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Eruv of reconciliation

The old joke inevitably comes to mind, about the Jew who chooses to go golfing on Yom Kippur, only to be punished by the Almighty with a hole-in-one. "Who," the punch line goes, "is he going to be able to tell?" When the Environment Secretary's long-awaited ruling on the North-West London eruv was announced, on Wednesday morning, most of the rabbis and lay leaders who had fought hardest to win approval for the plan were, of course, in synagogue. Even there — notably in the independent Orthodox Ner Yisrael congregation, a prime mover in the eruv proposal — word got out. Inevitably, spontaneously, a celebration ensued. Celebration — as opposed to a potentially divisive spirit of triumphalism — is entirely merited. For many months, a scheme which will greatly enrich the Sabbath for Orthodox Jews, notably for the parents of small children and for the disabled, without penalising or encroaching upon anyone else, has been mired in largely senseless controversy. Significantly, much of the opposition to the eruv has come from Jews. Some argued that the addition of several dozen nondescript wooden poles would somehow blight the environment. That argument was clearly about as thin as the filament between eruv poles — as John Gummer concluded in his decision to approve the proposal, and as even many opponents of the eruv must have recognised. It is difficult to escape the conclusion that other, unspoken concerns were at work — specifically, a fear among some Jewish opponents of the eruv that the scheme, and the debate surrounding it, might uncomfortably heighten the profile of Jewishness and Judaism in the wider community. It is equally difficult to ignore the lamentable fact that many of those Jews who bridled at the idea of an eruv would — quite properly — have reacted with openness, tolerance and empathy if an analogous proposal had come from another of Britain's ethnic communities. The similar calls this week, by both proponents and opponents of the eruv, for a spirit of reconciliation in Anglo-Jewry and the wider non-Jewish community are immensely welcome. In that context, the eruv plan should be implemented in the spirit that it deserves: as an example, in a truly multi-ethnic society, of a move to enrich the lives of one group — with care, sensitivity and respect for those who may neither need, nor want, its benefits.