

Jewish Chronicle

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Eruv basics

The proposal for a North-West London eruv, defeated after much ill-informed and overheated debate earlier this year, comes up again next week for the first of two appeal hearings. As things look now, the eruv proponents may well lose the first appeal, although they could well win the second. In the long term, however, the outcome may prove less significant than the political forces churned up by the eruv application. That the issue should have sparked debate is both understandable and entirely proper — despite the fact that dozens of communities worldwide, ranging from America to Australia, have approved eruvin without significant controversy, much less any ill effect. But aspects of the great London eruv battle have been deeply unsettling. For one thing, the main impetus for opposition seems to have come not from non-Jews — ostensibly those “threatened” by the eruv — but from Jews. Moreover, anti-eruv activists have clouded the issue with all manner of misrepresentations of what an eruv is, and what its effects would be. The simple facts bear repeating. An eruv is a notional boundary which, under Jewish law, symbolically converts a public space into a private one — thus allowing Orthodox Jews to “carry” some items otherwise prohibited on the Sabbath. Specifically, it would allow the strictly observant to push prams or wheelchair-bound relatives, in order to attend synagogue, or visit friends. Physically, the construction of the eruv would require the implanting of several dozen unadorned poles — in addition to the hundreds already used for telephones or electricity — joined by nearly invisible filament wire. To call this a blight on the environment, as was argued during the rejection of the original scheme, is, to say the very least, hyperbole. To suggest even a tenuous link, as did one recent pamphlet, between an eruv and ethnic cleansing in Yugoslavia borders on the obscene.

The expanded opposition that has emerged during the appeal process has raised further specific objections. Why can't Orthodox authorities, in the spirit of the late 20th century, simply declare the centuries-old constraints on carrying null and void, it is asked. Also questioned have been the estimates that thousands of people would benefit. As few as 100 parents or invalids might be affected, one counter-estimate maintains. But all this obscures a simple, fundamental issue. For Orthodox Jews, the halachah does, immutably, matter. To them, an eruv would matter. Even if as few as 100 people would find their lives enriched — by a project with virtually no effect on the landscape, and no financial cost to the wider community — it deserves support. If a non-Jewish minority were the beneficiaries of such a scheme, most of Anglo-Jewry would — quite properly — support it. How sad that, when fellow Jews are at issue, myopia sets in. Worse, the spurious issues of potential ethnic friction with which some opponents have stoked the eruv debate could prove a self-fulfilling prophecy — undermining the “multi-ethnic” Britain of which so much is said, but for which so much still remains to be done.

Rabbis' refusal to say peace prayer

Like many of my fellow congregants at Edgware (United) Synagogue this Yom Kippur, I was saddened to hear Rabbi Benjamin Rabinowitz describe the Israeli-PLO peace accord as a “terrible mistake.” Nor could I understand his refusal to recite special peace prayers, as advocated by Chief Rabbi Jonathan Sacks.

The division of opinion on the peace issue is, it seems, largely along religious lines. Rabbi Rabinowitz has told his congregation that land is more important than life — a view to be abhorred. And right-wingers denigrate the agreement as advocating a merely “political” peace as against the “spiritual” peace for which we yearn in our prayer every Shabbat for the State of Israel.

For those of us unable to understand such nuances, the case for reciting peace prayers is overwhelming. Even those who oppose the agreement must surely agree with Ariel Sharon, who said in the Knesset on September 9 that it is now a *fait accompli* and that efforts should be made to amend it, thus minimising the risks, rather than to abrogate it.

If the agreement were to bring in its wake a backlash of bloodshed from Islamic fundamentalist groups, the peace would indeed be lost. Our

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Who is to blame for BNP win?

The impact of the British National Party's by-election win in East London should not be exaggerated, but neither should we be complacent. There are a few other “Millwalls” waiting to happen.

The behaviour of the local parties, and the “holier-than-thou” condemnations by their national leaders, are both sickening and hypocritical. They, and especially the government, have been warned many times that they must take their share of the blame for what is happening.

If the Crown Prosecution Service, the Attorney-General and the police had vigorously applied the laws dealing with racial incitement and the distribution of racist material, the local voters may not have been exploited and misled into scapegoating racial and ethnic minorities as being responsible for the social and economic deprivation that exists in their constituency.

The lesson has to be driven home that there is no place in a free and democratic society for those who misuse that freedom and whose ultimate aim is its destruction.

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