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A Tents Standoff Pits a Town Against Gadhafi and a Synagogue

Whether Shelter for Libya's Strongman or Site For a Bar Mitzvah, Englewood Disapproves

BY BARRY NEWMAN
AND SUZANNE SATALINE

ENGLEWOOD, N.J.—This green, unassuming New York City suburb has a couple of problems involving tents.

One concerns Col. Moammar Gadhafi. Many people here believe Libya's leader plans to put up a tent in Englewood during his trip to the United Nations in September. They don't like that.

The second problem concerns East Hill Synagogue. It puts up tents for bar mitzvahs. Some people in Englewood don't like that, either.

"I was hoping the community had put this behind it," Mayor Michael Wildes says of the bar mitzvah-tent battle—"until the head of a nation decided to pitch

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all of these sensitivities are respected," spokesman Ian Kelly said Wednesday.

But New York City is defiantly anti-tent. A few weeks ago, Libya's government asked if Col. Gadhafi could sleep in Central Park. A city department said no. "There is no camping in the park," said Jason Post, a city spokesman.

For Libya, that left Englewood. In 1982, Libya's U.N. mission paid \$1 million for a 10,000-square-foot stone mansion here—some people in town know it as "Thunder Rock"—on nearly five acres of land in East Hill, one of the city's leather neighborhoods.

The Libyans, who at the time had no diplomatic relations with the U.S., got a letter from the State Department warning them that only their ambassador had the right to use the property. Neither the ambassador nor his successors appear to have taken up the invitation. Over the years, the house went to ruin.

Englewood's mayor would like to keep it unoccupied. He's doing everything he can to keep Col. Gadhafi from camping out in



Neighbors are pitching a fit over the prospect that Col. Gadhafi might erect a tent at his New Jersey mansion. Boteach's much more modest house is next door to Libya's. "I wanted to go say hello, but there was never anybody to say hello to," he says. "It was a real novel," he adds.

A month ago, Rabbi Boteach and his family awoke to noise. Workers next door had cut down some oak trees between the two properties. Libya's house was under total renovation.

The rabbi went over to complain, and received warm apologies. Then, the Lockertie bomber was released, and the rabbi is ready to sue.

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"I was prepared to give Gadhafi the benefit of the doubt—that he really wanted to change," Rabbi Boteach says. "Now he's shown that he's the same guy. And they haven't replanted my trees, which they cut down."

As of yesterday, newly raked earth led down to a pond and a new cabana at Col. Gadhafi's place. It might be a good spot for a tent. But unless the colonel is planning a bar mitzvah, Englewood's other tent controversy won't help him escape the tent enforcers.

East Hill Synagogue occupies a shingled three-story house with a turret, a short drive from Libya's mansion. The temple bought the property 10 years ago, and began holding bar mitzvahs, and the occasional circumcision party, under a tent in the parking lot. Not unlike the Libyans, the synagogue ran into trouble from the neighbors.

They complained about noise, and said the parking-lot parties, often held on Saturdays, forced members of the congregation to park their cars out on the street. But the temple said that was impossible: Its members don't drive on Saturdays. "Come the

permission to put up a tent."

Sabbath, we don't drive—we walk," says a temple member who asked not to be identified. "Nobody's going to be driving there. So, we figured, why not a tent?"

The dispute was big news. Before Col. Gadhafi's trip loomed, it was Englewood's prime source of ethnic and religious passions. When the planning board ruled tents could go up just three times a year, the temple went to court, claiming religious discrimination. Englewood's tent-suppression, it contended, "imposed a substantial burden on religious exercise." A settlement in 2008 finally let the temple put up tents 12 times a year.

But if Libya's diplomats imagine they might turn to East Hill Synagogue's fight for tent liberation to ensure that Col. Gadhafi has a place to sleep in New Jersey, they will be disappointed.

"The government of Libya can't sue under a statute designed to protect religious freedom," says Andrew Frank, the attorney who represented the synagogue in court. "Gadhafi's situation is more like putting up a tent for a wedding. In Englewood, everybody has to ask for permission to put up a tent."