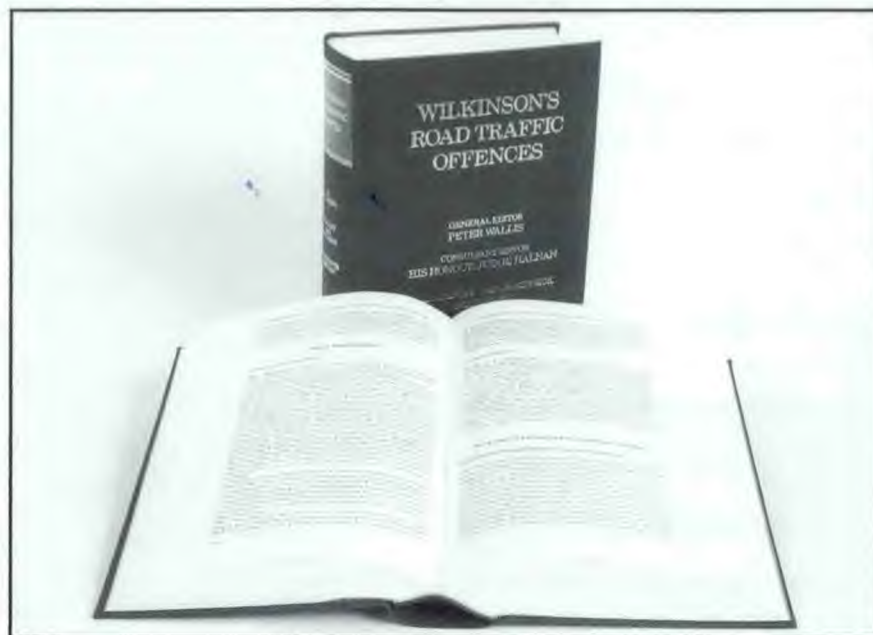


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IN PERSON

Laurence Begner

London is virtually the only major city in the western hemisphere without an *eruv*, or specially designated area for orthodox Jews. Richard Clayton meets the Harley Street solicitor leading the campaign for change

PUT THE man on the Clapham omnibus in the 'Mastermind' chair and ask him what an *eruv* is, and he'll pass quicker than you can say 'Shalom'. Admittedly these days the man on the Clapham omnibus is quite likely to be robbing the driver, but the principle holds good. London is the only capital city in the west still without an *eruv*, an area set aside by orthodox Jews where the Jewish law forbidding 'carrying' on the Sabbath does not apply. At the moment the law means that even everyday items such as keys or a wallet cannot be carried, and extends to prohibit the use of wheelchairs and pushchairs.

'Judaism is a very family-orientated religion,' explains Laurence Begner, the London solicitor spearheading the campaign to establish an *eruv* including NW11, NW2, N2 and parts of N3. 'The Sabbath is the high point of the Jewish week and it's the day when families have an opportunity to gather together and visit each other. But if the most elderly and youngest members of the family need a wheelchair or a pushchair to get around, this is often not possible. They can't even get to synagogue.' An *eruv* is created by joining existing boundaries – any physical landmark such as buildings or major roads – with lengths of wire to make an enclosed space, within which Jews are not subject to the 'carrying' ban. 'This is often misunderstood,' says Begner. 'It's not a question of the rules being relaxed. Jewish law actually forbids carrying on the Sabbath in the public domain. Within the *eruv* there is no law to break.'

One would have thought setting up an *eruv* would be a simple matter, but Begner and his *eruv* committee, created in 1990, have been stymied by a barrier of an unnatural kind: planning permission. Their initial application, despite being endorsed by local planning officers, was turned down by Barnet council. A second application, taking account of local objections, met a simi-

lar fate, because it involved erecting poles in a conservation area. Begner and his colleagues have now appealed to the Secretary of State for the Environment, and are awaiting the outcome, which is expected shortly. The campaign has attracted support from Jews and non-Jews alike, notably from the Chief Rabbi and a sympathetic leader in *The Times*. Begner won't say what the committee plans to do if it gets the ministerial thumbs-down, although presumably judicial review would be an option. 'We don't see any point in second-guessing at this stage,' he says. He dismisses suggestions that planning permission may have been refused on racist grounds. 'I really don't think so. I think the main problem is that most people still don't know what *eruvim* – not '*eruv*s'! – are or understand their significance to the Jewish community.' The poles and wire used, Begner explains, would not interfere with anyone else's activities. They are roughly the same size as telegraph poles, supporting a thin wire – 'like fishing line' – some 21 feet above the ground. There are *eruvim* in many European cities and in more than 20 cities in the United States. 'Not many people know that in Washington the White House and Senate building are in the middle of an *eruv*.' The whole of Israel, says Begner, is an *eruv*, but there has never been one in Britain.

Begner describes himself as 'a senior partner' at Kanter Jules Grangewoods, a general practice with a mainly Jewish clientele, based amid a myriad of private doctors and dentists in London's Harley Street. 'We do some commercial, commercial property, conveyancing, litigation ... a bit of everything, really.' He declines to give up-to-date figures on the firm's composition, hinting at plans to expand to be announced at the beginning of February. There was no law in his family. 'I just decided that I wanted to be a solicitor and went ahead and did it.' He qualified in 1976, having done his articles with



Grangewoods, which subsequently evolved into Kanter Jules Grangewoods, so has effectively been with the same firm throughout.

Begner's wife, an American, is herself studying to become a lawyer, having borne Begner five children, all boys. Will he encourage them to follow him into the law? He roars with laughter. 'I'm going to encourage them to become decent human beings,' he says. 'What they do after that is really a matter for them. Having said that, my eldest son wants to be a lawyer. But my second son wants to be an actor ...' As one would expect, Begner's family is his principal extra-curricular interest. 'I am also active in various charitable organisations.' Apart from the *eruv* committee, on which he has worked for the last three years, Begner is a leading light in the New Israel Community, which he was instrumental in setting up in 1983. 'This is a young, vibrant orthodox Jewish community,' he says, adding that he considers this to be his proudest achievement to date. The community provides educational programmes and a wide range of ... well, community activities, and illustrates Begner's commitment to the development of Jewish society with its emphasis on moral fibre and, dare one say it, family values.

It has to be said that, even in a brief conversation, Begner radiates a serenity or, at any rate, a contentment rare among the majority of us, the lapsed C of E, liberal-with-a-very-small-'l' community. Asked to define his long-term ambitions, he opts not for presidency of the Law Society nor a seat in parliament nor even to be the fattest cat in Harley Street, Wimpole Street and Wigmore Street combined. 'I just want to be happy. That seems to me to be the most important thing in life, just to be happy' ■