

# Reform Rabbi Endorses Eruv

Advice to opposition: 'Channel energy into Shabbat that reflects your values'

By LEON A. MORRIS

As a Reform rabbi in a neighboring Hamptons community, Sag Harbor, I have been publicly supportive of the East End Eruv Association's (EEEA) desire to

## PERSPECTIVE

establish an *eruv* in Westhampton Beach and Quogue. And for the past four years, I have been dismayed by the fear and intolerance that has been unleashed by EEEA's proposal.

A great deal of the opposition to the *eruv* seems largely based on ignorance about traditional Sabbath laws and, specifically, the prohibition against carrying in the public domain. Given the unobtrusive, indeed almost unnoticeable nature of an *eruv*, and the fact that several legal precedents have already been established that maintain that the *eruv* does not infringe upon a separation of church and state, I find it difficult to understand why residents feel so strongly opposed to it. Indeed, as the spring 2011 episode of *The Daily Show* with Jon Stewart made clear in laughable ways, the real fear, albeit unstated, is that the *eruv* might attract increasing numbers of traditionally Sabbath observant Jews to those villages.

I'm not a lawyer, and so I'll leave to the courts whether the situation in Quogue is sufficiently different from the court cases that have already established a firm legal precedent. But as a member of the Central Conference of American Rabbis (CCAR), the Reform rabbinical organization, I do feel obligated to respond to two recent statements quoted in this paper, attributed to Arnold Scheiffer, the founder of a group called Jewish People Opposed to the Eruv (JPOE).

In both statements, he is misusing a responsum from the CCAR. Mr. Scheiffer has suggested that the CCAR opposes public *eruvim* as a matter of principle and public policy. In the May 25 edition, he is quoted as saying, "We are relieved our government will not install religious symbols that fly in the face of our rabbinical teachings."

The rabbinical teachings to which he is referring has nothing to say to the case at hand. The 1983 responsum from which he is quoting is responding to the question of the origin of the *eruv* and asking whether it should be required of Reform Jews. The answer to the responsum is that Reform Jews are not required to establish *eruvim*.

The responsum makes no attempt to take a position on the establishment of *eruvim* for more traditional segments of the Jewish community. It does not go on record as opposing them. And it certainly does not sug-

gest or encourage a campaign of the like that JPOE has conducted that publicly pits Jews against other Jews and which deepens fissures in our community.

**I hope that Jews in Westhampton Beach and Quogue are committed to religious pluralism and would help further a diverse community whose embrace includes observant Jews who cannot carry or push their children in strollers on the Sabbath without an *eruv*.**

gest or encourage a campaign of the like that JPOE has conducted that publicly pits Jews against other Jews and which deepens fissures in our community. Indeed, the responsum notes that *eruvim* "can generally be accomplished without any governmental interference and done either through the use of telephone wires or cable television wire, with proper connections placed for the sake of the *eruv*." In fact, the responsum itself seems to acknowledge their increasing use and still does not speak of public opposition to them.

If Mr. Scheiffer and his organization want to claim that their commitment to Reform Judaism requires them to live in a community that has no *eruv*, they will be hard pressed to find such a statement emerging from any official rabbinical legal opinion or resolution. As a member of the CCAR, I would say to you, do not

oppose this *eruv* in my name. Additionally, while the responsum quoted refers to the *eruv* as a "legal fiction," I would maintain that every great legal system contains such "legal fictions" which are vital in allowing the law to evolve and continue to be applicable in new situations. American law has many such "legal fictions" as well. Whatever we think of the *eruv*, it is the sort of creative, adaptive innovation that many non-Orthodox Jews might champion in other areas of religious life.

We must remember that religion

deals largely with the symbolic, and while the *eruv* may not speak to many contemporary Jews, I would caution against dismissing its meaning, or suggesting that there is something simple or foolish in what it represents. Additionally, I would hope that Jews in Westhampton Beach and Quogue are sufficiently committed to religious pluralism as to help further a diverse community whose embrace is at least wide enough to include traditionally observant Jews who cannot carry or push their children in strollers on the Sabbath without an *eruv*.

To Mr. Scheiffer and the members of the Jewish People Opposed to the Eruv, I urge you, in the strongest terms, to cease your opposition and to channel your energy and creativity toward enhancing and building Jewish life on the East End, toward shaping a Shabbat observance that is reflective of your own values and toward bringing Jews closer to one another.

The central notion of the *eruv* is that it symbolically turns the public domain into a private dwelling. Therefore, what the *eruv* represents is precisely what the residents of Westhampton Beach and Quogue seem to need most urgently—a symbolic string that ties all of its residents together as a single family and reminds them that we all build and share a home.

Rabbi Leon A. Morris, spiritual leader of Temple Adas Israel in Sag Harbor, is a contributor to Jewish Theology in Our Time: A New Generation Explores the Foundations and Future of Jewish Belief (*Jewish Lights*, 2010).

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