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VIEWPOINT

# What's In A Name?

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There probably is no better known statement that reveals racism in America than the phrase that begins, "Some of my best friends are ..." with the blank filled in with "Jews," "blacks" or some other such qualifier. It reeks of a closet bigot's desperate attempt to backpedal on a comment or position regarding the inserted group that exposes him for what he really is. It is so widely known an expression for what it is that when author Tanner Colby released his new book last month, "Some of My Best Friends Are Black: The Strange Story of Integration in America," readers and reviewers had no problem understanding the main point: that America still struggles with racism, even with an African-American president. Those seven words have become almost iconic in the annals of closet racism, but there is another such lurking out in our language. It is not a mere phrase, but the actual name of an organization—a nonprofit, no less—and through its name, its founders reveal their true intent as much as "some of my best friends" does.

The subtly subversive name of the group: Jewish People for the Betterment of Westhampton Beach.

For those who do not know it, Westhampton Beach is a bucolic little village inhabited now by either longtime residents or wealthier newcomers who have found it to be the summer playground for the elite of New York City. Sixty-eight percent of the people who live there are religious, and of those, 76 percent are Catholic, 16 percent are Protestant, and the rest are assorted others, Jews included.

So what can a group of Jewish People for the Betterment of Westhampton Beach do alone that the 92 percent of Christians cannot do with them to "improve" their village? Given the demographics, the mere thought of the organization's name would almost seem exclusionary and perhaps even a bit sanctimonious.

Yet, as Hamlet said, "there's the rub." The founders of Jewish People for the Betterment of Westhampton Beach are actually JPOE ( Jewish People Opposed to the Eruv), an organization begun in 2008 for the sole reason of keeping more Orthodox Jews from pitching their tents in the backyards of these virtuous people seeking to "better" their own little hamlet. Christians cannot easily oppose the idea of an eruv publicly without appearing anti-Semitic, at the very least, but, as "some of my best friends" insinuates, the JPBWB sounds so innocent to the untrained ear.

Anyone who knows what an eruv is—the thin string posted up in areas to turn a "public domain" into a "private" one for the purpose of carrying on the Jewish Sabbath—knows that it really does not look bad, it does not interfere with sight lines, it really does not impact anyone other than those people who believe they need one to legally wheel their baby stroller on the Seventh Day of Creation.

For those who do not know, it is hard to get a grip on the concept. An eruv is a Jewish legal loophole used to get around certain Sabbath restrictions against carrying any object in public spaces ("carrying" being a loose term that also includes pushing a baby carriage down the street, or having your house key in your pocket). Suffice it to say, the only thing that an eruv really does that is "bad" is provide an incentive for observant Jewish families (Orthodox or Conservative; it matters not, since both require an eruv) to live within the eruv's area. Hence, the motivation of the JPBWB to keep Westhampton Beach beautiful.

The JPBWB's president, Arnold Sheiffer, claims in a statement to "respect the rights of all Jews, and in fact all people, to worship God and practice their faiths in their own way." Yet, after explaining that his practice rejects the eruv as a "legal fiction" that is "inconsistent with the true spiritual observance of the Sabbath under Jewish law," he pounces on the rights of those Jews who see it differently. He then throws into the mix the number game, claiming that Reform Jews make up approximately 38 percent of the total adult Jews in America, "making [his] by far the largest single Jewish denomination in the United States." That was telling, because while he claims to respect others, his "law" is all that counts, or so he seems to imply.

The Jews who want to better Westhampton Beach are petitioning the Long Island Power Authority to not allow use of its electric poles to string up an eruv. Mr. Sheiffer says, "It is impossible to view these actions by LIPA as anything other than active support for the private religious mission [of those supporting the eruv]."

Just like a Christmas tree on public property, he argued, "the hanging ... on a LIPA pole has no other meaning except a religious meaning, i.e., a visible embodiment of a certain kind of legalistic Jewish religious observance which my denomination firmly rejects." He and his people would feel oppressed: "Every time [he] walked in [his] neighborhood and witnessed the [eruv], [he] would feel that [his] own interpretation of Jewish law had been belittled and demeaned by [his]

own government.”

Just as places like New York City have made Sabbath accommodations by suspending parking rules in heavily populated Jewish neighborhoods, use of LIPA poles are not an endorsement of religion but an accommodation to those who adhere to a belief—and the use of the public poles is paid for, not free, making it a business transaction, not a religious statement. More to the point, unless you know that it is there, the eruv is virtually invisible. No one sees it unless they are looking for it, and straight at it.

Jewish People for the Betterment of Westhampton Beach is deceptively named. Actually, it is a euphemism for “keep the observant Jews from moving in.”

While we expend so much effort being watchful of those who would seek to harm the Jewish people, we too often forget to look inward to what we are doing to ourselves. Whether it is the charedi attacking the less observant, the Orthodox man on the street averting his or her eyes rather than wish a non-Orthodox Jew a good Sabbath, or these “civic-minded” Westhampton Beach Jews working hard to challenge observances they reject, we all too often are our own worst enemies.

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