

MEMBER CENTER: SIGN IN | REGISTER NOW

February 27, 2006 [Media Kit](#) [Subscribe](#)



America's Largest Independent Jewish Weekly Newspaper

SITE SEARCH

SEARCH

[HOME](#) | [ABOUT US](#) | [CONTACT US](#)



[Front Page Essay](#)

[News](#)

[Editorials](#)

[Features](#)

[Op-Ed](#)

[Media Monitor](#)

[Torah](#)

FEATURES

Columns

Glimpses Into American Jewish History

Letters To The Editor

Travel

Kosher Food

Books

Electronics Today

Art

Women's Page

Family Matters

Teens & Twenties

INSIDE

Need Help?

Privacy Policy

Jewish Press Classifieds

POLL

Palestinian Elections

If Hamas accepts Israel's right to exist, should the Israeli government negotiate with them?

 YES

 NO

DAILY SPECIALS



The premiere source for Kosher gift-giving online Consumer & Corporate gift



Kosher Vitamins online at Discounted Prices

Suffern Seeks To Close Bikur Cholim Shabbos House

By: [Tamar Snyder](#)

Wednesday, February 1, 2006

Rockland County's Bikur Cholim, a non-profit organization devoted to helping patients and their families, has found itself fighting for yet another life – its own. Suffern villagers who live in the vicinity of Bikur Cholim's Shabbos House are trying to close down what they term an "illegal transient motel."

"That automatically gives it a seedy connotation," said Leah Goldstein, director of health awareness at Bikur Cholim. "That's not what we are."

The yellow, two-story house located on 5 Hillcrest Rd. – conveniently situated across the road from Good Samaritan Hospital – enables Orthodox Jews to visit ill family members on *Shabbos* and *Yom Tovim*. The Shabbos House is outfitted with comfortable couches and stocked with *seforim* and other books, accomodating, free of charge, up to 14 family members of patients at Good Samaritan

The Shabbos House provides "a *Shabbos* like any other Jewish home would have – complete with fish, salad, cholent, challahs, even nosh," said Rabbi Simon Lauber, Bikur Cholim's founder and CEO. None of which impresses a large number of village residents.

At a meeting of the town's Zoning Board of Appeals last November 17, villagers testified against granting Bikur Cholim a variance to keep the Shabbos House up and running. Citing residents' complaints of extra traffic and the comings and goings of strangers, and noting that the Shabbos House is located on a residential block and no one lives in the house during the week, the committee denied Bikur Cholim its zoning variance.

Officials of the Bikur Cholim, which operates similar facilities at Nyack Hospital and Westchester Medical Center, said they've never before encountered such fierce opposition.

"I think they just don't want the Jews here," said Rabbi Lauber, who described his shock at reading in a newspaper that before the town hearing, which he attended, the town's code enforcer prepped villagers to avoid talking about religion. The tension in the room was so fierce, Rabbi Lauber recalled, that the police chief sat in the row in front of him and his fellow Bikur Cholim representatives, ostensibly to prevent an attack of sorts.

"At no point during the proceedings were we given a chance to explain ourselves," said Goldstein. "As soon as our attorney started reading a letter of support from Good Samaritan Hospital, 250 people in the courtroom began booing. It was something you would see on a TV show. I couldn't

MEMBER MESSAGES

ADD YOUR MESSAGE



SPECIAL OFFERS



believe what I was seeing. It didn't feel like America. It just didn't."

On December 29, Bikur Cholim filed a lawsuit in federal court in White Plains against the village of Suffern. The suit charges the village with violating Bikur Cholim's First Amendment Constitutional rights, as well as the federal Religious Land Use and Institutionalized Persons Act of 2000, commonly known as RLUIPA.

"We don't want to have to tiptoe around," Goldstein said. "By law, the village has to give us zoning. As a religious institution, we're entitled to it. I don't see how we can lose."

Speaking of the lawsuit, Rabbi Lauber said, "I'm doing it for *Klal Yisrael*, not for myself." Bikur Cholim, he added, is not seeking monetary compensation but rather the right to remain in Suffern and "service the Jewish community."

"I hope that the judge will understand that the people who use the Shabbos House have no other means to be with family members," Rabbi Lauber said. "Patients need extra help [on *Shabbos* and *Yom Tovim*]; they can't ring the bell to call for the nurses. The family members are there to help the patients."

Should Bikur Cholim be forced to close down the Shabbos House, observant Jews would be forced to spend *Shabbos* or *Yom Tov* in the emergency room, without kosher food. Others would have to walk back to their communities in New Square or Spring Valley, a multi-mile trek that could easily take hours.

"People are shocked that there is opposition to our pursuing our mission," said Rabbi Lauber. "Since we started Bikur Cholim in 1981, this is the first time we've had to battle for the right to be next to a hospital that services our community."

As for the villagers' complaints, Rabbi Lauber said they're unfounded: "There's no one in the house during the week; in fact, we're the best neighbors. The house is kept neatly, the grass is taken care of. Just let us be here."

According to Goldstein, the Shabbos House is locked during the week. A cleaning lady is sent twice a week – before *Shabbos* and afterwards. "We want it to be beautiful," Goldstein said. Bikur Cholim officials are confident they'll win their case next month. But the agency's fight to remain in Suffern is not without its costs.

In addition to the stress, time and effort already spent defending Bikur Cholim's Shabbos House, more than \$50,000 has been incurred in legal fees and related expenses.

"We're reaching out to people for advice or funding to help us," Rabbi Lauber said. "We're a non-profit struggling on a daily basis. We want to spend our time and money helping others, not dealing with lawsuits."

Editor's Note: *Readers wishing to offer advice or financial contributions to Rockland County's Bikur Cholim can contact Rabbi Lauber at (845) 425-7877, ext. 119).*

 SAVE ARTICLE  PRINT ARTICLE  EMAIL ARTICLE  ADD TO ALERTS

[Write a message for this story](#)

MEMBER MESSAGES

0 messages published on this story