

1,000th Shabbat for eruv

Think of it next time you see a baby carriage

By Elise Kigner
Advocate Staff

Once upon a time, a thousand Shabbatot ago, shul was off limits to observant parents who wanted to push their babies in strollers or carry them in their arms, and to people who depended on walkers or wheelchairs.

But that changed in January 1993 with the establishment of the Greater Boston Eruv: cables, string, and wire that provide a 22-mile ritual border around areas of Newton, Brookline, and Brighton.

On March 31, the eruv's 1,000th Shabbat, Jesse Hefter will talk about its history at services at Young Israel of Brookline.

"It's extremely important for the traditional community," said Hefter, president of the Greater Boston Eruv Corporation and a member of the Maimonides Kehillah. "We've now had it for 998 weekends, and people can't remember what it's like not to have it."

The Torah prohibits carrying objects in public areas during Shabbat. The eruv - which means to mix or join together - serves to integrate private areas (your home) with public space (everywhere else), creating a common shared area.

For the most part, Hefter didn't get into such halachic details when obtaining approval from all the entities affected, which included municipalities and the Massachusetts Turnpike and Boston Edison (now National Grid).

Instead, he emphasized the challenges faced by observant Jews without

an eruv: Families are split up when the mother must stay at home with the baby. People cannot bring prayer books to synagogue or carry a meal to a friend's house.

Hefter said in his pitch he would often refer to Jason Rosenberg, a lawyer with the eruv's legal counsel, Rosenberg, Freedman & Goldstein. Afflicted with polio as a child, Rosenberg uses crutches and braces. Someone like Rosenberg, Hefter would explain, would not be able to leave his house on Shabbat without an eruv.

As it happens, Rosenberg is a Reform Jew, who had known little about the eruv rules until Hefter raised the issue. But the lawyer didn't need much convincing, "especially after Hefter told him that his father-in-law couldn't leave the house on Shabbat because he was confined to a wheelchair.

"I said, 'Stop right there. What do you need me to do?'" said Rosenberg, of Newton.

Between them, Hefter and Rosenberg had secular and religious law covered. When doubts were raised about the constitutionality of the eruv, Rosenberg cited court cases affirming that the border does not amount to the establishment of religion - it bears no Jewish stars or Hebrew letters - but an expression of religion.

To the untrained eye, the eruv is invisible. The composition of the eruv is complicated. It is constructed according to a series of requirements. Among other things, it consists of utility cables, fences and walls, and more than 800 telephone, utility and lightpoles. Much of the eruv consists of existing borders.

Hefter and Rosenberg, both volunteers, said they encountered little resistance to the eruv, at least nothing like the battles in some communities in New York and New Jersey. Rosenberg said he thought that having both Orthodox and non-Orthodox Jews involved in the effort helped smooth the way.

He recalled that when they made their proposal, some public officials asked why they weren't making the eruv even bigger.

"That was a wonderful feeling, those not of the Jewish faith taken by wanting to create a situation that enhanced quality of life for some of their citizens," Rosenberg said.

Since 1993, the eruv has been expanded several times to include Nonantum, South Newton and Boston University. Hefter estimated 4,000 Orthodox Jews live within the eruv.

Eruvim have also popped up elsewhere in the state, including in Sharon, Malden, Somerville, Cambridge, and Springfield.

The Greater Boston Eruv depends on donations to cover its annual \$45,000 maintenance budget. For the past decade, Joel Steiner and Chayim Zirkind have inspected the eruv every Thursday. The men switch off between driving and peering out the window. When the person on lookout spots a break in the eruv, they park and take a closer look.

One week this month, they repaired five breaks over a five-hour period, and made note of 11 breaks for the electrician, Dan Strom of Strom Electric, to repair the next day.

"It's an activity I can look forward to week after week, see a friend, do something a little different from my day to day," said Steiner, 75. "It feels good to be providing something of use to the community."

If a bad storm leaves breaks that can't be repaired in time for Shabbat, the eruv is deemed to be inoperative for that week (the last time this happened was more than a year ago). To check the eruv status, people can call a hotline, or look at a light across

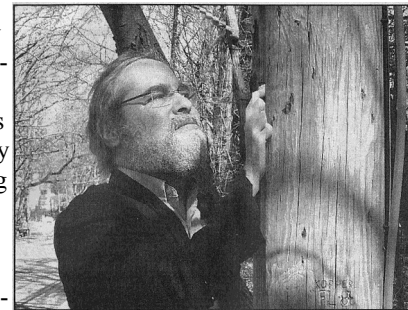
the street from Congregation

Beth Pinchas in Brookline (green means good to carry; yellow means the eruv needs repair).

Rosenberg, a member of Temple Beth Avodah in Newton, describes his work on the eruv as tikkun olam, repairing the world and improving lives. "Every time I cross the Mass Turnpike, I see the twine and poles and I smile," he said.

For more information, visit www.bostoneruv.org

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Jesse Hefter shows a cable that's part of the Greater Boston Eruv