

The Eruv

REVOLUTION

How technology and professionalization are reshaping the eruv industry

By Merri Ukraincik

Rabbi Mordechai Paretzky, an eruv builder from Chicago, once got his truck so deeply stuck in the mud while repairing an eruv that Chaveirim—a volunteer organization that provides emergency roadside assistance—had to pull his bucket truck out with an excavator, a utility vehicle usually reserved for heavy lifting on a construction site. On another occasion, he was out on a boat checking an eruv when he happened upon a dead body in the water.

All in a day's work for him and the new cadre of professional eruv builders who have helped revolutionize how *eruvim* are designed, built and maintained. Indeed, a number of factors, including technology and professionalization, have entirely transformed the eruv industry over the past decade.

In the past, eruv construction relied on handy local Jewish volunteers or non-Jewish builders, working with rabbinic oversight. Baltimore resident

Randi Shuster proudly remembers watching her father drive a bucket truck when the local eruv was completed in 1980 “because he was one of the only community members who knew how to operate it.” Today’s eruv builders, however, work full time designing, constructing, inspecting and maintaining *eruvim* while keeping costs low to help communities stick to tight budgets. (It’s way more costly to call an electrician with a bucket truck.) Currently, there are about



twelve full-time professional eruv builders and another thirty involved on a part-time basis throughout the country. (This does not include the hundreds of “eruv checkers” who volunteer to inspect their local eruv every week.) Professional eruv builders bring experience and a specially trained eye to the process, and they have *posekim* to consult with as needed,” explains Rabbi Baruch Gore, an eruv builder, supervisor and educator from Cherry Hill, New Jersey. In fact, their construction background, proficiency in *hilchos eruvim* and innovative approach to this age-old mitzvah have made them an indispensable resource to hundreds of communities throughout North America.

A Game Changer for the Industry

While smartphone technology is not new, it has only recently proven to be a game changer for the eruv industry. For example, an eruv professional can now determine whether an eruv is kosher or *pasul* (invalid) by examining an image of it on his phone. Likewise, he can virtually tour an existing or potential eruv border on Google Street View and use FaceTime to walk a local eruv checker through an easy fix.

But technology in general is responsible for dramatically changing the eruv industry. “It’s really remarkable. I can design almost an

entire eruv from my home office,” notes Rabbi Paretzky, who has upgraded more than thirty community *eruvim* across the United States.

The hands-on work for an eruv builder, however, can be rough and challenging—even risky. Eruv builders might spend Friday afternoon adjusting a wire on a telephone pole at the last minute. They contend with everything from wild animals to blizzards to oncoming traffic. The old saying about postal workers applies: Neither snow nor rain nor heat nor gloom of night holds them back from completing their rounds. All so we can carry on Shabbos within the bounds of halachah.

The Need to Network

Rabbi Gore recalls the days when he had to print out photos and mail them to a *posek*. “The immediacy of communication made possible by technology has vastly improved what we [professional eruv builders] are doing as an industry, increasing our confidence in the halachic standards of what we are building together,” he says.

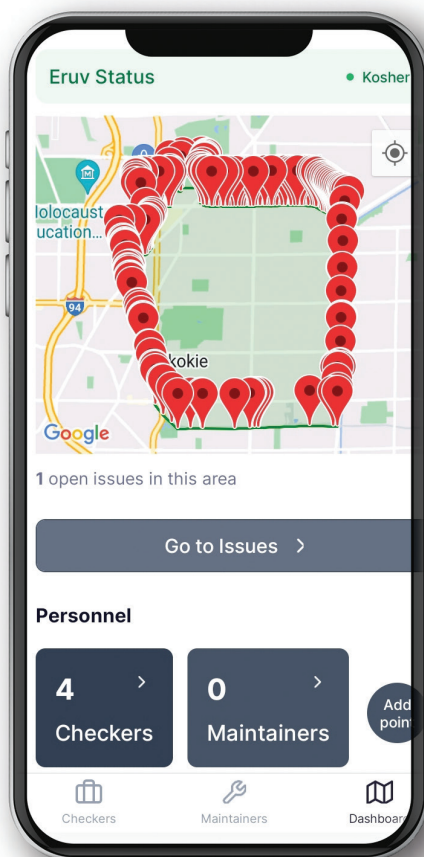
Interestingly, technology has also addressed the significant loneliness eruv builders face while engaged in this work. In general, they operate more or less independently, with little community recognition or opportunity to interact with one another.

Premier eruv builder Rabbi Micah Shotkin of Passaic, New Jersey, describes how isolating it can be “in our silos, fixing an eruv just before sunset on an *erev Shabbos*.” Three years ago, he helped launch a WhatsApp chat as a forum for nurturing camaraderie among eruv architects and builders so they’d feel less alone. They suddenly had a place to compare best practices and to ask and answer questions like, *Which method of attaching cement is best for this scenario?* They share successes and mishaps, like the time Rabbi Shotkin spent an afternoon working on a complicated *lechi* (a pole used to demarcate a doorpost) installation only to realize he’d put it on the wrong telephone pole. When one member got an electric shock while installing a *lechi*, the chat participants realized it was time to organize safety training.

Rabbi Shotkin also saw the space as a platform for transmitting knowledge he’d learned the hard way, hoping to spare other eruv professionals some of his frustration. “There’s no eruv school. More than once, I’ve bought four tools to do a job before I figured out which was the one I needed.”



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In a major step toward streamlining the eruv industry, the OU developed free user-friendly software designed exclusively for eruv professionals. The app gathers the details of an eruv's particulars in one place, including a full point-by-point mapping of the eruv boundaries.

“I saw how multi-layered the issues around this mitzvah are, and experienced how solitary this work can be,” says Rabbi Gore, who first got involved as a volunteer eruv checker when California’s Valley Village eruv was restructuring. He subsequently trained new eruv checkers, which is when he began incubating the idea of a national network to support communities and eruv personnel. About ten years ago, he and Rabbi Paretzky launched the National Eruv Initiative (NEI).

Rabbi Gore says the initiative creates opportunities for eruv personnel to connect, share stories and learn from

one another. “We’ve seen other results too, like heightened awareness in the *frum* community about what really goes into building and maintaining an eruv.” NEI provides guidance, individualized support, education and user-friendly resources. Ultimately, the mission of the NEI is to help communities have the best *eruv* possible.

To bring networking within the industry to a whole new level, Rabbi Ezra Sarna, OU Director of Halacha Initiatives, joined forces with Rabbi Gore to organize a conference for eruv builders and supervisors. (Supervisors are mostly volunteers who oversee their local community *eruv*.) Held at OU Manhattan headquarters in the fall of 2023, the conference offered a full schedule of repair demos as well as presentations on halachic, legal and safety issues. It drew over seventy eruv personnel, representing the spectrum of Orthodoxy, from forty cities across the US and Canada.

“This was the first opportunity of its kind to create a sense of community among eruv professionals,” says Rabbi Sarna, who hopes to make it an annual event.

QuickBooks for Eruv

About two years ago, a large Jewish community approached the OU with a major concern. It seemed that all the information about its eruv was stored in the head of just one individual.

“It’s a scary reality,” recalls Rabbi Sarna. “If *chas v’shalom* something happens to him, or he moves away or simply forgets, the entire eruv is ostensibly lost, leaving the community with no backup or support to figure it out.”

Rabbi Sarna soon discovered that such a scenario is common in many cities. There might be an eruv map—somewhere. Contracts with homeowners and agreements with utility companies are assumed to be in the rabbi’s desk. But that’s not always the case. From the perspective of *shemirat Shabbat*, this leaves communities vulnerable.

In a major step toward streamlining the eruv industry, the OU developed free user-friendly software designed

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exclusively for eruv professionals, which was unveiled during the eruv conference. “We want to standardize how communities document their *eruv*,” explains Rabbi Sarna.

Available via the website or as an app, the software gathers the details of an eruv’s particulars in one place, including a full point-by-point mapping of an eruv’s boundaries. It may not appeal to everyone in the industry; in fact, not all eruv personnel have smartphones. But Rabbi Sarna calls the new software “QuickBooks for Eruv” because it allows for secure data storage, customization and collaboration.

“It will play a critical role in institutional continuity,” Rabbi Gore stresses. A new *rav* or a substitute checker can step in seamlessly by accessing the information in the app.

Likewise, an eruv team can communicate through the app while in the process of making repairs. “When we perform a top-to-bottom check of an eruv, I often have to guess: Did they use the slope or the fence? The first utility pole or the second? The software’s specificity will help us sidestep these kinds of challenges,”

notes Rabbi Chaim Yadlovker, an eruv builder from Edison, New Jersey.

To date, twenty cities have signed on to use the software. Creating such an app “has been on my to-do list for ages,” says Moshe Katz, a software developer and eruv supervisor in Olney, Maryland. “I’m grateful the OU beat me to it.”

The Eruv Experts

Currently, some 350 *eruv* exist in the US and Canada, a number that continues to grow as new Jewish communities emerge and existing ones expand. Yet there is a misconception, says Rabbi Sarna, that “you build an eruv once and that’s it, when in fact ongoing investment is required, especially as the components age.” Rabbi Sarna adds that many older *eruv* may also be due for an update.

Rabbi Shlomo Katz, a lawyer who serves as president of the Silver Spring Eruv Association in Maryland, says that in his community a handful of the original poles—from when the eruv first went up forty-five years ago—are still in use. “We upgrade as opportunities arise,” he says. Nowadays, eruv builders

are opting to use stronger materials that are easier to check and less likely to need repairs over the long term.

Between new construction and upgrading and servicing existing *eruv*, professional eruv builders are kept busy. They often have waiting times of up to a year, sometimes even longer. “It’s a positive sign [that there is so much demand],” Rabbi Sarna asserts. “We’re beginning to bring eruv to the fore, to give it the same attention as we do *kashrus*.”

A Labor of Love

Many of today’s professional eruv builders began their careers as volunteers. Rabbi Shotkin operated out of the back of his van until he bought a bucket truck. “When I found one on eBay, I put a bid of \$40,000 on it, knowing I’d lose. They are the most essential tool for eruv building, but usually go for \$100,000. I was shocked when I got it. Calls flooded in as soon as I opened for business.”

Rabbi Paretzky also began as a volunteer. He used to *daven* early before setting out on Sundays to build and repair *eruv* in the Chicago area.

The first documented eruv in the United States was established in 1896 in the city of St. Louis, Missouri.

An Eruv Primer

Short for *eruv chatzerot*, literally a blending of courtyards, an eruv permits what would otherwise be the *melachah* of *hotza'ah me'reshut l'reshut*, the prohibition of carrying between public and private domains or more than four *amot* within a public domain on Shabbat. The eruv is a “wall,” as defined by Jewish law, that integrates several domains into a large private one in which carrying becomes permissible.

The eruv incorporates both preexisting manmade and natural infrastructures—such as fences and steep slope embankments—and “doorways” specially constructed of two posts with a crossbeam. The lintel must rest on top of the posts, not the side. So in the case of “doors” using utility poles and wires, which often run along the pole’s side, additional doorposts known as *lechi*s are affixed,

positioned beneath the wires.

An eruv’s construction can be as complex as the mitzvah itself. Depending on its size, it might have hundreds or thousands of points of connection and require numerous permissions from municipalities, corporations and private homeowners.



He’d bring photos to Rabbi Shlomo Francis at the Chicago Community Kollel when he had a *she’eilah*. Rabbi Francis also sent him to fix eruv issues he himself had identified. Eventually, Rabbi Paretzky made eruv his career.

Ultimately, the story of the eruv professional is one of *mesirut nefesh*. Eruv builders are on the road often, and they tend to be busy with repairs on Friday until close to candle lighting time. Each week, Rabbi Paretzky leaves first thing Monday morning and returns on Thursday night, sweeping across the country in between. He spends the next day fixing *eruvim* closer to home. At 2 PM on the summer Friday he was interviewed for this story, he still had five more *eruvim* to attend to before sundown. “Unfortunately, I’ve missed Minchah on *erev Shabbos* more than once,” he shares.

There are plenty of other challenges, too.

Local authorities, corporations and homeowners can reject plans after a long period of negotiation. Lawyers

step in, the eruv builder reworks the plans, and the all-consuming process begins again. A builder might arrive to break ground on a new eruv only to discover a fence has gone up where there had been none, or a pole has been downed, both requiring him to switch gears.

Despite these hurdles, eruv work is a labor of love, a meaningful investment of time and energy for Am Yisrael, and an opportunity to express *ahavat Yisrael*.

Rabbi Chaim Jachter, *rav* of Congregation Shaarei Orah in Teaneck, New Jersey, is also the eruv *posek* for seventy North American communities, from British Columbia to Kansas to his home state. Once a year since 1989 (and twice annually in Teaneck), he travels to inspect each eruv with a fine-tooth comb. Over time, he has established relationships with the local leadership and *rabbanim*. “We are partners in a process that requires ongoing dedication, because left uncared for, an eruv can become a halachic disaster.”

Rabbi Jachter notes that *posekim*

Conceptually, an eruv is a barrier that consists of walls and doorways, giving the enclosed area the status of a “private domain.” Halachically, a doorway consists of two doorposts (“lechayayim,” the plural of “lechi”), and a lintel that must be laid horizontally above both doorposts. Most modern-day North American eruvim use thin pipes affixed to telephone poles as the lechayayim and the telephone wires above them as the lintel. The day-to-day work of eruv building is mostly installing new lechayayim and lintels when the need arises. In this picture, the metal pole serves as a lechi and the wire on top serves as the lintel.

“There is a misconception that “you build an eruv once and that’s it, when in fact ongoing investment is required, especially as the components age.”

try to limit the footprint of required changes and repairs while ensuring halachic standards are adhered to. “An eruv isn’t cheap, but it’s still at the expense of holy communal money.”

Eruv Then and Now

Nowadays, an eruv is a prerequisite for attracting young families to a community; it’s a convenience we all take for granted, hardly thinking about it unless it’s down. So it’s hard to imagine that there was a time when few North American Jewish communities had one. As Miryam Block recalls of her eruv-less childhood in the Bronx and Rockaway during the 1950s and 60s, “I don’t know how we managed before my family moved, in 1968, to Far Rockaway, where the eruv was a *mechayeh*.”

Gradually, *eruv* went up across the country.

Rabbi Shotkin stresses that “the socialization the eruv has since made possible is critical to our communal well-being. Families with small

children, as well as anyone who uses a wheelchair, would be stuck at home without it. It’s both a *shalom bayis* issue and a mental health issue.”

In the 1960s, when Rabbi Moshe Feinstein, *zt”l*, sanctioned the building of the Kew Gardens Hills eruv in Queens, New York, one of the first modern *eruv* in the US, he stipulated that it be designed in a way that would limit the need for ongoing repairs. As such, telephone poles maintained by AT&T were integrated into the eruv “wall” as vertical “door” posts.

While *eruv* also use other preexisting infrastructures, such as a riverfront or the side of a building, utility poles remain the go-to element in North American eruv design. Except when there are none. Like in Las Vegas’s Henderson suburb, where the wires are buried underground, an aesthetic trend in new housing developments. Because it is harder to design an eruv without utility poles, such *eruv* may end up both larger and more costly compared to those in a city with utility poles.

Meanwhile, the technology boom has transformed the bare utility poles of the 1960s into a chaotic blend of phone, cable, internet and fiber-optic wires, rendering the eruv more vulnerable. Even a minor repair by any one of the respective companies can inadvertently compromise an eruv. Rabbi Paretzky recalls an incident when phone company linemen cut down fifty of the *lechis* he had just installed on a new eruv. They likely had no idea why they were there.

In other countries, where the wires are often buried, communities tend to use their own poles and wires instead, with bureaucratic hurdles often making for a lengthier construction process. As an example, the Zurich community in Switzerland has been trying to put up an eruv for over a decade.

Yet, once established, notes Rabbi Sarna, “they are easier to maintain because the eruv doesn’t share materials with anyone who might destroy them, unaware of their significance.”

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According to halachah, an eruv should be established whenever it is possible to do so.

Source: eruvinitiative.org/multimedia-archive/guidelines-for-creating-and-maintaining-a-kosher-eruv/

OU Supports Eruv Professionals

This past October, the OU, along with the National Eruv Initiative, hosted an eruv conference that drew some seventy eruv professionals from thirty-five cities in ten states from the East Coast and beyond, including California, Oregon, Illinois, Ohio and Michigan as well as Canada.

Aiming to support eruv professionals throughout North America, Rabbi Ezra Sarna, OU Director of Halacha Initiatives, and Rabbi Baruch Gore of the National Eruv Initiative organized the event along with a committee that included the *Who's Who?* of the eruv world, including premier eruv builder Rabbi Micah Shotkin and Rabbi Chaim Meir Steinmetz, a supervisor of numerous *eruvim* in the tri-state area.

"The *achdus* of the diverse group of eruv professionals infused every minute with a unique and powerful energy," says Rabbi Gore. "It was inspiring to see everyone's shared focus on enhancing *shemiras Shabbos* both in their hometowns and in other communities."

The two-day conference aimed to create a sense of community among eruv professionals while they explored various eruv-related topics, including how to launch a national conversation about raising the standard of eruv to a level compared with that of other *mitzvot* like *kashrut*.

Presenters included OU Kosher COO Rabbi Moshe Elefant; Yeshiva University *rosh yeshivah* and OU Kosher *posek* Rabbi Hershel Schachter;

posek Rabbi Shlomo Francis, founder of the Eruv Network; and attorneys David Yolkut and Yehudah Buchweitz, who have represented Jewish communities in high-profile eruv court cases. Presentations included "Setting city *eruvim* up for success" and "Creating a positive eruv culture." Additionally, there were sessions on eruv materials and tools and electrical wire safety.

"One of the most valuable takeaways from the conference was the chance to discover how other builders resolved various scenarios in ways I might never have thought of, and to speak with *posekim* I might never have had contact with," says eruv builder and supervisor Rabbi Chaim Yadlovker.



Seventy eruv professionals from across North America gathered at the OU this past October for an eruv conference. The event, aimed at supporting eruv professionals, was attended by eruv builders and supervisors from thirty-five cities in ten states. The next eruv conference is scheduled for November 2024. For more information, email sarnae@ou.org.

Keeping an Eruv Up and Running

When the rabbis in the Gemara instituted the eruv, they recognized that being able to carry things outside our homes contributed significantly to *oneg Shabbat* (our enjoyment of Shabbos), which is an essential part of the day. This still holds true.

But building an eruv now is an entirely different undertaking than it was then. “In those days, an eruv encircled a courtyard, not a city,” explains Rabbi Paretzky. “No one had to negotiate with power companies or deal with heavy traffic. Our process is far more complicated.”

“But it still comes down to ensuring that we keep Shabbos *k’halachah*,” he adds. “An eruv that is 99 percent kosher is 100 percent *pasul*.” The good news is that both technology and the professionalization of the eruv industry are making it easier to close the 1 percent gap.

Rabbi Yadlovker, who oversees the eruv in Great Neck, New York, as well as *eruvim* in the rapidly expanding Chassidic communities in Union County, New Jersey, calls his team of eruv checkers “the first line of defense” in ensuring that no one relies on a non-kosher eruv on any given Shabbat.

Generally, a checker will report

any issues to the eruv supervisor, who brings it to the attention of the overseeing *rav*. As needed, a *posek* might be consulted or a builder brought in to make any repairs.

Like eruv builders, checkers contend with plenty of challenges and risks, from the elements to angry dogs, from poison ivy to the occasional curmudgeonly apartment dweller who comes out of the building to shout, “What are you doing outside my window every Thursday night?” And more.

David Weintraub recently fell off his scooter, breaking eight ribs while inspecting the eruv in New Brunswick, New Jersey. Years ago, Rabbi Ronald Schwartzberg was arrested for trespassing after checking the eruv in Highland Park, New Jersey, unaware that he was on private property. (After he sent a fruit-and-wine basket to the owner, the charges were dropped.)

Aiming to streamline the weekly checking process, several eruv builders have toyed with using drones to inspect *eruvim* in obscured areas. In Israel, tension sensors are being developed that can notify the eruv manager immediately if there is an issue with a wire.

But eruv personnel agree that for the most part, nothing can replace the human touch. Therein lies the problem. “We just need to do more

checking. A well-trained pair of eyes is going to be the most effective antidote to problems with these complex structures,” says Rabbi Paretzky. He believes a major educational initiative that shines light on what goes into keeping an eruv kosher—from the cost to the *kedushah* to the physical labor—will inspire others to get involved.

“Due to increased technology upgrades and other factors, there’s much more activity now on telephone poles than there were twenty years ago,” says Rabbi Gore. “As a result, the need for more attentive checking is vital. Communities should have checkers who are not only knowledgeable but also capable of checking hard-to-reach spots, such as near bridges or rivers.”

As a *rebbe* at Torah Academy of Bergen County, Rabbi Jachter regularly brings his students with him when he checks the local eruv. “It’s tedious work, but I make it fun. It’s also my job to help other *rabbanim* become excited about it.”

By design, *eruvim* are naturally camouflaged within their environment, making their components hard to notice unless someone knows where to look. Their “walls” transform space to allow for communal inclusion and Shabbat enjoyment in ways that have made them a necessity of Orthodox Jewish life. And yet, so few of us give them much thought.

Those involved in the eruv industry are hoping that will change soon. Several communities already host an annual “Shabbat Eruv” to focus on the mitzvah and to recognize the efforts of local eruv personnel. Rabbi Katz says the Silver Spring Eruv Association hosts an annual campaign, which helps to raise both funds and awareness of what goes into maintaining a community eruv.

In truth, our *eruvim* function only because there is a team of devoted professionals and volunteers who, with enormous *mesirut nefesh* and love for Klal Yisrael, keep them running week after week.

Something to consider when we next get that text: *Gut Shabbos! The eruv is up.* ■

Eruv Resources & Further Reading

- *The Laws of an Eruv; A comprehensive review of the laws of Eruvin and their practical applications*, by Rabbi Shlomo Francis (New Jersey: Israel Bookshop Publications, 2013)
- *Walking the Line: Hilchot Eruvin from the Sources to the Streets*, by Rabbi Chaim Jachter (2023)
- *The Contemporary Eruv: Eruvin in Modern Metropolitan Areas*, by Rabbi Yosef Gavriel Bechhofer (New York: Feldheim, 2020)
- <https://eruvinitiative.org/>
- <https://eruvnetwork.org/>
- <https://outorah.org/series/4080> (All Daf Series: “Bringing Eruvin to Life”)

Rabbi Micah Shotkin is one of a handful of rabbinical experts in the United States who serve full time as professional eruv builders.

The Eruv Maven: Meet Rabbi Micah Shotkin

By Steve Lipman

For some rabbis who know a lot about constructing and repairing the eruv in their communities but want to know more, Passaic, a small city twelve miles west of New York City, has become the go-to place. That's because Rabbi Micah Shotkin lives there.

The rabbi, a native of Silver Spring, Maryland, who has lived in the city of 70,000 (with a Jewish population of about 11,000) for nearly two decades, is one of a handful of rabbinical experts in the United States who serve full time as professional eruv builders. "I'm the most active one," he says.

In addition to taking his tools to disparate communities that need an eruv built or fixed, the rabbi has become a mentor to his colleagues, inviting some of them to spend an individualized day or two with him in Passaic each year to share what he has learned on the job; the out-of-town rabbis accompany him on his inspection rounds of the city's eruv, for which he is responsible. This is typical in the small circle of rabbis who share their specialized expertise. "There's no competition" among eruv professionals, Rabbi Shotkin says.

He is also in charge of the *eruv* in nearby Teaneck and West Orange/Livingston, and is responsible for the upkeep of "numerous other *eruv*." This, in addition to handling the eruv *she'eilot* that come to him by phone each day.

To outsiders, putting up or fixing an eruv seems like simple work. Like *paskening* on the *kashrut* of a chicken. *Can't anyone with semichah build a kosher eruv with some string and poles?*

"A lot of people think that," Rabbi Shotkin says. In truth, most *rabbanim* agree that the Talmud's *Eruvin* tractate is one of the most difficult to master; the details of constructing an acceptable eruv are among halachah's most complicated. Though many rabbis have studied the relevant *halachot*, he noticed, when he began building his first few *eruv*, that "there weren't [many] people who knew the construction aspect of *eruv*." Much study was required.

Part of the challenge: no two eruv sites are identical. Each offers unique physical settings—featuring trees, bodies of water, gaps between buildings, et cetera, which an eruv builder must deal with.

The demand for eruv professionals like Rabbi Shotkin has grown in recent decades. "*Eruvin* are everywhere," the rabbi says.

An independent contractor, Rabbi Shotkin, who has done full-time eruv work for a dozen years, has his business based in his home on a Passaic side street, where he parks his 21-foot-long bucket truck (aka a "cherry picker"), which carries a boom lift ("forty-two feet high, twenty-eight feet high") for reaching high wires on telephone and electrical poles. The vehicle's row of sealed compartments surrounding the chassis are packed with an eruv builder's tools and construction supplies, and the rabbi's one-car garage behind the house is filled with even more supplies. It's as though a yeshivah opened a Home Depot branch.

Equally at home sitting in a *beit midrash* or walking the aisles of a hardware store, Rabbi Shotkin peppers his speech with Talmudic phrases and references to such things as lasers, screwdrivers and plum lines.

Rabbi Shotkin's eruv duties have taken him as far away as Nevada, to fields and streams, forests and swamps, the sides of cliffs and the shores of lakes. During his eruv-building years, he's encountered countless ticks and insects, as well as snapping turtles and bears (which did not threaten him), deer, snakes (non-venomous), mosquitoes and swarms of bees (his construction garb fortunately protected him against stings).

His duties have included producing a series of educational videos for the OU, demonstrating the intricacies of a community eruv for the OU's All Daf team when the Daf Yomi cycle reached tractate *Eruvin*.

All this from someone raised in a Modern Orthodox family who had no intention of becoming an eruv maven. "I wanted to be an engineer." Then, he became "enamored with [Torah] learning." He spent seventeen years in yeshivah. Like other Orthodox rabbis, he learned little in yeshivah (in his case, the Rabbinical Seminary of America—Chofetz Chaim in Forest Hills, Queens) about building an eruv, but had to learn quickly when he decided to build one at his family's home while doing outreach work in Ottawa, Canada.

Mechanically inclined, he developed an interest in and aptitude for that type of hands-on work. He studied the topic intensively. His reputation grew. And he got calls to put up, or repair, *eruv* in several out-of-town communities.

Rabbi Shotkin is "one of the most knowledgeable eruv experts in terms of materials and the how-to of building an eruv," says Rabbi Baruch Gore, a colleague who lives in Cherry Hill, New Jersey.

Sometimes Rabbi Shotkin's eruv work means assignments on short notice. Rabbi Chaim Jachter of Teaneck says he noticed "something very disturbing" about the community eruv on a Friday afternoon a few years ago—one of the poles along the eruv route was severely damaged. It was two and a half hours before candle-lighting time. Rabbi Jachter called Rabbi Shotkin, who fortuitously was fifteen minutes away in his car. "He quickly changed course and made his way to Teaneck," Rabbi Jachter says. "Rabbi Shotkin made the repair rapidly and efficiently, and the eruv was up and ready for Shabbat."

Over the years, Rabbi Shotkin says, he has had a hand—literally—in some 150 *eruv*.

Admittedly, eruv builder is a rare career choice for a *talmid chacham*, the rabbi says. People who meet his wife or children typically ask: "What does your husband [or father] do?"

"He's an eruv builder."

"He can make a living at that?" the people ask.

"Yes," says Rabbi Shotkin. It's easier, he says, than serving as a teacher in a day school, which he did before turning to full-time eruv work. "Much easier."

"And it pays better," he adds.

On one job in Connecticut a few years ago, an employee of the electric company who worked alongside the rabbi at some electrical poles, remarked, after Rabbi Shotkin declared his work done, "That's it?" *No testing required? How do you know the eruv works?*

Someone working for a utility or phone company needs to run some tests to ensure that the repairs work, Rabbi Shotkin explains. No such test is required for an eruv. "It works," Rabbi



Steve Lipman is a frequent contributor to *Jewish Action*.

“The demand for eruv professionals like Rabbi Shotkin has grown in recent decades. “*Eruvin* are everywhere,” the rabbi says.”



Shotkin declares, “if it’s kosher.”

Nine years ago, Rabbi Shotkin was called to Milwaukee to supervise—and actually carry out—the construction of an eruv on the city’s east side; plans for the eruv had been initiated three decades earlier but stalled until all the government permissions could be obtained. Under the aegis of an Eruv Committee formed by the Wisconsin Institute for Torah Study day school and yeshivah (WITS), the Lake Park Synagogue, and the Chabad of the East Side, the eruv encompasses seven square miles.

The committee turned to Rabbi Shotkin, says Rabbi Dovid Brafman, the development director of WITS, because “we needed his expertise.” Over a period of a few years, Rabbi Shotkin drove his cherry picker to Milwaukee several times for a week. Without Rabbi Shotkin, says Rabbi Brafman, that Milwaukee eruv “never would have happened.”

One snowy Friday afternoon, one of the wires of the Milwaukee eruv snapped. The eruv became *pasul* a few hours before Shabbat. Members of the Eruv Committee, lacking the

specialized knowledge or a cherry picker to effect repairs, were distressed. Rabbi Brafman called Rabbi Shotkin.

Rabbi Shotkin thought for a few minutes, then asked Rabbi Brafman, “Do you have a bungee cord?”

“Of course,” Rabbi Brafman answered; he had kept some of the heavy-duty elastic cords in his car after using them to tie some items atop the vehicle a few years earlier.

Following Rabbi Shotkin’s directions, Rabbi Brafman was able to fasten the bungee cord in place of the damaged wire; the east side of Milwaukee had a kosher eruv that Shabbat.

On the job, outfitted in a hardhat, a “highway yellow shirt” and steel-toed boots, Rabbi Shotkin is not readily identifiable as an Orthodox Jew, and most people he encounters assume he is a utility worker anxious to do his day’s job. Rabbi Shotkin is usually in no hurry to correct the assumption and engage in a theological conversation. “I always present myself as a utility worker.”

Many people—non-Jews and non-Orthodox Jews—who learn that Rabbi Shotkin is working on an

eruv, are intrigued by the details of the Shabbat enclosure. To those who are respectfully curious about the purpose of an eruv, he offers a simple explanation.

Since an eruv is often a sign of an expanding Orthodox community, Rabbi Shotkin has heard the occasional antisemitic remark from people who are not anxious to have *frum* families move in.

But he tells about the African American gentleman who was watching him do some repairs in Passaic a few years ago.

“Are you from the phone company?” the man asked.

“I said yes.”

“You’d better take care,” the man said. “That belongs to the Jewish community. They need it.” The onlooker kept telling the rabbi about the importance of the eruv wires. “He was very concerned about it.” ■