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THE INDEPENDENT MAGAZINE

CRISIS IN KOSHER SUBURBIA

The large Jewish community of Barnet, in north London, is bitterly divided over plans to create an 'eruv'—a demarcated zone where the strict Sabbath restrictions followed by Orthodox Jews are relaxed. Next month, Barnet Council's planning committee must make a decision which, as one councillor admits, would tax the wisdom of King Solomon. By LEWIS CHESTER. Illustration by PETER TILL.





There are few more unlikely-looking ethnic battlegrounds than the discreet and wealthy suburb of Barnet in north London. Its qualities of understatement and English reserve are all the more impressive since they are often best represented by citizens who are Jewish or Arab or Japanese.

Until recently, Barnet Council, naturally Tory but progressive with it, regarded its leafy domain as the highest expression of racial harmony in the outer city, a model for the rest of Britain. Then along came the *eruv* proposal, and banished all such thoughts. "I have never, ever," says Barnet Councillor Jack Cohen, "known an issue capable of generating so many intense feelings and emotions among the voters."

What is an *eruv*? On the surface, it would appear to be a humanitarian idea, if more than a little weird. Essentially, it means a closely defined area inside which the Sabbath laws restricting Orthodox Jews are relaxed. Barnet's proposed *eruv* would consist of six square miles in the south of the borough, and would encompass Hendon, Golders Green, Hampstead Garden Suburb and some parts of Mrs Thatcher's old political stamping-ground of Finchley.

The *eruv* is seen by its proponents as a thoroughly modern, though anciently sanctioned, approach to a problem of social deprivation. The curiosity in this instance is that the social deprivation is itself created by strict religious observance.

Jewish law prohibits the carrying of objects outside the home on the Sabbath. As this extends to the pushing of wheelchairs and prams, the ban keeps many Orthodox families housebound on Saturdays. A truly observant Orthodox Jew may not leave home with house keys or a walking-stick, or even so much as a handkerchief. But within an *eruv*, which draws its symbolism from the security afforded by an ancient walled city, these prohibitions cease to exist.

In Barnet, the *eruv*'s 11-mile perimeter would usefully coincide for most of its course with existing boundaries – housing, fencing and, for two long stretches, the M1 motorway and the overground section of the Northern Line. But in the south of the borough where there are gaps in the perimeter (mainly roads), some 110 poles of a telegraph type would need to be deployed to render the venture kosher. They would be aligned in pairs, representing "gateways", and would be linked with wire, at a height of 21 feet, symbolically indicating that the gate is closed. (An entire volume of the Talmud is devoted to the *eruv* and the proper methods of pole and wire construction that can transform a large public domain into a private one.) Some 10,000

Orthodox Jews living in Barnet would be immediate beneficiaries, while the *eruv*'s other 130,000 inhabitants would, it is claimed, scarcely be aware of its existence.

Eruvs of this type are standard features in Israel and common in American cities, but the one proposed for north London, with the backing of the Chief Rabbi, Jonathan Sacks, and the United Synagogue, the largest Orthodox organisation in the Commonwealth, would be Britain's first, though there are plans for many more.

The appeal to the imagination of Barnet's *eruv* is such that it excites fierce passions even among voters who are outside its frontier and miles from the nearest proposed pole. For every letter local councillors get lauding the promise of new Sabbath freedoms, they are likely to receive another of a darker cast.

At the end of last year, Milina and Frank Popper, refugees from Hitler's Europe, wrote to Barnet Council's planning group: "If the posts and wires as proposed are erected, every time we look out of our living room or bedroom window or leave the house, we will be faced with this reminder of concentration camps posts and wire and the division of areas for Jews and non-Jews."

"After the War there remained from both our families only one sister who survived Auschwitz. She subsequently had years of treatment and we hate to think what her reaction would be when she visits us and is confronted with these poles and wires."

There have been suggestions that the poles, and the *eruv* itself, could become a focus for racial vandalism and anti-Semitic attacks. There is also a deep nervousness about precedent in what, below the suburban veneer, is a profoundly polyglot society. The second largest ethnic minority in Barnet after the Jews is the Japanese, and, at the last count, no fewer than 100 different languages were spoken by children in the borough's schools. If the *eruv* goes through, opponents ask, can there be any grounds for refusing a demand for Shinto arches down the Golders Green Road – or totem poles on Hampstead Heath?

On Barnet Council the *eruv* has become the most divisive and havoc-wreaking topic since the arrival of the poll tax. Under the stress of considering its civic features – the *eruv*, to be viable, must have public works and planning consent for the poles and wire – old alliances and friendships have come under strain and, in some instances, completely snapped. And worse is yet to come.

Next month the borough's planning committee has to make the crucial decision that will either ensure the *eruv*'s future or check its advance. All that can be

confidently predicted about the outcome is that the parties will be bitterly split.

Originally, it seemed possible to isolate the *eruv* as "a Jewish issue", to be sorted out quietly by the Jewish councillors, but the reverberations of the dispute have now gone too wide for containment. By far the strongest denunciation of the *eruv*'s alleged potential for "ghettoising" the area appeared in an Anglican vicar's newsletter.

The ostensible suddenness of the *eruv* debate is almost entirely due to Alan Kimche, a rabbi who combines charisma with a talent for long-term strategic planning. Rabbi Kimche is not on the United Synagogue's *eruv* committee but everybody involved in the project – up to, and possibly including, the Chief Rabbi – defers to his judgement. It is not difficult to see why. He is built like a front-row forward and his thought processes seem equally robust.

The *eruv* idea is, Kimche says, "consumer-led", in that it arose from people in his synagogue who had experienced *eruv* life at first hand in Israel and the United States. In 1988 he prevailed upon the then Chief Rabbi, Lord Jakobovits, to issue a statement saying that there was "no impediment" in Jewish law to a British *eruv*. It was scarcely a ringing endorsement.

The first stage of his campaign, which was virtually unpublicised, involved the acquisition of powerful allies. The Jewish religious court the London Beth Din was persuaded to smile upon the venture and a key alliance was forged with the United Synagogue, which has a particularly strong presence in Barnet, where it controls the four largest synagogues. The second and public stage of the operation began in 1991 when the United Synagogue first outlined its proposal to Barnet Council's public works committee.

Much of the controversy surrounding the *eruv*, Kimche claims, misses the point. Its symbolism is important only to observant Jews; to other people, "it is no more enclosing than a postal district". He sympathises with the reservations expressed by Jews of the Holocaust era, but also points out that many Jewish leaders, like Jonathan Sacks, Lord Jakobovits's successor as Chief Rabbi, were born after the War, and feel the need for change to meet the needs of younger generations (Kimche himself is 41). In the multi-ethnic society that Britain has become, it no longer makes sense, says Kimche, "for Jews to try and be as invisible as possible".

Almost a third of Barnet's 60 councillors are Jewish, but there is nothing remotely resembling a block vote. In fact, there are Jews in the upper reaches of all three

political parties, and their theological views span an even wider range, from the most free-thinking rationalism to the most fundamentalist Orthodoxy. It makes any kind of party discipline on the *eruv* issue an impossibility, but it is the Liberal Democrats who probably have the worst of it. Of their three councillors, two are Jewish and they represent the Child's Hill district near the Finchley Road where the proposed *eruv* poles are most concentrated, and local feeling against their erection is most intense. Jack Cohen, one of the beleaguered councillors, says, "I feel like King Solomon, torn almost down the middle."

Roy Shutz, the crisply spoken retired barrister who is the Conservative leader of the council, is also Jewish but has absolutely no sense of being torn. He detests the *eruv*. What Kimche views as an up-to-date approach to a social problem of modern Judaism, Shutz sees as the perpetuation of a superstition already outmoded by the 15th century. "It represents", he says, "a provocation, and a defeat for integration."

Shutz is particularly sceptical of arguments for the *eruv* based on the Israeli and North American experience. Israel, he believes, can scarcely be regarded as a model for a racially diverse area of north London, while the big cities in North America are often formed by a patchwork of ethnic enclaves – precisely the type of development that race relations experts in this country most want to avoid but which could, Shutz claims, only be given impetus by the *eruv* concept.

Last June the *eruv* progressed through the public works committee, stormily but successfully. This meant that the poles and wire were sanctioned as permissible "street furniture". It only remained for the planning committee to pronounce on the scheme's visual aspects and, in a borough which already had 40,000 poles on its streets, another 110 did not appear to be an issue of vast proportions. But the *eruv* bandwagon started to slow down.

In the readers' letters pages of the local press the *eruv* became, perilously for a concept of such high solemnity, something of a joke. A number of creative suggestions were made to the effect that an *eruv* might be better defined by the M25 motorway, or the coastline of Britain, or even the ozone layer. One correspondent gave thanks for the inclusion of part of Hampstead Heath in the *eruv*: "We gay Jews will now be able to cruise on the Heath during the Sabbath, which can't be bad."

There has also been some rallying of the borough's formidable intellectual classes. Shutz can now look for support outside

the council to Lord McGregor of Durris, the chairman of the Press Complaints Commission, to Edmund Dell, a former Labour cabinet minister, and to a range of professional people, Jewish and non-Jewish. Much of this opposition was generated by what became known as the Battle of Hampstead Garden Suburb, in which some citizens felt they detected signs of the intolerance that can lurk behind a fundamentalist position.

The Suburb occupies a position of special prestige in the borough. Originally created in 1907 by the philanthropist Dame Henrietta Barnet, it now has 15,000 inhabitants, three places of worship – Anglican, Non-conformist and Orthodox Jewish – and no pubs. Its political clout has dwindled since the days when Harold Wilson and four members of his cabinet lived there, but it is still a place with a bright image of itself.

For all this, the annual general meeting of its sovereign body, the New Hampstead Garden Suburb Trust, has rarely aroused much excitement. In most years it has been hard to lure more than 60 members into attendance, even with a guest speaker and cucumber sandwiches.

At last year's AGM, held on 22 September in the Suburb's Free Church Hall, they were practically hanging from the rafters and raucous with it. The Orthodox had come out in force to excoriate Lord McGregor, the Trust's chairman, for sanctioning a letter to the planning committee which described the *eruv* proposal as "divisive".

After a long, torrid session, a vote of no confidence in the chairman was called for. McGregor resigned on the spot. Some of the older women members who remembered the decorous AGMs of yesteryear were seen to be in tears.

When the groggy Trust officials got around to a retrospective check of the credentials of the 119 people who had actually signed in for the meeting, they found that half were not registered as Trust members and that a fair number did not live in the Suburb. Lord McGregor later wrote to the Chief Rabbi complaining of "rent-a-mob" tactics by *eruv* supporters.

A more painful body-blow to the *eruv* cause was delivered by Chaim Bermant, the prolific humorist and writer whose many books include an authorised biography of Lord Jakobovits. A Suburb resident, Bermant described the AGM experience in his column for the *Jewish Chronicle*: "As an example of how to incur ill-will and alienate people, the occasion could not have been bettered. It also showed how anti-Semitism can be provoked among kindly, civilised people who have never previously harboured a hostile thought against anyone." ●