

Bring on the strollers

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"Did you hear? The eruv is really up. Robbie Nussbaum's mother came to shul in her wheelchair for the first time in nearly 20 years on Shabbat!"

"Amazing. Did you see? Dayan Ehrentreu and Rabbi Kimche walking along Golders Green Road carrying their siddurim. Incredible."

There was dancing in the streets of Hendon this past Shabbat as London's Orthodox community celebrated the inauguration of its first *eruv*: a notional boundary recognized by Jewish law within which it is permitted for people to carry items and push wheelchairs or prams on Shabbat.

Many a baby has graduated from her pushchair since Rabbi Alan Kimche of Congregation Ner Yisrael launched the project in 1987 with the imprimatur of Dayan Chanoch Ehrentreu, London's Av Beth Din (head of the Rabbinical Court).

The eruv covers most of Golders Green, Hendon, Hampstead Garden Suburb and Finchley, a large swathe of north-west London, where, according to the Eruv Committee, more than 10,000 people would benefit.

In 1992, the first applications were made to Barnet local council for planning permission to erect the eruv within an 11-mile perimeter. As 10.4 miles are made up of major highways and train tracks, the remainder of the territory necessitated 82 posts and a little more than 1,000 meters of fishing line.

Finally, after 10 years of objections and appeals, planning permission was finally granted in August 2002 and the poles have been quietly going up until they were ready for action last weekend.

For London's Orthodox community, Shabbat takes on new meaning now that women with toddlers have been liberated

WHAT took so long? Part of the answer is that a section of the eruv cuts across Hampstead Garden Suburb, a prestigious, expensive neighborhood with a somewhat snooty attitude that the English have perfected.

While there are many Orthodox families in the area who now benefit from the eruv, they are the sort of Orthodox people don't generally mind: professional, attractive, Land-rovers with a Poggenpohl kitchen and four kids max.

Most of the opposition to the eruv came from Hampstead Garden Suburb non-Jews and ambivalent Jews.

Non-Jewish objections were couched in

terms of wanting to preserve the harmonious character of the neighborhood and protect the environment from unnecessary changes (i.e. the poles needed to construct the eruv). Anyway, why benefit a few people who voluntarily restrict their Sabbath activities?

Non-Jewish reaction was legitimized – and fuelled – by a small group of Jews who voiced vociferous opposition to the eruv at every public opportunity.

Led by Mrs. Elizabeth Segall, who set up the Eruv Boundary Opponents' Group, opponents claimed an eruv would remind them of the barbed wire around Auschwitz; that there was no place for a shetl in their suburb, and that the eruv would be an invitation for more haredim with large families to move into the neighborhood.

Despite all this opposition the battle of the eruv has now officially been won. The national media – the BBC, *nach* – covered its Friday launch. But I've been wondering: Has the Orthodox community won the battle, but lost the war?

Rumors of intra-Orthodox opposition were confirmed in last Friday's haredi newspapers. In a stinging attack, Rabbi Halpern, Feldman and Roberts, elderly leaders of local haredi communities, publicly stated that the eruv "involves significant halachic problems, and, as such, will endanger the sanctity of Shabbos – it is forbidden to rely on this Eruv under any circumstances."

I can only understand this pronouncement in two ways:

• The eruv is a playground for personality politics. Dayan Ehrentreu is a rabbinical leader of impeccable qualifications. He is not known for his lenient opinions. But he is also an employee of the United Synagogue, the largest denomination of Anglo-Jewry, with Rabbi Dr. Jonathan Sacks at the helm.

These haredi rabbis are not just questioning the eruv: They are sending an unveiled message that the centrist-Orthodox United Synagogue, with its fancy philosophers and modern ideas, is *treif*.

• The eruv poses a threat to social control over women. In a highly structured community, men are religiously obligated to attend synagogue services and learning sessions. Without an eruv, most women with young

children – with some exceptions – are home-bound.

The haredi community feels threatened by the impact of feminism on modern Orthodox communities where women are talmud scholars, social activists and advocates for greater ritual participation. An eruv helps maintain the status quo, in which women harness all their energies in the domestic realm.

The implications are clear: The eruv will come to define people and their willingness to grapple with the tensions of modernity and tradition.

The writer, who stayed at home in Golders Green with her children on many a Shabbat, is the author of *Under My Hat*.

