



ETHEREAL BOUNDARIES

Orthodox Jews should be allowed their enclave

Last night, John Major and President Clinton met to discuss affairs of state in a mystical Jewish enclosure. Like dozens of civic buildings in America, the White House lies within an *eruv*, a symbolic area in which many of the prohibitions of the Jewish sabbath are suspended. *Eruvim* are accepted happily as part of the social tapestry of American life. In contrast, the attempt by the Jewish community in Barnet, north London, to create such an enclave on British soil has triggered a fierce local row over the proper limits of tolerance and the risks of separatism.

The Talmudic idea of an *eruv*, often attributed to King Solomon, is to "privatise" an area spiritually and make it a symbolic home for Jews. Within its ethereal boundaries, believers are permitted to carry keys, handkerchiefs and spectacles and to push wheelchairs and prams on the Sabbath, as they would in their own houses. Advocates of the Barnet *eruv*, which would enclose six square miles of leafy north London with almost invisible wires and natural boundaries, claim that it would make life easier for many Jewish people and reinforce their community's sense of identity without infringing the freedoms of non-Jews.

The borough has split angrily over the proposal, which is backed by the United Synagogue and the Chief Rabbi, Jonathan Sacks. Lord McGregor's scepticism forced him to resign as chairman of the Hampstead Garden Suburb Trust last September; since then, fears of Jewish fundamentalism have been voiced with increasing candour by the area's other communities. Within the Jewish community, there are many, including some Orthodox believers, who are nervous of ghettoisation and fear an anti-

Semitic backlash. Some of those old enough to have lived through the Holocaust feel that Jewish people should never again be penned in by wire.

An *eruv* is not the same as an Indian reservation, a Swiss canton or a local authority, however. Not all boundaries mark out one zone of power from another as a warning to trespassers. Some of the markings that man scores into the surface of the planet are transparent and permeable, like a line of longitude or a leyline. The limits of an *eruv* are of immense significance to those that believe in its mystical meaning, but should be of practically none to those who do not. Few agnostics in this country are aware of the boundaries of the Anglican provinces or parishes, or are offended by the ancient ceremonies which mark them out, such as the "beating of the bounds".

The Barnet proposal shows that an *eruv* need not be aesthetically offensive. Since most of the suggested enclosure is already marked out by buildings or roads, only 85 poles linked by wire would be needed in an area which already has 40,000. Only the concern of bird-lovers ruled out the use of transparent nylon rather than wire. Such markers would scarcely be an eyesore or grossly offensive to non-Jewish sensibilities.

Britain is a land of crossable boundaries, in which Burke's "small platoons" co-exist and the rambler has rights as well as the property owner. To be acceptable, *eruvim* will need a high degree of democratic consensus from community groups, town halls and central government. But, introduced with sensitivity and respect for others' feelings, they could be a positive addition to the nation's religious geography and help define the proper boundaries of pluralism.