

U'Vnei Yisrael Yotzim B'yad Ramah – Thirty Years of “Going Out”

Our Eruv as an Enabler of Community

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Judaism places community at the very center of our lives. When Bnai Yisrael leave Mitzrayim, they leave as one people. We know they were anxious – where would they get their water out in the desert and what would they do when their food supplies ran low? The Torah tells us that Bnai Yisrael left Mitzrayim with a Yad Ramah – usually translated as a “strong or uplifted hand”.

We read every day in P’sukay D’zimra that “וַיֵּרָא יִשְׂרָאֵל אֶת־הַיָּד הַגְּדֹלָה” – that the Jewish people saw the great Hand that HaShem used against Mitzrayim. Further, by being in awe of that immense power, the people found their faith in God restored “VaYaaminu B’Hashem u’vmoshe avdo”. Now Yisrael believed in God, and in Moshe, God’s servant.

At Har Sinai, we stood around the mountain and experienced Matan Torah – the giving of the Torah. We, as a community, were so attuned to the experiential moment that not only did we hear the words of the Torah being spoken from the divine Source, but we could also literally SEE them. The Torah tells us that “וַיִּכְלֹּה־הָעָם רֹאִים אֶת־הַקּוֹלֹת” – that all the people saw the thunder/sound. The Kli Yakar (Harav Shlomo Ephrayim Luntschitz of 17th-century Prague) asks in his Peirush on Chumash how it was possible for the people to see what you can only normally hear. He explains that the impact on the physical world of God’s speech was so amazing that there was some kind of aggregation of particulate in the atmosphere that formed the words that God spoke that the people could then see. They were “osiyos pohrchos” – words suspended in mid-air for which we have a model within the physical lettering of the luchos.

Quoting the pasuk from Tehillim 33 that we recite every Shabbos morning – בדבר ה' שמים נעשו – the heavens (meaning the physical world) was made through the words/speech of HaShem, The Kli Yakar observes that every utterance of God creates a new reality, a new being. When Moshe later smashes the tablets, the Talmud tells us in Pesachim 87 that the letters flew off the tablets and hovered (pohrchos). How could the letters have hovered if they weren’t physical objects? And later when the second set of tablets are constructed, the Torah tells us in Parashas Ki Sisa, Perek 34, that “וכתבתי על” – I will write on the tablets the words that were on the first tablets. It does not say “ka-dvarim” but rather “es hadvarim” – which letters were these? The letters that were still hovering in the air and waiting to be brought back to their proper place in front of Bnai Yisrael.

The Jews at Kabalas HaTorah had an uncanny ability, brought about by a magical encounter with the Divine to see what was normally hidden – acoustic frequencies that are received by the ear were transformed into physically viewable form. And, they experienced this together, as a community.

Recently, we, as a community, marked the 30th anniversary of our Eruv. Thirty years translates to over 1,500 weekends/Shabbatot where, during the prior week, the Eruv was carefully inspected and repaired if needed (which is pretty often).

The function of a Community Eruv is to integrate private and public spaces into one shared domain to allow us to carry permissible objects from our homes to the outside and back on Shabbat.

An Eruv is an overlay of the physical space in which a community resides. In an urban setting, an Eruv border can be defined using existing infrastructure such as utility or lighting poles, fences such as those along the Mass Turnpike or the MBTA Green Line, or topographic features of the ground such as the slopes of the sidewalls of the Cleveland Circle or Brookline Reservoirs.

Where there are gaps in the fencing to allow for roadway transportation (for example at the bridges over the Pike), we place thin overhead lines between a pair of vertical poles to form a simple doorway opening (two doorposts and a lintel).

As Channel 5, WCVB, described it when they aired two wonderful segments in September 2022 about our Eruv on Chronicle – the Eruv is “Hidden in Plain Sight”. What the chroniclers mean was that you can walk, bike, or drive past most of the Eruv your whole life and not see it. It blends into the cityscape and, in a sense, disappears from view.

Nevertheless, the Halachic Jew (and the trained non-Jewish Eruv repair team) know where to find the parts and pieces of the Eruv. We, the users of the Eruv, realize how the physical construct of hundreds of lechi/sideposts attached to utility poles, dozens of twines tautly stretched between the tops of underground-fed light poles, and mile after mile of fencing along roadways combine to create something special in the Halachic realm that only we can see.

And how do we see it? As a community. As a community of Shabbos walkers, with strollers, canes, and keys, we “see” it. As a vibrant community where families with small children can attend davening on Shabbos together with their friends. As a vibrant community where friends can get together for Shabbos meals and carry what is needed to enhance the meal experience. As a vibrant community where we can simply take a Shabbos walk, carry our housekey and grab a water bottle on the way out the door.

We have the special feeling of Shabbos with a kosher Eruv. We have this experience virtually every week of the year, year-after-year, to start Shabbos knowing that Shabbos will be specially enhanced with the existence on this Eruv.

Accordingly, each of us must take responsibility, at a level comfortable for them, to support this institution every year. Our inspections continue weekly – our repairs continue weekly. I have served as a volunteer to this institution for the past 38 years, starting in 1984 when we began searching for how to get an Eruv built here in Boston, working for 8 years to plan, design, get licensed, raise funds, and construct our initial build-out. Over the last 30 years, we have grown several times, adding in Nonantum in West Newton, expanding to include nearly all of Boston University and more recently, a significant segment of South Brookline.

At over 26 miles in perimeter, we rank as one of the largest Eruvin in the United States. We are fortunate to have great inspectors who “see” what needs to be inspected every week. And we have a great community of supporters who “get” what having an Eruv means to Boston. If you have already contributed for this year, thanks. We sincerely appreciate your “hand” in helping us serve the community. If you have yet to give, please don’t delay. We honestly need every dollar. May our community continue to be blessed with hatzlacha and bracha and may we continue to celebrate more milestones with our communal institutions over the years to come.