

Boundary Issues

The North-West London eruv is poised to be built, finally — or is it? Nathan Jeffay reports on the women who want it and the women who don't

Jews are family people, reaffirms the Chief Rabbi, Dr Jonathan Sacks, in his latest book, "Radical Then, Radical Now." And Shabbat brings the family together. But the arrival of sunset every Friday holds a less cohesive prospect for Gila Rose, from Golders Green, and thousands of other observant Jewish mothers.

On Shabbat, according to Jewish law, one may not, among other things, carry anything outside one's own home and garden. And one may not push a pram. So Gila, a mother of three, is unable to leave her house.

"Being stuck at home for the whole of Shabbat is awful," she says, "especially when bad weather means we can't even go into the garden. We want to go out as a family, but the children can't make the walk. It's difficult for me, at home, while my husband needs to go to *daven*."

Hinda Lasky, a Wembley optician, whose children are now grown up, believes that an eruv should be in place wherever there is a large Jewish population.

[An eruv is a boundary allowing observant Jews to carry within its confines on Shabbat, as it gives the area the status of a walled city — if you like, an extended home.]

Mothers, young children, the disabled and the elderly would benefit most: it would become permissible to push people in wheelchairs, use walking sticks and carry medication, spectacles, or food for the sick.

"If men were the ones who had to stay at home every Saturday, and could not take the pram out," says Hinda, "there would have been eruvs all over — long ago."

London's proposed eruv, in the borough of Barnet, North-West London, has been under discussion for 13 years.

Originally proposed in 1988 and endorsed by the late Chief Rabbi, Lord Jakobovits, and by Rabbi Sacks, it has been delayed by continued opposition from residents, Jewish and non-Jewish.

After receiving Department of Environment approval back in 1994, protesters launched two High Court challenges, both of which were unsuccessful.

They object to the erection of the poles, linked by thin wire, to comply with rabbinic law. Some of the objectors are against the prospect of more Orthodox Jews moving into the area, which they say, would create social upheaval.

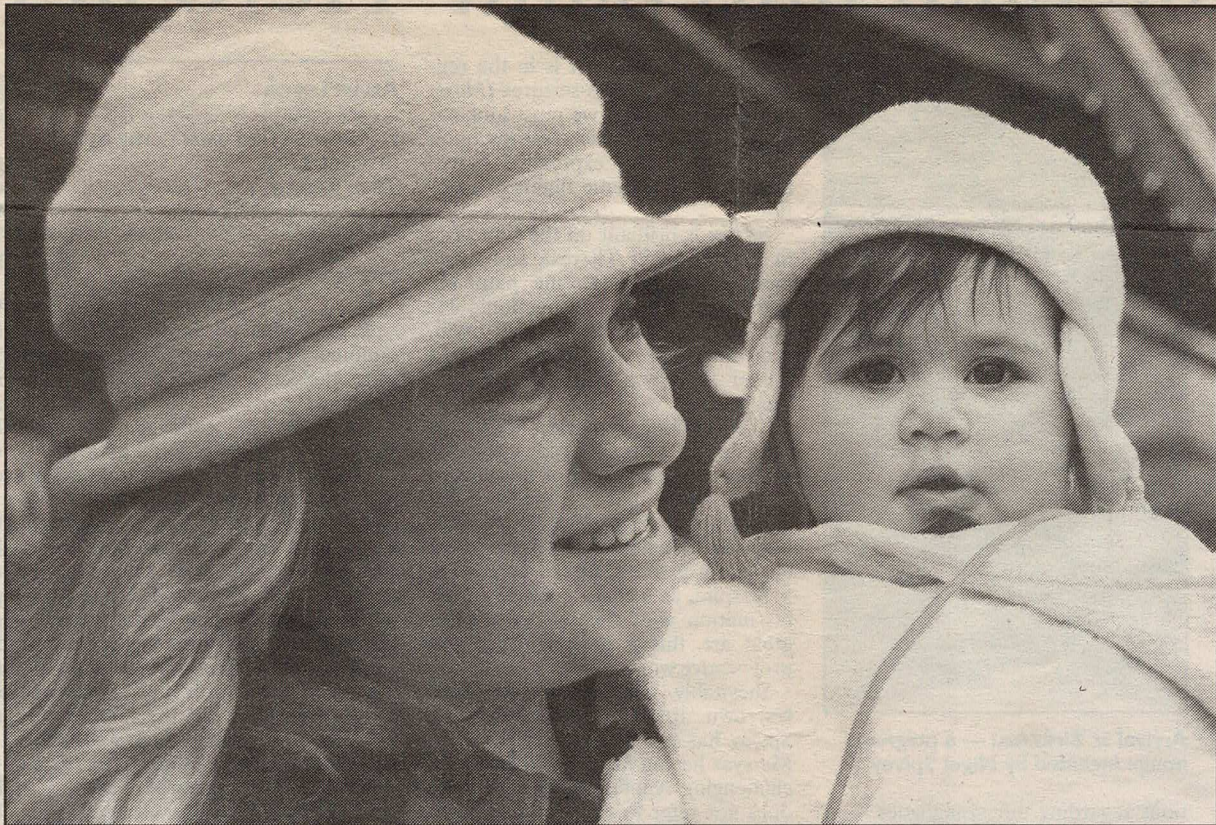
Supporters like Andrea Walker, however, a Hendon mother of three, says she is "desperate for an eruv. It would mean I can have friends over who would be able to bring their kids, go to shul, and to the park in the summer."

"I would be able to wear my Shabbat clothes to go out," she adds, smiling. "Shabbat would be far more sociable." Andrea recalls a "great" Shabbat spent in Israel — "we went out as family."

But some Orthodox rabbis doubt whether the proposed eruv will be religiously acceptable.

The late head of the Union of Orthodox Hebrew Congregations, Rabbi Hanoah Padwa, declared his opposition to the eruv from the outset and publicly spoke out against it.

Now, in a pattern that has become all-too-



Mothers in arms: clockwise: Gila Rose: "being stuck at home for the whole of Shabbat is awful"; Sonia Bloch: "Eruvs should be built everywhere"; Andrea Walker (and Millie): "It would mean I could go to the park in the summer"

familiar, Finchley and Golders Green Labour MP Rudi Vis has written to Environment Secretary John Prescott asking him to re-examine the proposal, which in February was given the go-ahead by Barnet council.

But Edward Black, spokesman for the United Synagogue eruv committee, is hopeful the eruv will be "up and running before long." The eruv committee is now awaiting final approval from the Transport for London body, formerly the Highways Agency.

Mr Black estimates that the eruv will benefit some 2,000 observant Jewish families.

"We're fully aware of the benefits to women this would make," he explains. "That's why

we've put so much effort into making this project happen."

But many women feel confused by objections from Orthodox rabbis outside the United Synagogue. One woman, who asked not to be named, is "afraid to say anything about it." But she remarks: "It would make a mega difference to me. But I know my rabbi is against it. I don't understand why, but I do know that my Shabbat gets very boring."

Leading Orthodox rabbis outside the United Synagogue, who also did not want to be named — among them, prominent figures from the Federation, the Sephardi community, and well-known shtiebls — declined to confirm whether

or not they would endorse the validity of the eruv. They raised doubts about whether the regular inspections on the poles and the wire — to ensure that the boundary had not been broken — would conform to their strict standards.

"I don't understand the rabbis — why they don't say yes or no to an eruv," says Ada Rachel, a North London mother. "But they don't, and whether or not I agree, I'm bound by their ruling."

Chani Smith, a Golders Green mother of one, was also confused by her rabbi's stance. "It's slightly contentious," she acknowledges. "I'm not sure if I would actually use the eruv. It depends on what my rabbi rules."

At the other end of the scale, the anti-eruv campaigners fully intend to continue their protests — with sabotage, if necessary.

Cricklewood resident Muriel Marks threatens to take direct action if the eruv is built and vows: "If they put a pole up in my road, I'll have it chopped down."

She says the religious reasoning behind the eruv is hard to respect and understand. "Only God absolves sin, not poles and wires," she remarks.

Madeleine Simms, a member of the Eruv Boundary Opponents Group, claims the eruv is the project of "a small and fanatical minority. People shouldn't inflict their religious practices on others."

She adds: "It is very undesirable if individual religious denominations ask for special religious privileges. It will mean that Muslims could then ask for a prayer tower, and the Hindus for whatever they want."

"For instance, there are Jewish schools, and now the Muslims want their own schools," she comments. "None of the Jewish people I know supports the eruv."

One of the Jewish eruv objectors, Eva Jacobs, says she feels concerned about the social conflict the proposals have caused and wonders if it is "an attempt to alter the demographic profile of the area..."

"The proposed eruv will encompass some 60,000 people who have not been consulted or asked for their consent to be included," she explains.

It "has aroused bewilderment and resentment among people who have never before thought of their neighbours primarily as Jews, and some anti-Semitic sentiments have been provoked."

But a Hendon mother of three, Sonia Bloch, says the problems would be solved if eruvs were more common. "Build them everywhere," she says. Then they will not cause "any fuss," nor be a factor for "where people want to live... I come from Antwerp, where there has been an eruv since before the Second World War, and it was never controversial. That should be the way here. If it were so, it would really make a difference to women's Shabbat."

Outside London, the need for an eruv is not regarded as a hot issue. The registrar of Manchester Beth Din, Yehuda Brodie, says: "In terms of priorities at the moment, it is not really an issue. The Beth Din has its work cut out with divorces, court cases and kashrut. We need to respond to our current pressures."

He describes the subject as "dormant. There are little revivals from time to time, but plans have never got as far as official proposals. We want to see the London one in place to give ours impetus."