

***The Rise of a Sovereign Shtetl:  
Kiryas Joel from Private Congregation to Public Corporation***

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Tucked in a quiet rural area some fifty miles due north of New York City sits one of the most intriguing experiments in modern Jewish sovereignty. Kiryas Joel is a legally recognized municipality of 22,246 residents, almost all of whom belong to the Satmar Hasidic sect. According to the Village's own estimate, Kiryas Joel will double in size over the next decade, with estimates ranging between 40,000 and 53,000. At that rate, the population of this curious and unlikely polity could well reach 73,000 in 2035, which would make it the first all-Hasidic city in history.<sup>1</sup>

The spectacular growth of Kiryas Joel has not come about without considerable tension, both within the community and without. Its recently announced aim to annex an additional 507 acres, slightly less than the existing bounds of the village (700 acres), has led to howls of protest from surrounding residents who fear the ongoing encroachment of their Satmar neighbors. Meanwhile, the seeming uniformity and conformism of Kiryas Joel's villagers are belied by fierce tensions between two competing sources of authority in the Satmar world, Rabbi Aaron Teitelbaum in Kiryas Joel and his younger brother Rabbi Zalmen Leib Teitelbaum in Williamsburg. The two have been locked in a bitter power struggle for more than fifteen years, with factions of supporters based in Kiryas Joel and the wider Satmar world. To a great extent, this struggle reflects the huge vacuum left after the passing of the founding father of the Satmar Hasidic court, Rabbi Joel Teitelbaum in 1979.

And yet, despite all of the internal and external pressures that have plagued Kiryas Joel, the community has grown at an extraordinary rate, developing into an intensely pious, Yiddish-speaking Hasidic enclave with substantial political clout smack in the heart of suburban New York. Nomi Stolzenberg and I have been engaged in researching and writing a book about this fascinating community for more than ten years. Our blended perspective draws on our discrete disciplinary and thematic interests. As such, it observes Kiryas Joel through multiple lenses, historical and legal modes of analysis, as well as American and Jewish framings. From an American perspective, Kiryas Joel, for all its residents' perceived strangeness, fits naturally into the religious, legal, and political landscape of this country. From a Jewish perspective, Kiryas Joel stands out as one of the most successful forms of sovereignty—or we might say autonomy—ever achieved by a group of Jews outside of the land of Israel.

There is a certain terminological confusion embedded, somewhat intentionally, in the previous sentence. Sovereignty, in the case of modern Jewish history, has often been cast in opposition to autonomy. The former, rooted in the seventeenth-century Westphalian system, connoted the aspiration and realization of territorial independence in the form of a *state*; the latter, issuing from late nineteenth-century nationalist theory, reflected the aspirations of a *nation* to regulate its own cultural, educational, and linguistic affairs under the patronage of a sovereign power.<sup>2</sup>

In today's world, this distinction has become rather more blurred. In the first instance, the rapid pace of globalization has eroded, or at least challenged, the once inviolable borders of "sovereign" states, prompting some analysts to speak of a "post-sovereign" era.<sup>3</sup> Other observers point to the existence of the "non-state sovereignty" exercised by religious communities (e.g., the Roman Catholic Church) and a range of international organizations including the United Nations, the International Red Cross, and FIFA. For example, Jurgen Brauer and Robert Haywood include in a 2010 article on "non-state sovereignty" examples of what earlier theorists such as Karl Renner and Otto Bauer called "autonomy."<sup>4</sup> One of the consequences of this moment of rethinking is to render more elastic the boundaries of the term "sovereignty" itself. Accordingly, I will refer to Kiryas Joel as a variant of this term of art—namely, as a case of "local sovereignty" (which might otherwise be described as autonomy).

To explicate this claim, I will proceed, in the first of my three tasks in this brief paper, to relate the contours of the spirited early twentieth-century debates over Jewish nationalism, often focused on the opposition between sovereignty and autonomy. Although Satmar Hasidism and its antecedents explicitly eschewed the "idol" of nationalism, we cannot understand the political vision, or better, political-theological vision, of Satmar without recognizing the deep imprint of this milieu. More specifically, I will argue that the unrestrained contempt expressed by the founding Satmar Rebbe, R. Joel Teitelbaum, belies his own participation in this moment, as well as his unwitting articulation of an autonomous, counter-Zionist vision.

The fulfillment of that vision, however, did and could not come in Europe. In the second part of the paper, I will suggest that the form of local sovereignty that Satmar Hasidim have so spectacularly achieved in Kiryas Joel, while rooted in the ideological universe of Europe, was realized in and enabled by America, and more particularly, by an American economic and political system that allows for the swift passage from a private aggregation of property owners to a public corporation. This transition reflects the trend toward a "communitarianism from the bottom up."

In the particular case of the Satmar community, it should be noted that there was a certain unwitting quality to the assumption of local sovereignty. The original intention of the founders of Kiryas Joel was to establish an insular "shtetl" in which Satmar Hasidim could live their lives without interference from the surrounding society. It was *not* to establish a legally recognized village. That step was mandated by the circumstances that accompanied the residents of the new Satmar enclave as they interacted with the neighbors in the Town of Monroe. Finally, in the third section of the paper, I will offer some brief observations on the differences between the American form of *haredi* political organization as exemplified by Kiryas Joel and the Israeli version.

## I

The period from 1897 to 1939 may be called the "Golden Age" of Jewish nationalist ideology. Jewish intellectuals and activists in Europe participated in a cacophonous marketplace of ideas in which they vigorously discussed and debated the nature of Jewishness. For an important segment among them, though by no

means all, there was agreement that the Jews constituted a *nation*, although there were widespread divergences of opinion over what the precise contours of the nation were and where it should be centered. One of the main dividing lines was between those who believed the Jewish nation should have its center in the ancestral homeland and those who believed that the most natural venue for the Jewish nation was exactly where its members were to be found at the time, in the Diaspora.<sup>5</sup> The divide between Zionists and Diasporists often, though not always, tracked another key divergence: that between nationalists for whom the ideal was the creation of a sovereign state and those for whom the ideal was a regime of “national cultural autonomy” under an existing sovereign state. Two of the founding figures of Jewish nationalism, Theodor Herzl (1860-1904) and Simon Dubnow (1860-1941) illustrate this division. The Central European Herzl formulated an unprecedented proposal in 1896 for a *sovereign state* for the Jewish people, imagining an elaborate mechanism (including a Jewish Society and Jewish Company) to raise money and implement concrete plans for resettlement and development. Meanwhile, his Eastern European contemporary, the historian Dubnow, advocated cultural autonomy for the Jewish nation that would entail state support for the right of Jews to regulate their internal affairs, including language, education, and culture, wherever they were to be found.

Although statist Zionism and non-statist Autonomism, as Dubnow referred to it, had distinct political goals and geographic foci, the borders between the two were not hermetically sealed. In fact, there was a fair bit of border crossing in the early twentieth century by Jewish nationalists, for whom support for Zionism and support for the principle of national cultural autonomy in the Diaspora were not mutually exclusive.<sup>6</sup> A fitting juncture of these two sensibilities was the conference sponsored by Russian Zionists in 1906 in Helsingfors (Helsinki), in which the policy of *Gegenwartsarbeit*—“present-day work” in building institutions in the Diaspora—was affirmed alongside the longer term goal of immigration to Palestine. Recent scholarship has deepened our understanding of the shared ideological space occupied by Zionists and Diasporists, including Joshua Shanes’ work on the important though understudied realm of Galicia and Dimitry Shumsky’s revisionist approach to the thought of key Zionist figures.<sup>7</sup>

This work amplifies the impression that nationalist ideologies of various and overlapping registers were prevalent among Jews in East, East Central, and Central Europe in the early twentieth century. These ideologies animated journals, newspapers, social clubs, political parties, and educational institutions. As such, they engaged not only adherents, but also opponents for whom nationalism was a foil against which they forged competing visions of Jewish life, ranging from arch-assimilationist to stringently orthodox. Among the latter, it is important to note the rise of the Agudat Yisrael movement which was established at a founding conference in Kattowitz, Germany, in 1912 with the mission of fighting the twin perils of Zionism and secularism.

It is in this context that we return to the story of Satmar Hasidim, and particularly the founding father of the movement, R. Joel Teitelbaum. Teitelbaum came from a renowned family of Hasidic rabbis who had resided, since the arrival of the family patriarch known as the “Yismach Moshe” (R. Moshe Teitelbaum) in 1808,

in Hungary. It was there, and particularly, in the northeast quadrant of the Habsburg Empire known as the Unterland, that *haredi* Judaism found its most fertile ground. Joel Teitelbaum was born in 1887 in the town of Sighet, where his father, Rabbi Hananiah Yom Tov Lipman Teitelbaum (known as the Kedushas Yom Tov), served as rabbi. On the death of his father, Joel followed the prevailing custom and took leave of Sighet, leaving his elder brother to assume the post of the Kedushas Yom Tov. He made his way to the town of Szatmár (also rendered as Satmar) in 1905, before commencing service in a series of rabbinic positions in Unterland communities that culminated in 1928 in his election as rabbi of Szatmár, which after the Treaty of Trianon of 1920, became known Satu Mare (as it transferred from Hungarian to Romanian control).<sup>8</sup>

The environment in which Joel Teitelbaum grew up and assumed leadership roles was one of intense piety, deepened by a sense of persistent and dangerous threats. The modern world around him was polluted, filled with widening circles of enemies: Gentiles, modernizing reformers, *faux* Orthodox, competing Hasidim. And yet, for Joel Teitelbaum and his fellow Unterland *haredim* such as R. Chaim Elazar Shapiro of neighboring Munkacs, there was perhaps no greater threat than Zionism. As a general matter, Jewish nationalism in its various forms was deemed a false idol, but Zionism committed the gravest sin of all by seeking to hasten the messianic redemption through human, rather than divine, action.

This was a deeply held belief of Joel Teitelbaum's, standing at the core of his political-theological vision. Perhaps his most famous book, *Va-yo'el Mosheh* (1959), contains a detailed elaboration of his view that Zionism marked a violation of the Three Oaths enumerated in Ketubot 111A which, according to his reading, enjoined Jews from undertaking a concerted movement of return to the Land of Israel. That Zionism represented such a movement made it not only an "impure idea," but "the greatest form of spiritual impurity in the entire world."<sup>9</sup>

Clearly, Zionism touched a raw nerve in Joel Teitelbaum; he encountered it in his midst, since Satu Mare's Jewish community included a significant Zionist presence.<sup>10</sup> The persistence of his engagement with Zionism--and its centrality in his thought—make clear what a large impact it had. As a young man, he assumed a position on the front line of opponents to Zionism in the Hungarian Unterland, sniffing out those whom he suspected of collaboration. For example, he joined with the Munkaczer Rebbe at a conference in Csap in 1922 to condemn—and forbid interaction with—the Agudat Yisrael. The fact that the Aguda, as it was known, arose precisely *in opposition to Zionism* did not insulate it from claims by Joel Teitelbaum and other *haredi* rabbis that it was in fact collaborating with Zionism on various projects in Palestine.<sup>11</sup>

Zionism did not command a majority of Jewish supporters in Europe in the pre-WWII era. But it and its Jewish nationalist rivals lent a powerful sense of energy, as well as a template for organizational structure, communications networks, and aspirational goals to Jewish communities in this period. Even those opposed to Jewish nationalism absorbed the strategies of the nationalists, all the while defining themselves as unrelenting foes. This dialectical process led some *haredim* to formulate an "alternative Zionism," as one scholar has written of the approach of Isaac Breuer, the grandson of Samson Raphael Hirsch and prominent

leader of the Aguda who moved to Palestine in 1936.<sup>12</sup> That is, Hirsch and others imagined a quasi-political movement that could marshal resources and build alliances to assure a significant presence for observant Jews—and present a counter-ideal to Zionists who failed to recognize the errancy of their ways.

One can extend this argument, I believe, to the case of R. Joel Teitelbaum, whose fight against Zionism was so constitutive as to shape the core of his being. He crafted a political-theological vision that relied on extensive engagement with Gentile government officials on whom he and his followers relied to advance their interests. This model was set in place through his work as a rabbi in Unterland communities prior to the dramatic collapse of Hungarian Jewry in 1944. He and his supporters established good relations with mayors, governors, and national officials in the towns where he served as rabbi: Orshava (known as Irshava in Hungarian and Ilsova in Romanian), Krule (Nagykároly in Hungarian and Carei in Romanian), and Satu Mare. The impulse to work with Gentile officials, which did not carry over to a willingness to work with Jews of differing religious or political norms, continued after Rabbi Teitelbaum made his way to the United States in 1946.

Two other features of R. Teitelbaum's political-theological vision bear mention, especially as they came to fruition on American soil. First, he sought to create in America a self-regulating enclave at a remove from polluting influences that would allow the Satmar way of life and authority structure to be preserved. Second, Satmar Hasidim, while intent on preserving strict segregation from other Jews, were and are also intent on expanding their community through marriage and procreation, in part as a response to the decimation of their ranks in the Holocaust. Far more than other Hasidic movements, Satmar Hasidim have succeeded in this project of growth, creating a global network of communities (Brooklyn, Kiryas Joel, London, Jerusalem, Melbourne, Antwerp, Montevideo) that is connected by their unique brand of religious stringency and politics. Some within the community have gone so far as to describe this entity as "malkhus Satmar," the Kingdom of Satmar, in recognition of its imperial reach and power.<sup>13</sup> At both local and global levels, these goals reflect the attempt by Joel Teitelbaum and his followers to promote a compelling alternative to Zionism, a sort of Counter-Zion.

## II

The realization of the first part of that vision, a self-standing enclave, came to fruition, as noted in the United States. This point merits repeating, because it is, at some level, counterintuitive. The classic and highly romanticized *shtetl* is associated with Jewish life in Eastern Europe, though that image of a wholly insular, homogenous enclave—indelibly etched by "Fiddler on the Roof"—bears little resemblance to the actual communities of Jews in the Pale of Settlement.<sup>14</sup> So too, Satu Mare, whence Satmar Hasidim came, was a multi-ethnic, multi-lingual East Central European city with a significant Jewish population, but one that never amounted to more than a quarter of the total number of residents.<sup>15</sup> It was in America that a Satmar *shtetl* took rise, gaining a measure of *sovereignty* or at least legal autonomy that would be unimaginable in the old country—with the possible exception of the Soviet-imposed experiment in Jewish autonomism that was created in 1928 in Birobidzhan.

Indeed, it was in America that Joel Teitelbaum would re-establish and expand his empire. The overwhelming majority of his followers from Satu Mare and neighboring towns did not survive the Nazi assault on Hungary in the spring and summer of 1944. Rabbi Teitelbaum himself was rescued, ironically enough, by a Hungarian Zionist official, Rudolf Kasztner, who negotiated with Adolf Eichmann to organize a transport of 1684 Jews to evade deportation to Auschwitz. As a member of the Kasztner transport, Teitelbaum spent six months in incarceration in Bergen-Belsen, before he was liberated to Switzerland in December 1944. He resided there for nine months before moving in August 1945 to Palestine to reunite with a surviving daughter. His trip to the United States in 1946 was ostensibly a fund-raising mission on behalf of his impoverished institutions in Jerusalem. But he quickly found a hospitable setting in Williamsburg in northern Brooklyn. It was there that he settled with his wife, Faiga, and trusted *gabbai*, Yosef Ashkenazi. Within a short period of time, Teitelbaum began to attract supporters among the tattered fragments of Hungarian Holocaust survivors who had made their way to the United States. He also exerted a powerful influence on Williamsburg, which was an ethnically mixed neighborhood with a sizable Orthodox Jewish population centered around the Torah ve-Daas yeshivah. As he had in the communities he served in Europe, Teitelbaum introduced new norms of stringency into Williamsburg in terms of *kashrut*, modesty, and education. His circle of followers began to grow, drawn by his pietistic charisma, reaching hundreds in the 1950s and thousands by the 1960s.

Unlike other strains of Orthodoxy—Torah ve-Daas’ embrace of “Torah im derekh erets” and Modern Orthodoxy’s commitment to the modern secular world—Joel Teitelbaum’s version regarded the surrounding society as rife with threats of contamination. Modernity at large was life *in extremis*, the chief antidote to which was segregation. Joel Teitelbaum’s biographer, Sh. Y. Gelbman, who grew up under his tutelage, recalls that among his cohort:

The idea of a ‘shtetl’ was a subject that never left the agenda during all of our years growing up; at every turn, one spoke of the Rebbe’s desire to build a settlement outside of the city that would be four pure cubits devoid of any defect or flaw in which the Satmarer could devote themselves to Torah and awe of G-d, in the pure path and way of the holy Rebbe, who taught us.<sup>16</sup>

Indeed, shortly after settling in Brooklyn, Joel Teitelbaum entrusted his close advisors with the task of identifying a site outside of the city where a Satmar *shtetl* could be founded. The importance of this task increased in the 1950s as a result of two demographic developments: first, the rapid rise of the Satmar Hasidic population due to a very high birth rate, animated in large measure by a desire to replenish the ranks of those lost in the Holocaust; and second, the arrival in Williamsburg of large numbers of Puerto Ricans, recent immigrants to New York as part of “The Great Migration,” who came to the neighborhood in search of affordable apartments.<sup>17</sup> These two factors placed ever greater strains on the limited stock of public housing units.

As a result, Satmar officials such as Lipa Friedman and Leopold (Leibish) Lefkowitz, who served as presidents of the Satmar Congregation and as leading

*shtadlanim* for Joel Teitelbaum, engaged in a decades-long effort to find an appropriate place for a satellite community. Rabbi Teitelbaum made clear that two conditions had to be met for the prospective site to be deemed a success: first, it had to be at a sufficient remove from the city in order to provide a measure of isolation and segregation; and second, it had to be close enough to Brooklyn and Manhattan to allow for daily commuting by Satmar men. Staten Island was one of the first locations visited in 1962, but was ruled out, in part because there was no bridge at that point to provide easy access (the Verrazano-Narrows Bridge opened in 1964). A serious attempt was made to establish the satellite in Mt. Olive, New Jersey in the early 1960s; 500 acres of land was purchased in 1952 with the intention of building 800 houses, along with a commercial district. That plan faced a series of obstacles set in the path of the Satmars by the Mt. Olive Township Committee, which was, to put it mildly, not enthusiastic at the prospect of thousands of foreign-looking Hasidic Jews invading their suburban Eden. As a result, the Mt. Olive experiment collapsed, and the efforts to find a new venue proceeded.

Owing to this experience, Satmar officials became wiser to the challenges at hand. They grasped that few Americans, Jewish or non-Jewish, would relish the arrival of thousands of Hasidic Jews in their community. They would find ways to forestall selling property to them. Increasingly mindful of the difficulties in buying property, Leibish Lefkowitz asked his brother-in-law, a clean-shaven, non-Orthodox Hungarian Jew named Oscar Fisher, to assist in buying land in Orange County, New York. Working under the cover of the newly created Monwood Realty Corp., Fisher began to purchase the lots of 172 acres in 1972. He was joined in this task by a Satmar Hasid from Brooklyn, Haim Leimzider, who took control of the construction project at the new site. Leimzider commuted to Monroe on a daily basis where he sat in a concealed caravan while overseeing the initial phase of the work: 80 garden apartment and 25 single-family homes.<sup>18</sup>

After two years of work, in April 1974, the project began to attract visits from Satmar Hasidim who read ads about the new housing prospects in the Yiddish press. It was at this point that Monroe residents caught wind of what was being planned: a new settlement of Hasidic Jews. Several months later, in the summer of 1974, the first Satmar families moved from Williamsburg. Their arrival marked, at once, the birth of the *shtetl* that Joel Teitelbaum had imagined decades earlier, and the onset of years of conflict and mutual suspicion between the new arrivals and veteran residents of Monroe. Reflecting this suspicion, the local newspaper, the *Times Herald Record*, asked on July 17, 1974: “How many people? Monroe officials jittery.”<sup>19</sup>

According to most accounts, Joel Teitelbaum’s original vision of a new Satmar community did not include plans for legal incorporation as a village.<sup>20</sup> That step emerged after tensions between the Satmars and the Town of Monroe reached a boiling point in the fall of 1976. The preceding period was full of recriminations between the two sides. Monroe officials alleged that the Satmars were in constant violation of the town’s zoning laws, pointing to the presence of synagogues, ritual baths, schools, and bakeries in the basement of the garden apartments as evidence. The Satmar residents of Monroe, for their part, believed that they were the victims of religious discrimination and intolerance toward their distinctive way of life. The

two sides were headed to a date in a federal court of law in Brooklyn where the Satmars had filed a religious discrimination lawsuit. However, the two sides never made it to the opening hearing, scheduled for October 26, 1976. Instead, a heated, all-night meeting was held after the Sabbath on Saturday night, October, 23 in which Satmar leaders Moshe Friedman and Shlomo Mikhel Rosner, on the authority of Rabbi Joel Teitelbaum, reached an agreement with the Town of Monroe's representative, a Jewish lawyer named Alan Lipman.<sup>21</sup> According to the agreement, Monroe would permit the Satmar residents to carve out an autonomous, self-standing village that would remain under the administrative umbrella of the town. The formal process toward village incorporation then commenced. The requisite percentage of leading property owners (50%) signed a petition requesting incorporation. The Town of Monroe approved the request, even as resentments lingered. Town Supervisor Williams Rogers signed off on the request by declaring that "the compromise (to create a Village) is almost as distasteful as the dispute it settled."<sup>22</sup> The penultimate hurdle was for the residents of the Satmar settlement to vote on incorporation, which they did in February 1977 by a vote of 148-1. The results were then sent to Albany, where, on March 2, 1977, New York State Secretary of State Mario Cuomo formally approved the incorporation of the Village of Kiryas Joel.

The attainment of the status of a village came about, at one level, as an unintended consequence--at the tail end of two years of strained relations between the new Satmar enclave and the residents and officials of Monroe. And yet, the vision of creating a kind of sovereign enclave that would serve as a *Nachtsyl*--a night exile from the ravages of the modern world, to borrow Max Nordau's evocative phrase from 1903--was more deeply rooted in the churning ideological world in which Joel Teitelbaum came of age. Rabbi Teitelbaum never declared that his ideal of a *shtetl* owed to the influence of Jewish nationalist discourse. On the contrary, he repeatedly declared his steadfast opposition to any and all forms of Jewish nationalism. But his obsessive engagement with Zionism suggests to us that it played a very large role in his thinking—and may well have inspired a counter-vision to the Zionist dream.

Seen from an American perspective, the creation of Kiryas Joel reveals the ease with which a relatively small assembly of private citizens can transform itself into a public corporation, moving from that most basic liberal individual right—private property--to a slice of sovereignty overnight. According to the laws of the State of New York, "(a) territory of 500 or more inhabitants may incorporate as a village in New York state" if a) it not be part of an existing city or village (as distinct from a town), and b) if it not be larger than five square miles.<sup>23</sup> Once the Satmars determined in the fall of 1976 that creating their own village was the preferred path in the fall, it was a short route to official incorporation. They assembled the requisite number of property owners, advanced a petition, placed pressure on the Town of Monroe, and then voted the Village into existence. This meant that the private group became a public entity with its own governmental apparatus that controlled the affairs of the community, including and especially zoning regulations.

The new Village elected a mayor, long-standing Satmar leader Leibish Lefkowitz, and a board, both of which were supported by an appointed

administrator or clerk. To suggest that this new set of offices marked the separation of religious and political power, consistent with the Establishment Clause of the First Amendment, would be inaccurate. Rabbi Joel Teitelbaum remained the dominant authority and guide in all matters for the Satmar community—a principle enshrined in the founding bylaws of the Yetev Lev Congregation in Williamsburg in 1952. The bylaws made reference to his authority over “all spiritual matters” in the community, a category that, in other settings, might appear limited, but in this context included virtually every realm of Satmar life.<sup>24</sup> He maintained his position of unquestioned authority even when his health deteriorated and he was partially incapacitated following a stroke in 1968. Indeed, no communal leader would deign to make a significant decision without his input and approval.

In light of that force, it would be no understatement to say that Joel Teitelbaum’s death in August 1979 was a devastating loss to the Satmar community. Still to this day, his followers speak of him with an extraordinary degree of adulation and reverence. The mythic quality in which his memory is shrouded has expanded considerably since his death due to an ongoing crisis of legitimacy among his putative successors. The person who immediately followed him as leader of the Satmar community was his nephew, Rabbi Moshe Teitelbaum, who had multiple strikes against him: he was not particularly close to Joel Teitelbaum; he lived in Brooklyn with his own community (where he was known as the Sigheter Rov); and he was widely regarded as lacking the erudition and charisma of his uncle. Further compounding the difficulties for Moshe Teitelbaum was the intense dislike of Joel Teitelbaum’s widow, known as Alta Faiga. From the early 1980s, a group of dissidents that had aligned with her began to establish their own institutions under the name “Bnai Yoel” (Sons of Joel). They believed themselves to be the guardians of the time-honored path of Rabbi Joel Teitelbaum.<sup>25</sup>

The battle lines were drawn even more clearly in 1984, when Moshe Teitelbaum appointed his eldest son, Aaron, to serve as chief rabbi of Kiryas Joel.<sup>26</sup> The dissidents regarded Aaron Teitelbaum, who (like his father) was not among the founders of Kiryas Joel, as an outsider with a domineering personality. They were also suspicious of his wife Sasha, the Israeli-born daughter of the Vizhnitzer Rebbe, because she allegedly spoke modern Hebrew at home (which was a grave violation of Joel Teitelbaum’s anti-Zionist teaching).<sup>27</sup> Aaron, for his part, moved quickly to establish his authority over the community, in part by restricting access to the main communal institutions. He was able to exert his rabbinic authority in the Village to prevent the residence, marriage, and burials of those who opposed him. He was also able to parlay his very close relationship with Village officials, who looked to him for guidance on most matters, to solidify his power. In an ironic turn of fate, the village has frequently applied its own power over zoning to restrict the development of new synagogues and schools associated with Rabbi Aaron Teitelbaum’s opponents.<sup>28</sup> The use of this power has even led some of the fiercest dissidents to sue in court for the dissolution of the Village on the grounds that it violates the vaunted separation of church and state.<sup>29</sup>

To make matters in the Satmar world even more complicated, Rabbi Moshe Teitelbaum shocked Aaron in 1999, when he decided to appoint his third son, Zalmen Leib, as rabbi of the Satmar congregation in Williamsburg, thereby dividing

the two capitals of the Satmar empire. This act inflamed tensions between the two brothers and their followers, leading to the creation of parallel religious institutions under the banners of the competing rabbis in both Williamsburg and Kiryas Joel. Meanwhile, the death of Moshe Teitelbaum in 2006 added considerable friction to the rivalry, resulting in scores of lawsuits filed by the two sides against each other over control of Satmar *mosdos* (institutional holdings), as well as new efforts by the Kiryas Joel establishment to prevent the growth of the dissident faction (now aligned with Rabbi Zalmen Leib).

All of this intense internecine conflict stems back to the void left in the Satmar world after Joel Teitelbaum's death—and to the crisis of legitimacy that has attended his various successors. And yet, remarkably, as ongoing and debilitating as the conflict has been, the Satmar kingdom has continued to expand its position as the largest Hasidic movement in the world. At a more local level, the Village of Kiryas Joel has grown at an astonishing rate, doubling in population every ten years. The success of the early residents in knowing how to make use of the American legal and political system to create a village has allowed for an unprecedented degree of Jewish sovereignty on the soil of this country. Satmar's more well-known Hasidic peer (and rival), Lubavitch, claims its headquarters at 770 Eastern Parkway in Brooklyn is "the spiritual capital of the Jewish people"<sup>30</sup> Kiryas Joel, by contrast, is an example of real political power at the local level, enabled by a thick web of political connections and a blending of the authority of synagogue and state.

One of the most notable assertions of the sovereign power of the community—and of the complicated boundary between religious and political power—was the attempt to establish a public school district in the Village beginning in the 1980s. Kiryas Joel followed a different course than that taken today in neighboring Rockland County, where Orthodox Jews have taken over the school board of the East Ramapo School District despite the fact that their children are not enrolled in it. Kiryas Joel residents identified a problem in educating their special needs children around 1983. A small group of parents, cognizant of the need to bring disabled kids out of the closet and raise the level of education for them, created a short-lived private school called Sha'are Hemlah.<sup>31</sup> A number of others decided, as an experiment, to send their children to the neighboring Monroe-Woodbury School District, but the cultural dissonances and pressure were perceived to be too great. After several other attempts to make use of public school teachers off-site—at both a neutral venue and in the private Satmar school system—the decision was taken in 1989 to seek the creation of a public school in Kiryas Joel intended for special needs children. At that point, Kiryas Joel officials set in play their formidable political skills and network, enhanced by their ability to deliver a bloc vote in elections. Owing in no small part to their influence, the New York State Legislature overwhelmingly passed a special statute, Chapter 748, that created the Kiryas Joel Free Union School District.

From its inception and for years thereafter, the idea of a self-standing school district in Kiryas Joel elicited intense opposition from many quarters—from New York state school officials, from liberal Jewish groups committed to the separation of church and state (e.g., the Anti-Defamation League, the American Jewish Committee, and the American Jewish Congress), and from angry *haredim* fearful of the

corrupting influence of American secular culture on Satmar children.<sup>32</sup> These various foes undertook constant legal action against the school district, tying it up in courts for nearly fifteen years, including a stop at the United States Supreme Court in 1994 where Chapter 748 was declared void since its “primary effect was impermissibly to advance religion.”<sup>33</sup> Throughout this contentious period, Village officials, together with Rabbi Aaron Teitelbaum, did not waver in their support for the school, whose doors remained open throughout.

The creation of the school district reminds us again of the public nature of Kiryas Joel’s mode of governance. The Village is not simply a group of private citizens bound together by a common cause, like a homeowners’ association or a condominium board. It began as such. But through the process of “communitarianism from the bottom up,” it was transformed quickly and somewhat unexpectedly into a recognized unit of New York State government that controls affairs within its one square mile area. Time does not permit a fuller recounting of the many twists and turns taken in Kiryas Joel over the past quarter century. But it is important to summarize our discussion by observing that the form of *local sovereignty* that Kiryas Joel has come to embody—allowing for full control over the *entwined* realms of religion and politics--represents a fulfillment of the counter-Zionist vision of Joel Teitelbaum beyond what he may well have imagined or even desired.

### III

By way of conclusion, I’d like to offer a brief comparison of Kiryas Joel to other related cases. In the broad sweep of American history, perhaps the boldest experiment in local sovereignty is the state of Utah, established by Mormons as an enclave to assure the perpetuation and growth of their religious community. Indeed, America knows of hundreds of examples of religious communities that have sought to create a place of refuge at a remove from mainstream society.<sup>34</sup> A small number of them have actually sought to wield the powers of government. Perhaps the most relevant precursor to Kiryas Joel is New Square, New York. Adherents of the Skverer rebbe, Rabbi Ya’akov Yosef Twersky, followed him to Spring Valley, New York, in 1954. Seven years later, Skverer residents petitioned the town of Ramapo to incorporate into a self-standing village. They did so for reasons that anticipate precisely the rationale for the Satmar settlement to seek incorporation: repeated run-ins with with local authorities over perceived violations of zoning regulations.<sup>35</sup> In contrast to Kiryas Joel, though, the Skverer village, New Square, does not share Satmar’s imperial ambition to expand rapidly and garner and employ political power as boldly.

That said, both Kiryas Joel and New Square offer a different path than that of other prominent enclaves of Orthodox Jews such as Monsey, New York, and Lakewood, New Jersey. In these two latter cases, growing numbers of observant Jews made their way to already established municipalities. And in both cases, they have become powerful and often dominant players in the political life of the two locales. But, for the most part, they have remained within the two communities rather than seek to carve out new self-standing polities.<sup>36</sup>

How do the strong cases of local sovereignty compare to the state of *haredi* settlement in the State of Israel?<sup>37</sup> There are several differences between the two domains that must be highlighted and analyzed.

First, there is a key attitudinal difference between *haredim* in the two countries. Although Satmar Hasidim do insist that America is *golus* (exile) and fervently aspire to the coming of the Messiah, they also regard the country as a *malkhut shel hesed*, a Gentile “kingdom of grace” that has been receptive and hospitable to them—to the almost unimaginable point of permitting them their own slice of sovereignty.<sup>38</sup> By contrast, from the time of the creation of the *Edah Haredis* in Jerusalem in 1919, *haredim* have regarded Zionism with grave suspicion. Some among them, including and especially Satmar Hasidim (who still hold annual protest rallies on 5 Iyar, Israeli Independence Day), consider the State of Israel to be a *malkhuta ha-rish`a*, a “regime of evil.”<sup>39</sup> Consistent with that view, Rabbi Joel Teitelbaum demanded that his followers refuse to participate in Israeli elections, while other Hasidic groups (Ger, Belz, etc.) were prepared to acknowledge the reality of Israeli sovereignty and vote in elections.

On the face of it, this attitudinal difference would seem to make a difference in the way in which a group makes use of the instrumentalities of government to advance its interest. Arguably no Hasidic or *haredi* has employed these instrumentalities as effectively and unapologetically as the Satmar of Kiryas Joel. It is not just their compensatory sense of entitlement to beneficent treatment for having survived the Holocaust nor the long-standing and counterintuitive Satmar tradition of political engagement. It is also America *per se*—its perceived “hesed” (grace) and, more importantly, its interest group politics—that rewards and empowers those who are able to marshal resources and votes to their side.

By contrast, there are still some in the *haredi* world in Israel, most notably, members of Neturei Karta, who refuse to recognize the State or minimize any contact with it as a matter of principle. But large number of *haredim*, while overtly opposed or merely indifferent to the State, have willingly utilized its financial resources and played the parliamentary political game to promote their own interests. Moreover, there are municipalities in Israel that have come under the control of *haredi* politicians (e.g., Bnai Brak, Beit Shemesh, Modi`in Illit, and Jerusalem during the mayoralty of Uri Lupoliansky from 2003-08), who are motivated to transform the very nature of Israeli society in ways that have no parallels in the United States.

In most cases, these communities have not assumed their current form in ways that resemble the rise of Kiryas Joel. That is, they have not acquired private property as the first step toward the creation of a formal *haredi* municipality. In the first instance, the overwhelming percentage of land in Israeli—more than 90%—is not privately held, but rather state owned. In related fashion, urban planning and land development are too centralized and controlled to allow five hundred residents the kind of discretion that they possess in New York; if for no other reason, the desire to constrain the growth of the Arab population so as to preserve the Jewish character of the State would prevent that latitude. And yet, there are strong versions of a “communitarianism from the bottom up” in the form of outposts in the West Bank that were settled in the name of creating facts on the ground, were

subsequently deemed illegal by the government, and later authorized after political pressure was applied to the government. It is not unlikely that, as the share of *haredim* in the general public and in positions of power increases in Israel, they might well attempt to carve out more examples of local sovereignty through a bottom up—rather than State-initiated top-down—approach.

As a general matter, one of the ironic consequences of globalization in the twenty-first century may be that we will see more examples of local sovereignty as the once rigid boundaries of nation-states are eroded. Concomitantly, the international community of *haredi* Jews may become even more of a small global village through frequent travel and social media. In that case, not only might the attitudinal differences between American and Israeli *haredim* be diminished further, but Kiryas Joel, New York, may become a model deemed worthy of replication by groups seeking to preserve their distinctive culture in the wake of the eroding tide of modernity—precisely by using some of its characteristic political stratagems and tools.

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<sup>1</sup> See the projections in the survey undertaken by Tim Miller Associates as part of Kiryas Joel's proposed annexation of 507 acres from the Town of Monroe from April 29, 2015.

<http://kjseqra.com/507Acres/DGEIS%20Vol%201%20Text%20Sections/KJ%203.2%20Demography%20and%20Fiscal.pdf>. Accessed on 5 June 2015.

<sup>2</sup> See the important treatment by Synopticus (aka Karl Renner), *Staat und Nation* (Vienna, 1899).

<sup>3</sup> Michael Keating, *Plurinational Democracy: Stateless Nations in a Post-Sovereignty Era* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

<sup>4</sup> Jurgen Brauer and Robert Haywood, "Non-state Sovereign Entrepreneurs and Non-territorial Sovereign Organizations," *UNI-WIDER*, Working Paper # 2010/09.

[http://www.wider.unu.edu/publications/working-papers/2010/en\\_GB/wp2010-09/](http://www.wider.unu.edu/publications/working-papers/2010/en_GB/wp2010-09/). Accessed on 5 June 2015. See also David N. Myers, "Rethinking Sovereignty and Autonomy: New Currents in the History of Jewish Nationalism," *Transversal* 13 (2015), 1-8.

<sup>5</sup> For a helpful taxonomy, see Ezra Mendelsohn, *On Modern Jewish Politics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), chapter 1.

<sup>6</sup> Of relevance are two works by Simon Rabinovitch, *Jewish Rights, National Rites: Nationalism and Autonomy in Late Imperial and Revolutionary Russia* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2013) and the edited volume *Jews and Diaspora Nationalism: Writings on Jewish Peoplehood in Europe and the United States* (Waltham, MA: Brandeis University Press, 2013). See also Noam Pianko, *Zionism and the Roads Not Taken: Rawidowicz, Kaplan and Kohn* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2010), and David N. Myers, *Between Jew and Arab: The Lost Voice of Simon Rawidowicz* (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 2008).

<sup>7</sup> See Joshua Shanes, *Diaspora Nationalism and Jewish Identity in Habsburg Galicia* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012), and Dimitry Shumsky, "Tsiyonut u-medinat le'om: ha'arakhah mi-hadash," *Zion* 77 (2012), 223-254.

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<sup>8</sup> A good deal has been written about Joel Teitelbaum and his early life, most notably in the nine-volume biography of the recently departed Satmar historian Shlomo Yankel Gelbman. See Sh. Y. Gelbman, *Moshi'an shel Yisrael* (Kiryas Joel, NY: Sh. Y. Gelbman, 1978/9-2008/9). See also Avraham Fuchs, *Ha-Admor mi-Satmar*, Alexander Sender Deutsch's two volume account, *Sefer botsinah kadishah* (Brooklyn: Tiferes Publishing, 1998-2000), Dovid Meisels' *The Rebbe*, Y.Y. Weishaus, *The Rebbe*, Yosef Steinberger, *'Olamot she-harvu* (Jerusalem: M. Mendel, 1980/81) and the related Yiddish volume *Fergangene veltn* (Jerusalem: M. Mendel, 1980), and Y. Landau, *Zikaron ba-sefer* (Brooklyn: Landau, 2000). For a highly critical account of Joel Teitelbaum during the Holocaust, see Menachem Keren-Kratz, "The Satmar Rebbe and the Destruction of Hungarian Jewry," *Tablet*, 16-17 July 2014. <http://tabletmag.com/author/menachemkeren-kratz>. Accessed on 5 June 2015.

<sup>9</sup> Joel Teitelbaum, *Va-Yo'el Mosheh: le-va'er dine ha-shalosh shevu'ot be-'inyene kets ha-yeshu'ot, gam le-va'er dine mitsvat yeshivat artsenu hakedoshah* (Brooklyn: Deutsch, 1959), 9ff. See also Gelbman, *Moshia'an shel Yisra'el*, VIII: 554ff and IX: 146ff, as well as *Botsina kadisha*, 39-40

<sup>10</sup> There were in the late 1930s some 800 Jews from Satu Mare who purchased "shekels" from the world Zionist Organization, indicating their membership. See the Satu Mare *yizker bukh*, edited by Naftali Stern, *Zakhor et Satmar: sefer zikaron shel Yehude Satmar* (Bene Brak, 1984), 53.

<sup>11</sup> An account of the Csap meeting, including the declaration, can be found in Moshe Goldstein, *Sefer tikun 'olam: yakhil kitve kodesh mi-maranan ve-rabanan neged shit'at ha-mithadshim* (Mukacevo: Guttman, 1935/36), 31-40. See also the concise summary in Aviezer Ravitzky, *Messianism, Zionism, and Jewish Religious Radicalism*, translated by Michael Swirsky and Jonathan Chipman (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 42-46, in which author argues for the "decisive influence" of the Munkaczer Rebbe on Joel Teitelbaum.

<sup>12</sup> Matthias Morgenstern, *From Frankfurt to Jerusalem : Isaac Breuer and the History of the Secession Dispute in Modern Jewish Orthodoxy* (Leiden: Brill, 2002), 236ff.

<sup>13</sup> See the book by Elchonon Josef Hertzman, *Malkhus Satmar: Satmerer kenigraikh in Amerike* (Brooklyn: Hertzman, 1981).

<sup>14</sup> Samuel Kassow argues that "(t)o see the shtetl as an entirely Jewish world is wrong." Kassow, "Introduction," in Steven T. Katz, ed. *The Shtetl: New Evaluations* (New York: New York University Press, 2007), 2. See the recent historical and terminological discussions by Yohanan Petrovski-Shtern, *The Golden Age Shtetl: A New History of Jewish Life in East Europe* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014), and Jeffrey Shandler, *Shtetl: A Vernacular Intellectual History* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2014).

<sup>15</sup> See Tamás Csíki, "Satu Mare," *YIVO Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe*. Csíki notes that by "1869 the Jewish population had grown to 1,357; by 1890 to 3,427; and by 1910 to 7,194 (representing 7.4%, 16.5%, and 20.6% of the total population, respectively). By 1941, there were 12,960 Jews in Satu Mare—24.9% of the total number of residents." [http://www.yivoencyclopedia.org/article.aspx/Satu\\_Mare](http://www.yivoencyclopedia.org/article.aspx/Satu_Mare). Accessed on 1 June 2015.

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- <sup>16</sup> See Gelbman's one volume history of Kiryas Joel, *Retson tsadik* (Kiryas Joel: Executive Printers, 1998), vii.
- <sup>17</sup> On the "Great Migration" of Puerto Ricans in the post-WWII era, see <http://centropr.hunter.cuny.edu/education/puerto-rican-studies/story-us-puerto-ricans-part-four>. Accessed on 2 June 2015.
- <sup>18</sup> Interviews with Debra Fisher (8 December 2009) and Haim Leimzider (22 March 2012)
- <sup>19</sup> "How many people? Monroe officials jittery." *The Times Herald Record*, 17 July 1974.
- <sup>20</sup> Interview with Shlomo Y. Gelbman, 2 February 2010.
- <sup>21</sup> Interviews with Alan Lipman (14 September 2011) and Moshe Friedman (20 October 2012).
- <sup>22</sup> "Monroe supervisor approves petition for Hasidic village," *The Times Herald Record*, 12 December 1976.
- <sup>23</sup> *Local Government Handbook* (New York State Department of State, 2011), 68. Accessed on 4 June 2015 at [http://www.dos.ny.gov/lg/publications/Local\\_Government\\_Handbook.pdf](http://www.dos.ny.gov/lg/publications/Local_Government_Handbook.pdf).
- <sup>24</sup> The 1952 bylaw declared that Joel Teitelbaum is "our *mara d'asra* (Halakhic decisor), may it be for many years to come. Nobody can perform his functions without his consent. He is the only authority in all spiritual matters (alle geistige inyonim). No rabbi, ritual slaughter, or teacher can be chosen without his consent. His decision is binding on every member."
- <sup>25</sup> See the account by Jerome Mintz in his excellent history and ethnography of Hasidic life in America, *Hasidic People: A Place in the New World* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992), 209-211.
- <sup>26</sup> The installation ceremony of Aron Teitelbaum as chief rabbi and *mara d'asra* of Kiryas Joel took place on Saturday evening, Nov. 10, 1984. See the notice in *Der Id*, 9 November 1984.
- <sup>27</sup> In the second edition from 1961, Joel Teitelbaum added two essays to the original 1959 version of *Va-Yo'el Mosheh*, one devoted to settlement of the Land of Israel (*Ma'amar yishuv Erets Yisra'el*) and one to his views about traditional—as distinct from modern—Hebrew (*Ma'amar leshon ha-Kodesh*). For further explication of Teitelbaum's view of Hebrew, see Oded Schechter's essay (under the pseudonym O. from Volozhin), "Haside Satmar," in Adi Ophir, ed., *50 le-48: Momentim bikortiyim be-toldot medinat Yisra'el* (Van Leer Institute and Hakibbutz Hameuchad Publishing: Tel Aviv, 1999), 523-533, as well as "Leshonam ha-tame' she-kar'uhu `Ivrit: ben leshon ha-Kodesh veva-Aramit: Le-gene'ologyah shal ha-`Ivrit," *Mi-ta'am* 2 (2005), 123-138.
- <sup>28</sup> Interview with Shlomo Yankel Gelbman and Jacob Ferencz, November 2014.
- <sup>29</sup> Chief among them has been Kiryas Joel dissident Joseph Waldman, who has sued for the dissolution of the Village on at least four occasions.
- <sup>30</sup> Samuel Heilman and Mordechai Friedman, *The Rebbe: The Life and Afterlife of Menachem Mendel Schneerson* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010), 201.
- <sup>31</sup> See Myers, "Commanded War," 31. Interview with school founder Wolf Lefkowitz, 31 August 2014.

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<sup>32</sup> Myers, "Commanded War," 343-346. A number of the *haredi* opponents of the school issued a book-length polemic against the school district, in which they called for a "battle for the soul of the child...a war of holiness against impurity based on the sense that the end is approaching, when the forces of impurity will be altogether eradicated. *Kunteres milhemet hovah* (Brooklyn: Congregation Tiferes Yczchok, 1995), 2-3.

<sup>33</sup> See Kiryas Joel School District v. Grumet (1994), <https://law.resource.org/pub/us/case/reporter/US/512/512.US.687.93-539.93-527.93-517.html>. Accessed on 5 June 2015.

<sup>34</sup> See the more than five hundred examples detailed in Foster Stockwell, ed. *Encyclopedia of American Communes, 1663-1963* (Jefferson, North Carolina and London: McFarland & Company, 1998).

<sup>35</sup> Mintz, *Hasidic People*, 199-200.

<sup>36</sup> The case of Monsey requires a qualification. Monsey is a hamlet in the Town of Ramapo. It is out of Ramapo that the Skverer Hasidim created the Village of New Square in 1961. And it was out of Ramapo that a group of Vizhnitzer Hasidim created the Village of Kaser in 1991.

<sup>37</sup> Another interesting comparison that is beyond the scope of this paper is Kiryas Tash, the community of Tash Hasidim located about 18 miles from Montreal in Boisbriand, Quebec.

<sup>38</sup> On the designation of the United States as a "malkhut shel hesed" by *haredim*, see Emmanuel Sivan, "The Enclave Culture," in Martin E. Marty and R. Scott Appleby, eds. *Fundamentalisms Comprehended* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 26.

<sup>39</sup> Gelbman, *Retson tsadik*, 126.