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Over the last year everyone seems to have gone *eruv*-crazy. Jack Shamash examines how a local Jewish issue was catapulted to national prominence



Cllr Roy Shutz: Against



Cllr Don Goodman: For

On February 24th, Barnet Council chamber in north London was packed for a meeting of the borough planning committee. Normally such gatherings attract little attention, but on this occasion there was a special item on the agenda. Alongside the normal run of home extensions and building permits, the committee was being asked to decide on the construction of an *eruv*.

Feelings on the subject were so strong that, by the time of the vote, the *eruv* had become the biggest issue in the Jewish world. What baffled many people was how something that started as a local planning debate managed to assume national prominence.

As most people will know by now, an *eruv* is a sort of symbolic domain in which orthodox Jews can use pushchairs and carry things on Shabbat. The north London *eruv* would encompass most of Golders Green, Hendon and the Hampstead Garden Suburb.

In most cases the boundaries were set along major roads or railway lines. However, where the boundaries were less clear, rabbis decided that a small number of poles should be erected and wire stretched between them, similar to existing telegraph poles. It was these poles which started the planning equi-

valent of world war three. On the face of it, there was no reason why the *eruv* should not have been approved. Since 1987 the United Synagogue's "Eruv Committee" had been working on the project. The committee, which contained local rabbis and planning experts, had enlisted support from a number of sources: local Jewish charities, local MPs and numerous rabbis endorsed the idea. They distributed letters from American mayors saying that in their cities an *eruv* had proved no obstacle to good community relations.

And yet, at February's stormy planning meeting, the proposal was defeated by 11 votes to 7. The *eruv* was overcome by a barrage of opposition. And the most vehement dissent came not from avowed antisemites, but from other Jews.

Until the middle of last year, discussion of the issue was limited. The only opposition had come from the ultra-orthodox leader, Rabbi Henschel Padwa, who in 1988 wrote a public letter saying that the presence of an *eruv* could lead to a lessening of Shabbat observance.

The *eruv* seemed to be progressing smoothly when it was first considered by Barnet Council. A group of orthodox rabbis did write, saying that they would be urging Jews not to use it. But this was soon countered

by the big guns of the rabbinate – particularly Dayan Ehrentreu of the London Beth Din, the religious authority behind the *eruv*. The then Chief Rabbi Lord Jakobovits maintained a surprising silence on the question.

In June 1992 the issue was put before the Public Works Committee of Barnet Council. The committee, whose consent was required, agreed to the *eruv*. Although there was debate, it was nothing compared to what followed at the September AGM of the Hampstead Garden Suburb Trust – the authority on planning issues within the Suburb.

The Trust took an interest in the *eruv* because 17 of the poles were intended to run along the Suburb boundary. *Eruv* campaigners were angered when, a few days before the meeting, the Trust sent a letter advising Barnet to reject the plan because it would open the door to other minorities to build whatever structures they liked. Trust Manager Chris Kellerman repeated the warning. "As a Jew," he wrote, "I object most strongly. Would Barnet give permission for the erection of Totem poles in all the public parks?" Mr Kellerman describes this letter as "private", although it arrived with the Trust fax heading and was signed "Trust Manager".

POLES



Cllr John Tiplady: Against



Cllr Gerald Shamash: For



Cllr Frank Davis: Against

This was too much for the eruv campaigners. They arrived at the Trust AGM mob handed. After failing to persuade Trust chairman Lord McGregor to revoke this letter, a motion of censure was passed against him. The motion was also supported by non-Jews who were unhappy with his manner.

Lord McGregor resigned as chairman. As head of the Press Complaints Commission, his move was closely followed by the press.

Now worries about the eruv started to develop in the minds of many Jews. Hampstead Garden Suburb is a special sort of Jewish area, particularly genteel and English. By the end of the 1960s when even the golf clubs all started accepting Jewish members, most Jews felt they had found a cosy niche.

This was a state of affairs that the eruv controversy disturbed. It gave many Jews no joy to hear that their area was to become "more Jewish". Councillor Gerald Shamash, who voted for the eruv on the Public Works Committee, explains: "There was real venom against the eruv. A lot of Jews are frightened of being Jewish. Then you've got the Anglo-Saxons who feel that they're being ringed by Jews and don't have a say."

There was also the fear that the eruv would increase antisemitism, or

create some sort of ghetto. In his letter to the council, Chris Kellerman wrote: "For Jews living in the eruv, they (the poles) would create a ghetto mentality and the poles could be a focus for anti-semitism." There are already four synagogues, two Jewish schools, a kosher butcher and a Jewish graveyard in the Garden Suburb, none of which have been particular targets for attack.

Opposition also came from an unexpected quarter. The respected local paper the *Hampstead and Highgate Express* (*Ham and High*) started protesting against the eruv.

The paper, whose most senior staff are all Jewish, published a series of articles broadly critical of the planned eruv and gave prominence to the views of those most opposed to the scheme. The orthodox community complained that the paper was biased – an accusation that the *Ham & High* pointedly denied on January 21st with an editorial ridiculing "amazing allegations that our editorial stance from the start has been negatively biased against it (the eruv)." But the editorial made no secret of where the paper's sympathies lay, concluding that the eruv "is not a realistic proposition."

The most controversial act of the *Ham & High* was a story published

under the headline: JEWISH ZEALOTS: WE'LL PATROL ERUV – ALARM IN SUBURB AS EXTREMIST PLAN IS REVEALED. It claimed a group of extremist Jewish vigilantes inspired by the late Rabbi Meir Kahane was going to descend on the Garden Suburb to defend the eruv against antisemitic wire-cutters.

The article led to immediate accusations that the paper was scaremongering – particularly as neither the police, the Board of Deputies or anyone else was aware of the "Kahana Defence Group". The paper's only evidence was a piece of typed paper, which was thought likely to be a hoax by almost everyone except the *Ham and High*.

To support their story, the paper quoted American Mike Guzofsky who later told the *Jewish Chronicle* that he was only talking theoretically and knew nothing of vigilantes in Britain. They also cited an expert on Anglo-Jewish politics, Professor Geoffrey Alderman, who later told *New Moon*: "I told them it could be a hoax, but on the other hand one shouldn't leap to conclusions. I can't be responsible for any use that the paper puts to my words."

Ham & High editor Gerald Isaaman was understandably defensive about the whole matter when he spoke to *New Moon*. He felt that the eruv committee was secretly sniping at

APART



So why was the eruv turned down? The campaigners certainly made political mistakes. "They might have

But it has to be recognised that, within the heart of north London's Jewish community, there are a lot of Jews who don't want their area to be more Jewish than is absolutely **reem** necessary.

