the Jewish councillors are not in favour of the eruv on various grounds, either for town planning or demographic reasons."

In my opinion nobody should look upon it with their religious beliefs either in the forefront or back of their mind. They should look upon it as a town planning matter or what is best for the London Borough of Barnet... My view is that it is a blight on parts of the Garden Suburb ward."

The original eruv committee petition sought to encourage members to bear in mind the religious aspects of the matter, he added.

"I have also to bear in mind that a substantial number of Child's Hill residents are so totally dissatisfied with their representation on the town planning committee by Jack Cohen that they have requested me to speak on their behalf and dissociate themselves from any comments he might make."

He was not satisfied that the eruv item on the town planning agenda complied with the law. "It appears to be in breach of various sections of English law."

Tory Jack Clarfelt said he would vote against the proposal if he were on the planning committee. "I would hope that it would go to full council as it is something that affects so many different wards."

"If it does I shall vote against it because I feel it introduces a degree of sectarianism into the community."

He believes that an eruv would encourage a ghetto. "Those Jews who are religious will naturally gravitate to inside it and I think that isn't desirable."

He describes himself as a secular person and belongs to a reform synagogue. "I am opposed to any form of extremism or fundamentalism in any religion of any kind."

Tory Anthony Finn said the eruv had become an issue that people did not understand. "People are scared and frightened. There are silly arguments for it and against it, but mainly against it."

"If the thing was put up tomorrow no one would know it was there. If you stick purely to planning grounds the argument then is: do these 85 or 90 poles really harm the population of the area? If one sticks just to those grounds I can't see really how anyone can ob-

ject to it.

"For myself it isn't an issue. I can manage very well without it. If I was on the committee I would vote in favour."

Tory Julian Czarny, on the planning committee, said he would be supporting the application. "In planning terms there is nothing that should make it very contentious. We are talking about adding relatively few poles to the street furniture. It has been exaggerated by opponents to represent something that it isn't."

Mr Czarny, who belongs to the United Synagogue in Edgware, understood people not wanting anything new near their houses but did not have much sympathy with the wider objections.

Liberal Democrat Monroe Palmer, a member of Golders Green Synagogue, said he was in favour of the application because it would make life much easier for Orthodox women with young children and the disabled without any real harm to anyone else. His rabbi Ivan Binstock is a strong supporter.

"I am rather upset sometimes at the comments that it would attract more Jews to the area. I don't think it would form a magnet in any way. It is rather offensive that people should even think it."

"The application might seem weird and strange to people but it is of negligible harm to the general populace. I would support it whatever religion it was. The Jews who object are mainly people who believe in assimilation of Jews into the populace and don't want to be seen to be different."

Planning committee member Victor Lyon, a Tory who describes himself as a Liberal Jew, said he had heard a lot of arguments for and against. "What one has to be careful of here is getting involved in any possible religious aspects. I am keeping an open mind."

"It will depend partially on letters and we have to make sure it doesn't contravene the Unitary Development Plan. Every planning application is supposed to be judged by its merits but very often those precedents are cited by others."

Tory Joan Levinson said it should be decided on planning grounds and nothing else. "My own view is that there is nothing to prevent it being agreed."

Her colleagues Malcolm Lester and Helena Hart agreed. Mr Lester said it was a planning matter and should be decided on that alone. "If I state my views I will upset people and I don't want to do that. If it goes to council I will vote for it as a planning matter."

Ms Hart also said such a matter should be decided by the planning and public works committees (she is not a member of either). People who would have an eruv pole outside their house had every right to object.

Tory Brian Salinger did not think an eruv

would be in the best interests of the broadest community in the long term. "My concern is that the council, in deciding this on technical criteria, hasn't given itself the opportunity to debate the wider issues."

Labour's Gerald Shamash supported the application but did not see the concept of relaxing religious law in the same way as the eruv committee. "You have a nonsense to cure a nonsense. That is their business. On planning grounds I can't see for the life of me how this can be turned down. It doesn't harm anyone."

He did, however, feel the eruv campaigners had handled the matter badly. "I have been lobbied by every rabbi known to mankind."

If the scheme had been proposed by any other religious group he would have treated it in exactly the same way.

Council leader Roy Shutz, who has in the past described himself as "wholly opposed" to the idea of an eruv, said he would have voted against the application if he had been on the planning committee. "I am going to leave it to the members of the planning committee who are experts to decide."

"I don't seek to usurp the role of the members of that committee. It is a rather technical committee and I don't pretend to be particularly knowledgeable about town planning matters."

Tory Veronica Soskin said she was against the eruv because all communities should live together. "We should not have a marked-off area for any particular community. We should all live as one."

She would say the same thing if the application had been made by the Catholic church. "I enjoy living in a multi-religious, multi-cultural society here in the Suburb. May we long continue to do so. Once you start, where do you stop? That is the problem. I don't see how you can make a decision to do this for one."

Tory Eva Greenspan, a member of the planning committee, said the issue would be decided on planning considerations alone. "There is nothing that one could object to. It is neither obtrusive nor detrimental to the environment."

"Personally I am for it. It doesn't do any harm. It doesn't cost any ratepayer's money. If it is going to help some people in some way I don't see why we should object to it."

Labour councillor Ellis Hillman was quoted in the Ham & High last week as saying that he would use the eruv personally if it got consent. He said it was the right of people to do what they believed in terms of their religion or non-religion as long as it didn't interfere with others.

Tory Leslie Sussman did not want to comment. The Ham & High was unable to contact planning committee member Melvin Cohen because he was out of the country.



● Veronica Soskin: "No marked-off area."



● Malcolm Lester: "My views will upset people."



● Monroe Palmer: "I am upset at comments."



● Jack Cohen: "I need the judgement of Solomon."



● Brian Salinger: "My concern is wider debate."



● Gerald Shamash: critic of pro-eruv lobbying.



● Ellis Hillman: would use the eruv personally.



● Roy Sutz: "not very knowledgeable."



● Frank Davis: "A blight on parts of the Suburb."



● Leslie Sussman... refused to comment.