

'There's a New Sheriff in Town'

Gov. David Paterson backs the eruv in Westhampton Beach

By DAVID GERTLER

“A people fighting for their own rights are only as honorable as when they fight for the rights of all people,” said Rabbi Marc Schneier, spiritual leader

IN THE COMMUNITY

of The Hampton Synagogue, in the name of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

“Daybreak is when you look into the eyes of all the people you see and recognize your brother and your sister,” said Gov. David A. Paterson, citing a story about a rabbi teaching his rabbinical class.

Both statements were made from the pulpit of The Hampton Synagogue following services on Shabbat morning, Aug. 2.

Paterson gave a speech so adamant that even Schneier was taken aback. Starting with his personal history in connection to the Jewish people, the governor spoke about how he was diagnosed at an early age with Tay-Sachs disease, a metabolic condition he thought only afflicted Jews. More recently, he took a DNA test that identified two hits of Jewish genetic code.

Moving to the political arena, Paterson spoke about the budget deficit he discovered. Although many cuts are needed to balance the budget, Paterson said the one thing we cannot cut is compassion.

He described a situation he had to deal with years ago in Harlem, when many residents opposed the practice

of one group to commune every Saturday and beat drums as part of an African ritual intended to evoke peace and kindness. He applied the story to local issues by saying, “In a few hours the drums will be beating in Harlem, and maybe there will be an *eruv* in Westhampton Beach.”

Over the next few minutes, Paterson received multiple standing ovations from the overflow crowd at the synagogue. Regarding Schneier’s intended educational meeting on Aug. 13, 8 p.m., at The Hampton Synagogue, Paterson awed people by saying, “I might drop by; I want people to know there’s a new sheriff in town.”

Asked by a member of his congregation if he thought Paterson would attend, Schneier shook his head and said, “I wouldn’t want him to come,” implying his desire that the meeting be apolitical.

Paterson closed his speech by quoting proclamations of peace to all people from texts and philosophers of many religions. Responding to Schneier’s description of the synagogue as open to all who wish to pray, regardless of affiliation, Paterson said, “This is my synagogue, too.”

When asked, Schneier said he did not expect Paterson to speak so strongly in favor of the *eruv*. Seemingly at a loss for words, Schneier said, “That was beyond, beyond, beyond.”

Cynthia DiLorenzo, a Christian woman who had come to hear



Gov. David Paterson, who spoke at The Hampton Synagogue last Shabbat, gave a tacit endorsement for the locally embattled Westhampton Beach *eruv*.

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Paterson, said, “Now the governor is shoving the *eruv* down our throats.” DiLorenzo added that if the *eruv* is erected she will consistently cut the wire. She also declared her intention to make sure the *eruv* is not installed, saying: “We’ll run you [the Orthodox Jews] out of town!” She said she approached Paterson and told him that she was offended by his speech, at which point, she claims, Paterson took her hand and said, “The way that the rabbi introduced me, I had to say what I said.”

When introducing Paterson, Schneier did make statements that could be construed as leading the governor to come out in favor of the *eruv*. He spoke about his own efforts to fight for the civil rights of all people, specifically combating xenophobia toward African-Americans, Latinos and Muslims. He said he was surprised to have to deal with anti-Semitism “in my own backyard.” Schneier continued by saying that Paterson was also known for fighting for the civil rights of all people, that he and Schneier were not only longtime colleagues but also longtime friends. The two embraced when Paterson concluded his speech.

The general reaction to Paterson’s speech by the congregation and its guests was approval and relief that the broader government bodies were unwavering in support of their cause.

The *eruv* debate exploded this past May when e-mails were circulat-

ed claiming that an *eruv* would allow Jews to trespass on their neighbors’ property, and that “Shopkeepers have already been asked rather strongly to please close their stores on Saturday.” According to an investigation conducted by Westhampton Beach Mayor Conrad Teller, this claim has no merit. Nevertheless, DiLorenzo claims to know at least one store owner who was asked to close, but said that the shopkeeper denied it in fear of a boycott.

Following the e-mail campaign, Schneier suspended the synagogue’s petition while issuing a letter explaining that he wished to allow time for a forum to dispel the circulating misinformation. In response to Schneier’s suspension of the petition, a group calling itself “The Westhampton Beach Alliance for the Separation of the Church and State” (unaffiliated with the nonprofit that has registered the name) took out a full-page ad on Page 6 of the June 12 edition of *The Southampton Press*. The ad read: “Do you want Westhampton Beach to be proclaimed an Orthodox Jewish Community? Don’t let it happen!”

Since that time each week *The Southampton Press* letters-to-the-editor page has been filled with comments both in favor of and opposed to the *eruv*. In the July 30 issue, Clint Greenbaum returned to the core issue of discrimination, saying, “Creating roadblocks for any minority group to live within a community is discrimination.” Lewis Ziegler made similar comments about the fear that more

Orthodox Jews might move to Westhampton Beach should there be an *eruv*. “This is discrimination. There are laws against that,” he said.

On the other side, Jay Boyle suggested that not allowing an *eruv* shouldn’t be considered discrimination as there are other recourses for families that need to push strollers, such as using a Shabbat Goy. (The use of someone who is not Jewish for certain tasks on Shabbat is permissible under strict guidelines; among other restrictions, one is not permitted to be direct in the request.) Boyle suggested that the synagogue request assistance from the Girl Scouts or Boy Scouts.

Others took a more global approach, such as Marvin Tenzer, whose firm, Tenzer and Lunin LLP, represents the undisclosed client that registered the nonprofit Westhampton Beach Alliance for the Separation of the Church and State. Tenzer reprinted President George H. W. Bush’s letter to the Orthodox Jewish community in Washington, D.C., in 1990 upon the establishment of the first *eruv* in the nation’s capitol. Bush Sr. wrote: “There is a long tradition linking the establishment of *eruvim* with the secular authorities.” Bush cited a responsa of Rabbi Moses Sofer (The Chasam Sofer, 1762-1839), which issued a blessing to the governments that allow an *eruv* in their jurisdiction. Bush Sr. wrote about the *eruv* that “the territory it covers includes the Capitol, the White House, the Supreme Court, and many other federal buildings. ... [I]t will lead to a fuller and better life for the entire Jewish community in Washington. I look upon this work as a favorable endeavor.”

Paterson referred to an equally historic statement in his address to The Hampton Synagogue’s congregation, citing George Washington’s letter in response to one from Moses Seixas, warden of the Hebrew Congregation in Newport, R.I. (the Touro Synagogue). Paterson paraphrased closely from that letter, saying that we are “living in a society that will give to bigotry no sanction and will give to the pettiness of others no assistance.” (In the original letter the second half of the quote is “to persecution no assistance.”)

On that note, Paterson said, “I am hoping that we can bring tolerance and understanding and compassion to the desire of those who practice to erect an *eruv* right here in the Hamptons.”

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