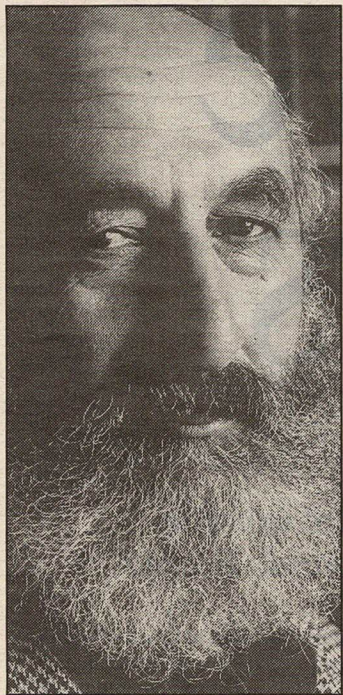


*On the
other hand*



Chaim Bermant

The Mib fail to cancel the high-wire act

AS THE WORD is likely to find its way into the next edition of the Oxford dictionary, I had better define it now.

An eruv is a device which renders permissible some actions normally forbidden on the Sabbath and festivals. Such devices have several applications, but the expression is commonly used to refer to a notional boundary, usually in the form of overhead wires, which symbolically converts a public domain into a private one, thus enabling Jews to carry on the Sabbath.

Once the word strays into general circulation, it will come to mean a licensed way of doing something you shouldn't. Thus, for example, a sprig of mistletoe at Christmas may come to be known as an eruv because it enables people to kiss complete strangers without being accused of sexual harassment.

When Environment Secretary John Gummer announced that he was permitting the creation of a North-West London eruv, I was phoned by two national papers which wanted to know how it would affect non-Jews and non-Orthodox Jews? Would it mean the creation of a ghetto?

I replied that the ghetto was

already there, self-created and self-preserved, and that the eruv would affect only about 4,000 or 5,000 Orthodox Jews, who accept the word of their rabbis as the word of God. As for non-Jews and non-Orthodox Jews, they wouldn't even know that the eruv existed.

I suppose if we had a Jewish honours system, the begetters of the eruv campaign — Rabbi Allan Kimche, and a range of other figures, notably in the United Synagogue — would each get a knighthood, if not a peerage, for it cost them many a sleepless night, and a great deal of time, money and heartache.

Some of the heartache was self-inflicted, especially when some eruv-enthusiasts tried to steamroller the scheme through a meeting of the Hampstead Garden Suburb residents' association. It was a high-wire operation from the beginning, and a steamroller is not the best device to use on a high-wire.

But what nearly destroyed the scheme was not the objections of the HGSRA, or of non-Orthodox Jews who feared that the eruv would symbolise a return to the ghetto, but the evidence given to the public inquiry by the holiest of the holy, the men in black — known hereinafter as the

Mib — from Stamford Hill, Golders Green and Hendon, who argued in emphatic terms that the eruv was unacceptable in Jewish law.

That Mr Gummer nevertheless ruled in favour is, I am convinced, due less to the actual merits of the case than to his feeling that, if he had turned down the eruv, the word would spread that English society was riddled with anti-Semitism.

The word had already begun to spread after the HGSRA meeting, but the residents of the Suburb were merely as anxious to preserve the amenities of their neighbourhood as observant Jews are anxious to preserve their traditions.

Their fears may have been unfounded, but the high-handed attitudes of the pro-eruv party did little to put them at rest.

We are all careful to protect and assert our religious rights, but non-Jews also have rights. And so, for that matter, do even non-religious Jews, whom Rabbi Kimche, in one of his less felicitous asides, denounced as self-haters.

The affair has not enhanced the standing, or rather understanding, of traditional Judaism in the wider community.

It must have been a shock for

those who liked to think that Judaism was reasonable and compassionate, to be told that cripples and mothers with infants were incarcerated in their homes on the holy Sabbath — at least where they lacked non-Jewish au pairs — and that they needed a succession of high-wires over telegraph poles before they could take an aged relative out in a wheelchair, or an infant out in a pram.

As if that were not bad enough, there came the insistence of the Mib that even the measure of humanity evident in the eruv was not kosher. If ever there was an example of a *chillul Hashem*, this was it.

Well, it's all over now, bar the shouting, but there will be quite a bit of shouting.

It was, I think, the late Chief Rabbi Israel Brodie who invented the unfortunate expression, "Torah-true Jews." We shall now have Torah-true Jews who will make use of the eruv, and Torah-truer Jews who won't — or the eruvim and the eruvless.

The eruv will certainly make life easier for some. For others, it will provide a new occasion to be holier than the rest which, I suppose, is a benefit of sorts.