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NEIGHBORHOOD REPORT: LOWER EAST SIDE; String Theory

By ALEX MINDLIN

STRUNG together out of poles and wire, the symbolic boundary known as an eruv is a flimsy thing. Under Jewish law, however, it has all the strength of a masonry wall. Within its enclosure, observant Jews are freed from certain Sabbath prohibitions on transporting items or people outdoors. For example, they may carry a prayer shawl to synagogue or push a child in a stroller.

So it was good news for many when a group of rabbis decided last fall to extend an uptown eruv southward. Formerly, the eruv had run from 125 Street to 56th Street; by summertime, it will stretch to Houston Street.

But one area conspicuously left out of the eruv is the Lower East Side. And Jews in that neighborhood are asking, why not us?

"It's very important to many of us," said Jonathan Shore, a board member of the Stanton Street Shul, a Lower East Side synagogue. "I'll say it right out: I want an eruv."

If there was a tiny note of defiance in Mr. Shore's tone, it sprang from a fact of religious geography. Unlike most other Manhattan neighborhoods, the Lower East Side has traditionally shunned the eruv.

"It's like a taboo word," said Rabbi Yehuda Sarna, manager for religious life at the N.Y.U. Jewish center, who helped organize the eruv's extension to Houston Street. "There are strong voices on the Lower East Side who are opposed to putting up an eruv, and we didn't really have an interest in butting heads with them." Nor, he said, had anyone in the neighborhood offered to help pay for an extension.

The strongest of the anti-eruv voices was once Rabbi Moshe Feinstein, a Lower East Side sage who was considered by many the leading authority of his time on Jewish law. Rabbi Feinstein, who died in 1986, believed that no eruv could ever be erected in Manhattan -- the island's street layout and traffic patterns made it impermissible, he said -- and his influence was such that it was unthinkable for any Lower East Side rabbi to contradict him.

"Rav Moshe was the rule, and when it came to Jewish law, no one could touch Rav Moshe's toenails," said Azriel Siff, the rabbi at Chasam Sofer, a synagogue on Clinton Street. "As a result, the Lower East Side never had an eruv and never will have an eruv." Nor, he added, does it need one: "The Lower East Side survived for hundreds of years without an eruv."

Some disagree on that last point. Juda Engelmayer, the owner of Kossar's Bialys, a 70-year-old bakery, said he had seen the local Orthodox community dwindle. "If I had to survive from the Orthodox Jewish business on the street, I would have closed my doors," he said. The eruv, he said, will reverse the decline.

"People will say, 'Hey, I'll come down here, there's an eruv, I can carry,' " Mr. Engelmayer said. "And maybe a community would grow down here." ALEX MINDLIN

Border Wars

The Lower East Side is not the only area where an eruv has caused tension. Mount Sinai Jewish Center, in Washington Heights, is building an eruv, though a neighbor, Congregation Khal Adath Jeshurun, disapproves. And in Brooklyn, there have been eruv disputes in Borough Park, Flatbush and Williamsburg.

Most of these arguments concern the conditions necessary for a proper eruv. Roughly speaking, under Jewish law an eruv does not have its intended effect -- allowing those within its bounds to carry items outdoors on the Sabbath -- if it encloses a thoroughfare traversed by more than 600,000 people.

But the required width, length and shape of such a road, as well as the period in which the 600,000 people must travel it, are all subject to debate.

Photos: At West 56th Street and 10th Avenue, the border of the eruv, strung atop a utility pole. (Photographs by Don Hogan Charles/The New York Times)
