

Shtetl Without Pity

31

HENNELLY

**Dissent Is Dangerous at an Upstate Hasidic Village
Where the Religious and Political Leadership Are One**
By Robert Hennelly

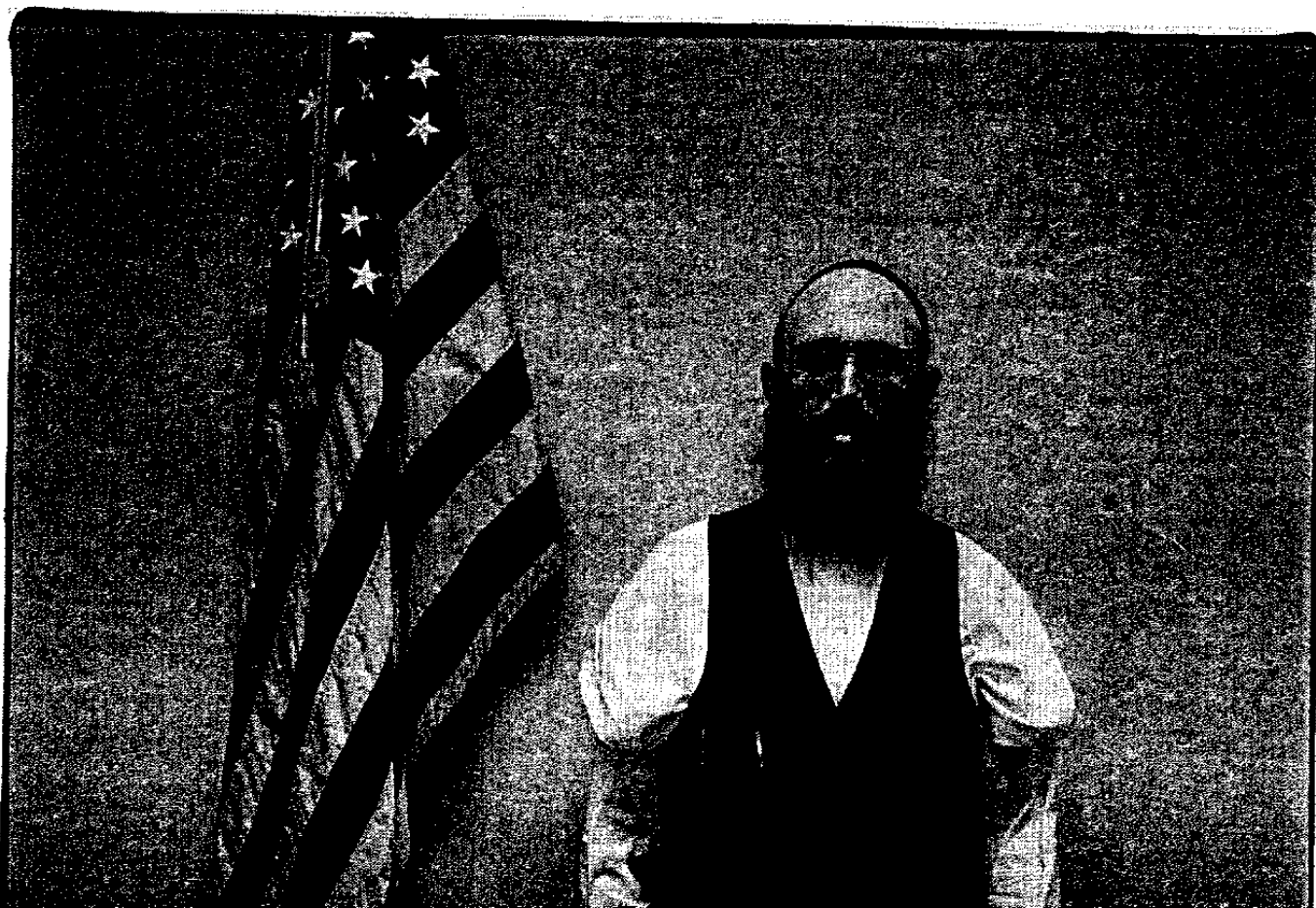
KIRYAS JOEL, NEW YORK—A few hours before sundown, the sweet smell of home baked challa permeates this two-family colonial across the street from the suburban synagogue set in the rolling Schunnemunk Mountains.

In the kitchen preparing for the Shabbos feast, the women of the house sing joyfully while the youngest children play and suck on Twizzlers. Downstairs in the playroom-office, Joe Waldman, the man of the house, explains the presence of a small-caliber handgun in the waistband of his pants. "I've got mine," a friend, Rabbi Yosef Hirsch, throws in.

Waldman and Hirsch do not fear people from outside their insular orthodox community. They fear the village's ruling clique, which controls its religious, cultural, educational, and governmental institutions along the lines of what Waldman calls a "theocracy"—with the full cooperation of local, state, and federal authorities.

So why isn't this Hasidic enclave of 12,000, an hour north of New York City, one big happy family waiting for the Supreme Court to approve its precedent-setting public school? It depends on whom you ask and how much history you know.

Kiryas Joel, at first glance, looks to be just another incorporated municipality that happens to be governed exclusively by men of the Satmar sect. The leadership argues that its right to self-determination has been violated by state court rulings prohibiting



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Kiryas Joel, at first glance, looks to be just another incorporated municipality that happens to be governed exclusively by men of the Satmar sect. The leadership argues that its right to self-determination has been violated by state court rulings prohibiting the village from running a public school district. In 1989, a deal was brokered with the existing local district, Monroe-Woodbury, to set up a separate district for handicapped Hasidic children in Kiryas Joel. Satmar parents had refused to send their handicapped children to the public school. The parents felt their children's orthodox customs had made them the target of ridicule. The cultural gap was further widened by the fact that, in this village, English is not spoken at home.

According to Dr. Steve Benardo, a former superintendent for special education in the Bronx who now runs the Kiryas Joel district, the present arrangement is just common sense. He described an incident in which one of the Hasidic children was cast as Rudolph the red-nosed reindeer in the Monroe-Woodbury school. "This community views culture as something that needs to be lived everyday," Benardo says. "The issue is, should these kids who had special needs have to be wrung from their community, culture, brethren while also being the most vulnerable?"

The underlying legal question is: Just how far must government go to accommodate a religious community organized as a municipality with claims on the public treasury? Governor Mario Cuomo, the state legislature, and Attorney General Robert Abrams are willing to go all the way to the Supreme Court to defend the district they created for Kiryas Joel by a special act. Monroe-Woodbury went pretty far as well when it replaced a female bus driver with a man to accommodate the young male yeshiva students who refused to board the bus because a woman was driving. (In the Satmar tradition women are not permitted to



LINDA ROSIER

Meyer Wertheimer, the Satmar grand rebbe's spokesman, is also the town's director of economic development. In Kiryas Joel, says one official, "It is a fine line between the religious and the municipal."

drive, and socialization between the sexes is frowned upon.) A federal judge ruled that the Monroe school district had violated the woman's rights while putting itself in the position of "promoting the Hasidic tenet that boys must not be in contact with women."

The current case has even broader implications. It may provide the Supreme Court with an opportunity to redefine the boundaries between church and state. Pat Buchanan puts the legal battle on an even loftier plane. "This battle of Kiryas Joel is between states' rights and federal power," he recently opined. "The cause of the Hasidim is nothing less than the cause of the Pilgrim fathers."

But how does this heroic community of observant Jews handle dissent? Waldman, a fifth-generation Satmar, uses homemade

videotapes called "Terror in Kiryas Joel" to illustrate his answer. "You won't believe this should happen in a place like this great country. What I am going to show you is like Khomeini style in Iran with Rushdie. The leadership here is oppressing the people brutally."

The videos depict events going back to 1990, when Waldman was the eighth candidate in a seven-seat school board race for the newly created district. Waldman was the only candidate not endorsed by the Satmar grand rebbe, Moishe Teitelbaum. He lost, but he made a respectable showing. Just a few weeks later, his six children were expelled from the yeshivas that serve everyone in the community. The reason given was their father's violation of religious law and flouting of rabbinical authority. Waldman's lawyer, civil rights attorney Michael Sussman, got a court order readmitting the

children for the rest of the school year. The religious-school authorities resisted the court order and were cited for contempt. The children were scorned.

Waldman's campaign was part of a larger schism in the Satmar community, and his chief adviser was Rabbi Judah Weingarten, a prominent Satmar dissident. A few months after the school-board election, Weingarten, who had headed a local effort for Dinkins in 1989, was beaten beyond recognition in front of his Williamsburg apartment. He spent a year in bed. Before the beating, a car Weingarten had been riding in was firebombed after police pulled him from a mob of angry Satmars. Three young Satmar men were charged with felonious assault and plea-bargained to a much lesser charge. They got probation.

The dissidents believe Weingarten was beaten because of his role in Waldman's

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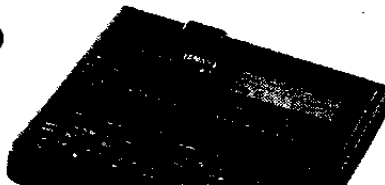
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Rabbi Judah Weingarten, a prominent Satmar dissident, was beaten in front of his Williamsburg apartment. He spent a year in bed.

election campaign. "We have nothing to do with any of these matters," countered Moses Friedman, secretary for Grand Rebbe Moishe Teitelbaum.

But someone is apparently very interested in Waldman and Weingarten's political activities. According to Michael Sussman, phone conversations among Weingarten, Waldman, and other dissidents were com-

push back the ocean," says one Orange County election official. "It was too big a job for two guys to secure the room."

Kiryas Joel officials maintain that the social hall is a separate facility not included in the banishment. But, to contest the nature of this dubious distinction, Waldman videotaped the list of banned families posted in the social hall and stairs of

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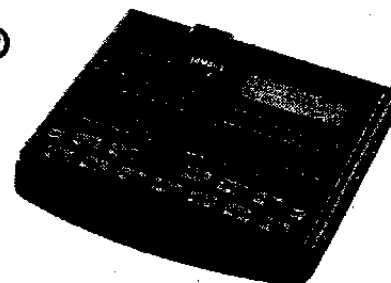
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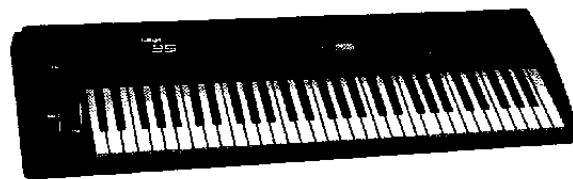
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But someone is apparently very interested in Waldman and Weingarten's political activities. According to Michael Sussman, phone conversations among Weingarten, Waldman, and other dissidents were covertly recorded and placed on sale at a Williamsburg electronics store. Sussman says the FBI expressed interest in the case for several months but no criminal charges were brought. Weingarten told the *Voice* he did not want to comment because he was afraid for his life. He continues to receive threatening fliers.

Meanwhile, back up north in Kiryas Joel, hundreds of angry yeshiva students marched on Waldman's home. "We have a rabbinical college of 800 students," says the community's spokesperson, Meyer Wertheimer. "They get upset, and they practice the freedom of protest to raise their voice." But Waldman says the protest was anything but nonviolent. Rocks were thrown through his windows, tires were slashed, and dissidents were assaulted when they attempted to visit the sect's sacred cemetery. The Satmar believe disputes should be adjudicated in rabbinical courts, so dissidents who complained to the authorities were branded as "informers," and dozens of families were banished from the congregation. "If somebody goes to secular court, it is considered he recognizes something else as G-d," says Wertheimer.

After a brief rapprochement between Waldman and the congregation in May of 1990, things blew apart again when 150 residents of Kiryas Joel petitioned county election officials to move the polling place for the village's four precincts from the temple's basement social hall. Waldman contends that the banned families are afraid to enter the social hall. Indeed, in the last election, 100 people packed the polling place all day. Despite the presence of two sheriff's deputies, "It was like trying to

push back the ocean," says one Orange County election official. "It was too big a job for two guys to secure the room."

Kiryas Joel officials maintain that the social hall is a separate facility not included in the banishment. But, to contest the nature of this dubious distinction, Waldman videotaped the list of banned families posted in the social hall and signs for the polling place. They were not five feet apart.

Village officials contend that the temple is the only suitable voting site, because it is the town's largest space and within walking distance for the entire community. "No women drive in this community," says Wertheimer. To move the polls from the social hall "you have 50 per cent of the votes knocked out." But Waldman estimates that 1000 registered voters stayed home because the polls were in the temple.

Just last week, the Orange County Board of Elections decided to investigate the last election at Kiryas Joel. Meanwhile, Waldman has written to the Justice Department requesting "immediate action against the massive voting fraud." He contends that students in the yeshivas (many of whom are over 18 and eligible to vote) were assigned registration cards belonging to other students who had graduated or left the community. Waldman says he has personally witnessed students practicing the signatures of departed students in order to cast as many as 10 votes each.

Wertheimer calls his charges baseless. In the last election, he insists, one of Waldman's daughters voted twice. (The daughter counters that, after voting under her married name, she was instructed by polling place workers to vote again under her father's name.) A commissioner at the county board of elections concedes that more than half of the voter-registration cards from Kiryas Joel fail to say where the voter was previously registered. The only way officials can determine whether a voter is on the rolls somewhere else is if the voter tells them.

The dissidents charge that county, state



LINDA ROSIER

This fully functioning shtetl in the midst of Orange County's exurban Americana is also one of the poorest communities in New York State.

and federal politicians are loathe to address their concerns because, when it comes to delivering the vote, no political machine can inspire more discipline than the folks in charge at Kiryas Joel.

When the Satmar leadership is in a candidate's corner, the faithful follow. In the last presidential election, for example, Bush got almost 1600 votes in Kiryas Joel to Clinton's 95. When Gertrude Mokotoff, the feisty Democratic mayor of Middletown, took on Satmar favorite Bill Larkin for state senate in 1992, she got just one vote in the village. "And I was Jewish," Mokotoff says.

Mokotoff is hardly the only local official astonished to find a fully functioning shtetl in the midst of Orange County's exurban Americana. The village of Kiryas Joel in the Township of Monroe was first settled in 1974 on 500 acres of farmland, much of which had been part of Averill Harriman's rolling Arden Hill estate bisected by the New York State Thruway.

The sect was incorporated in 1947 under the leadership of Rebbe Joel Teitelbaum. The charismatic mystic built on the centuries-old Hasidic tradition, drawing thousands of adherents, primarily from Romania and Hungary. (The name *Satmar* derives from a Romanian village named for Saint Mary.) After the carnage of the Holocaust, Teitelbaum led his followers to Palestine. But as the state of Israel came to fruition, the

1989 memo from the Satmar leadership that describes the village as an enclave restricted to members of the sect—by rabbinical decree. The memo was directed to Satmar building contractors. "From today on, everyone with no exception, before he buys a parcel of land, and before he starts to build an apartment in Kiryas Joel... he is required to have in writing permission from the leaders of the congregation," the memo read. Residents would be required to make a \$10,000 payment to the yeshiva upon the sale or construction of any apartment. "This agreement is binding on everyone either by the laws of Torah, and also in secular law without exceptions."

Abraham Weider, deputy mayor of the village, denies that any such policy exists. "Try to authenticate the document," he challenged. When pressed for examples of non-Satmars who owned a home and lived in the village, he responded, "Sure, some people who lived here in the past were not Satmar, and I think there is one guy who lives here now from Washington Heights, but I have trouble giving specifics."

Whether by custom or decree, Kiryas Joel remains an entity composed exclusively of one sect. With residency effectively restricted to a single group, the municipality has come to resemble the shtetls that sheltered—and eventually trapped—Jews in Eastern Europe. But that hasn't stopped state and federal agencies from pouring subsidies into the village.

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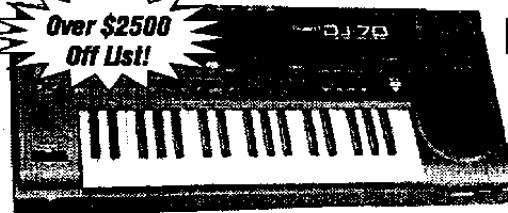
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In 1962 an attempt to settle in Mt. Olive, New Jersey, was reportedly derailed because of local resistance, which Satmar leaders regarded as anti-Semitic. As a result, their second attempt to find a site for Kiryas Joel was far more circumspect. Despite "repeated denials (by the Satmars) and a complex web of development corporations designed to disguise the project and protect it from possible opposition here, plans for a self-sufficient community are coming to light," *The New York Times* reported after the initial tracts were acquired.

The land they purchased in Monroe was zoned for one single-family house per acre. Imagine the planning board's surprise when it discovered that three-story, multiple-family structures were to be built instead. When board members asked for an explanation for the massive construction, which included a kitchen on each floor, they were told it was required by religious law. After three years of legal skirmishing, the conflict was finally resolved when Kiryas Joel became a fully autonomous village operating as an incorporated municipality with an elected mayor and council.

The dissidents supplied the *Voice* with a

village, denies that any such policy exists. "Try to authenticate the document," he challenged. When pressed for examples of non-Satmars who owned a home and lived in the village, he responded, "Sure, some people who lived here in the past were not Satmar, and I think there is one guy who lives here now from Washington Heights, but I have trouble giving specifics."

Whether by custom or decree, Kiryas Joel remains an entity composed exclusively of one sect. With residency effectively restricted to a single group, the municipality has come to resemble the shetlts that sheltered—and eventually trapped—Jews in Eastern Europe. But that hasn't stopped state and federal agencies from pouring subsidies into the village, as recently as last week. How could millions of public dollars be funneled to a religious community where the allocation of housing is apparently reserved for members of a particular religious sect, and building is strictly controlled by a religious figure answerable only to God?

Even the state police, weary of responding to many complaints from dissidents in Kiryas Joel, have accepted a liaison picked by the village leadership to sort things out when complaints arise. The result, says Waldman, is an abdication of the state's responsibility to be impartial in any dispute. For example, a few weeks ago a rabbi friendly with the Waldman faction was beaten up. The victim signed a complaint to press charges. An hour later the liaison, Mendel Farkas, called the victim. "I went and got the two witnesses he had listed," Farkas told the *Voice*. "I took them down to the police station and there was nothing to it." Says Waldman: "Can you imagine how intimidating this is for us?"

This hands-off approach goes beyond policing and extends into the local judiciary. Waldman claims he was assaulted over a year ago. The case has yet to come to trial and three local judges in two different towns have recused themselves from hearing the case.

Waldman says there have been dozens of violent incidents—beatings, stonings, firebombings, and at least one stabbing—involving his supporters in Williamsburg and Kiryas Joel. But Farkas has another perspective: "The worst thing that happens here is when kids go up on somebody else's grass. We are a peaceful community. You

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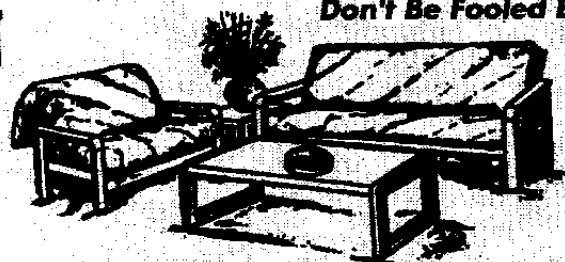
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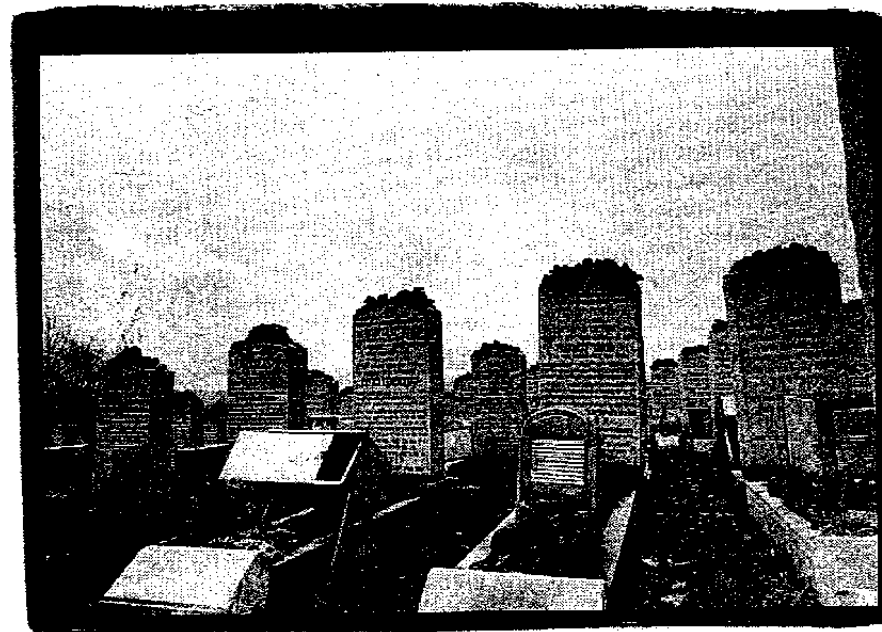
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can leave your car door open. You should show me any school district where 5000 kids can get along without one fight or metal detector. Boys look like boys and girls look like girls."

The Satmar miracle stalled in 1979 when the sect's visionary, Grand Rebbe Joel, died at 92 without a son. As recounted by Jerome R. Mintz in his book, *Hasidic People*, the result was a power struggle that only intensified when Joel's nephew, Moishe Teitelbaum, was appointed to lead the sect after the customary year of mourning. But a growing group of dissidents within Satmar is convinced the current rabbi and his minions are trying to coerce from the rank and file what his uncle was given out of devotion. "With Rebbe Joel, the people initiated the relationship themselves," says one dissident rabbi. "If he said something, there were no two opinions because we chose it to be that way." The rabbi added that Joel had not inherited his position, but had created it himself.

Joel's widow, Alte Feiga, continued to play a key role in the community, assembling her own court even as Joel's nephew took over. The faithful who felt that Moishe was no Joel gravitated toward the widow, whose former home in Brooklyn, which remained in the possession of her supporters, was stormed by Moishe's sup-

porters. president of the public-school district. Dissidents have complained in court that Weider's religious title, granted by the grand rebbe in 1981, violated bylaws that require congregational elections each year.

Says Weider: "It is a fine line between the religious and the municipal. We know that. But rabbinical leaders lead the community; it is our cornerstone, without which we could not continue in the footsteps of our fathers and grandfathers. Our children are not compromised because we adhere to our leaders."

For Waldman to reach out to the outside media and avail himself of secular courts remains for the leadership a betrayal of the congregation's most fundamental religious traditions. The punishment for due process can be harsh. Consider the Kiryas Joel residents who signed a petition to move the polling place and failed to recant after getting a series of letters. They were banned from using—or even visiting—their village cemetery where the grand rebbe is buried.

Regarded as pariahs, the dissidents have received preliminary approval from the Township of Monroe to open their own cemetery, just outside the village of Kiryas Joel. In another part of the perimeter, they have opened an alternative yeshiva with 200 students. As if conditioned by centuries of oppression, the dissidents are determined to endure. "Where are we going to

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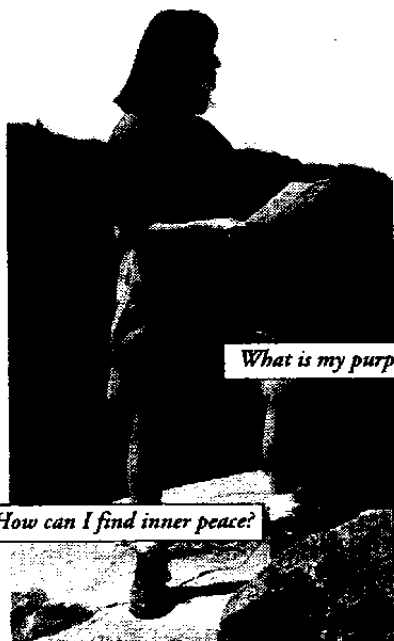
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and his minions are trying to coerce from the rank and file what his uncle was given out of devotion. "With Rebbe Joel, the people initiated the relationship themselves," says one dissident rabbi. "If he said something, there were no two opinions because we chose it to be that way." The rabbi added that Joel had not inherited his position, but had created it himself.

Joel's widow, Alte Feiga, continued to play a key role in the community, assembling her own court even as Joel's nephew took over. The faithful who felt that Moishe was no Joel gravitated toward the widow, whose former home in Brooklyn, which remained in the possession of her supporters, was stormed by Moishe's supporters over a conflict about who should hold title to the property. She has turned the late rebbe's residence in Kiryas Joel into a postnatal center for the village. It's a busy place.

Consider that, since 1980, Kiryas Joel has grown by 256 per cent, compared with a birth rate up 18 per cent in the rest of Orange County. The median age in the village is 13, and the average family size is 6.61 members. As a result, the average per capita income is the lowest in the county at \$2912, making the village one of the poorest communities in New York State. Three-quarters of the children qualify for subsidized lunch programs, and most families are eligible for Medicaid. The leadership, to its credit, has enrolled in a wide array of government programs and the faith itself requires that wealthy Satmars give generously to maintain individuals in need. The very existence of Kiryas Joel is a testimony to the group's resourcefulness.

But there's another side to life in this Hasidic enclave. One cannot buy a newspaper in any of the dozen well-stocked village stores. Television is frowned upon. Published material is generated exclusively by the spiritual leadership and the municipal government. "I published a newspaper which no store would allow to be sold," says Waldman. "The only way I was able to get it into the community was by sending the paper through the mail." Doorways on the Village Hall feature mezzuzas.

When the *Voice* reached out for Rabbi Aron Teitelbaum, son of the current grand rebbe, this reporter was referred to Meyer Wertheimer, who doubles as the village's director of economic development. Deputy Mayor Weider is also president of the local congregation, a trustee of the yeshiva, and

remains for the leadership a conveyor of the congregation's most fundamental religious traditions. The punishment for due process can be harsh. Consider the Kiryas Joel residents who signed a petition to move the polling place and failed to recant after getting a series of letters. They were banned from using—or even visiting—their village cemetery where the grand rebbe is buried.

Regarded as pariahs, the dissidents have received preliminary approval from the Township of Monroe to open their own cemetery, just outside the village of Kiryas Joel. In another part of the perimeter, they have opened an alternative yeshiva with 200 students. As if conditioned by centuries of oppression, the dissidents are determined to endure. "Where are we going to go?" asks Waldman. "There is no place to run. What Williamsburg! They'll get you there. If you run they chase you harder."

What do the dissenters want? "Joe Waldman," sighs Farkas, "he has a problem. He wanted to get elected and he didn't get enough votes, so he holds a grudge against the whole village." Waldman and his supporters see things differently: They want civic life in Kiryas Joel to be free of domination by the Satmar religious hierarchy. "You have to have at a higher religious level a conception that this is an inappropriate way for Jew to treat Jew or for people to treat people," says Waldman's attorney, Michael Sussman. "This sort of conduct is antithetical to Jewish values and democracy."

But in fact the conflict in Kiryas Joel goes to the heart of what it means to be a Satmar—and how a democracy must respond to those beliefs. If there is a solution to this schism, it is taking shape in entirely Hasidic terms.

At the Waldman home, the ceiling vibrates with the sound of many children's feet, phones ring constantly, and there's a steady stream of dissidents. Waldman plays this reporter a tape of a 1992 demonstration outside the home of Rabbi Yosef Hirsch, who is sitting beside him in the playroom-office. The Yiddish rant is punctuated by shouts of "Joel!" referring to the rebel rabbi. Hirsch has claimed he was turned out of his job in the Kiryas Joel Water Department, that parents were directed to boycott the day-care center he operated in the village, and that he has been regularly attacked by the leadership. Yet he does not plan to leave. Says the armed and observant rabbi, "With religion there is always hope."



LINDA ROSIER

Kiryas Joel, New York: Village leaders threatened dissidents with banishment from the community cemetery.

SHTETL AND STATE

Can an Upstate Religious Ghetto Run a Public School District?

by Robert Hennelly

ing before the justices of the state's highest court, the attorney general held up a thick loose-leaf book. In it, he said, was contained the municipal code for the village of Kiryas Joel, New York. A code like any other, he argued, despite the fact that

by the court this day, because of the limited nature of the case before it. That case, brought by the New York School Board Association, focuses on the constitutional issues raised by the law that created the Kiryas Joel school district in 1989. The School Board Association argues that the special creation of the district violates the

sistently been able to lobby local, state, and even federal officials to make exceptions for its village. In 1987, the Monroe-Woodbury Public School District agreed to replace female bus drivers with male ones because the male Satmar students would not travel on a bus driven by a woman. That practice was struck down by a federal

quired for each housing unit. The proceeds of this shakedown are remitted back to the yeshiva.

"These documents show that, at the very foundation of the community, is an exclusionary policy that requires that persons moving here subscribe to a system of beliefs dictated by and only by the Grand Rebbe," says Michael Sautman,

gregation president, and Yeshiva trustee. Weider challenged the Voice to authenticate the memo.

A public notice in the February 3, 1989, edition of the Satmar paper *Der Yid* read, "It is forbidden for any contractor or owner of a house, in our village, to sell or rent an apartment in Kiryas Joel without receiving permission in advance, in writing, from the Organization allocated for this purpose."

The Voice has obtained sworn and notarized translations of speeches made by the Grand Rebbe Moses Teitelbaum in December 1989 calling for the expulsion from the community of specific families and the maintenance of a rigorous exclusion policy. The Grand Rebbe commanded that anyone who violates the policy "should be dealt with like a real murderer."

The Voice has also obtained a sworn statement made by an 18-year-old yeshiva student from Kiryas Joel to the New York state police. The student told the police—though no charges were brought—that around the date of the Grand Rebbe's pronouncements, the teenager was directed by Meyer Wertheimer, village economic development director, and another elder to throw rocks through the windows of apartments belonging to villagers who had defied the directive requiring prior permission to lease. Wertheimer did not return phone calls.

As for the \$10,000-a-tithe mandated per housing unit, there is sworn testimony from none other than the village mayor, Leopold Lefkowitz, confirming it. On June 24, 1993, before New York Supreme Court judge Irving Kramer, Lefkowitz said, "There are many families there, 10 children to a family...and so that they might continue, so that the education may be continued, the builder of a house has to contribute \$10,000."

Meanwhile, millions of dollars of federal aid have flooded into Kiryas Joel under HUD's Small Cities Grant Program. U.S. taxpayers have paid \$675,000 for the construction of sidewalks and curbs, \$360,000 for the building of a medical center that was mysteriously burned down by unknown

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ing before the justices of the state's highest court, the attorney held up a thick loose-leaf book. In it, he said, was contained the municipal code for the village of Kiryas Joel, New York. A municipality like any other, he was implying, despite the fact that its residents are members of the Satmar Hasidic sect.

In oral arguments before the state Court last week, the attorney was using the municipal code to back up his claim that the village clearly separates religious functions from municipal functions. He suggested, the Satmars usually operate their village, that the proper constitutional distinction between sect and state is running a public school—this was the issue before the court—and that this should be no problem.

Meanwhile, Joe Waldman, a Kiryas Joel resident, sat a few feet back in the same chambers, listening intently to the lawyers. Hoping the court would rule in his favor, which was first reported last December in the *Voice*. Waldman's story of official intolerance. In 1990, Waldman, a fifth-generation Satmar, ran for the village public school board—created in 1989 by a special act of the New York state legislature. He ran without rabbinical approval, and the process made the election a farce. Waldman lost, but got elected. His initiative cost him his seat. He was banned from the village congregation, his home was surrounded by a mob of students, his car was smashed, his supporters brutally beaten, and his children expelled from the community's yeshiva. None of this would be heard

by the court this day, because of the limited nature of the case before it. That case, brought by the New York School Board Association, focuses on the constitutional issues raised by the law that created the Kiryas Joel school district in 1989. The School Board Association argues that the special creation of the district violates the Establishment Clause of the Constitution, drafted to ensure the separation of church and state.

Indeed, Waldman was crestfallen when Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg cut short an attorney for the School Board Association when he tried to talk about Waldman's battle with the Satmar hierarchy. "I felt," he said, "like she had prevented America from knowing what is really going on in this Khomeini-like shtetl."

In the years since it became a separate municipality in 1977, Kiryas Joel has become one of the fastest growing communities in New York. It shuns contact with the outside world in almost any form, including radio, TV, and English-language newspapers. It is also one of the state's poorest communities, and the decision to incorporate as a municipality has provided a windfall in federal grants, state aid, and county appropriations.

Kiryas Joel purports to *not* be a wholly religious community. And yet, the same men that run the congregation also direct the yeshiva, the public school board, and the village itself. Were the village officially considered a religious community, it would be organized as a tax-exempt entity, and would not be the beneficiary of this government largesse.

The Satmar leadership has con-

sistently been able to lobby local, state, and even federal officials to make exceptions for its village. In 1987, the Monroe-Woodbury Public School District agreed to replace female bus drivers with male ones because the male Satmar students would not travel on a bus driven by a woman. That practice was struck down by a federal judge.

In 1989, then assemblymember Sheldon Silver wrote to Governor Cuomo that legislative action was necessary on behalf of Kiryas Joel so the Hasidim would not have to continue to send their handicapped students to the existing public school at Monroe-Woodbury. The Hasidim felt that to send their children to that public school was an unacceptable religious compromise. So in July 1989, the New York state legislature approved the creation of a special school district to be administered by the Satmars.

When Nat Lewin, the Satmars' attorney, defended that special district to the Supreme Court, he argued that Kiryas Joel runs like any other municipality. In fact, the village is more like a medieval shtetl—where stoning can be used to enforce rabbinical decree.

The *Voice* has learned of some local practices not included in the municipal code Lewin used for rhetorical effect.

Since at least 1989 there is documentation that the congregation, at the direction of the Grand Rebbe, has pursued a policy requiring builders of new housing or owners of existing units to get prior permission from the religious authorities before they rent or sell. In addition, a \$10,000 tithe is re-

quired for each housing unit. The proceeds of this shakedown are remitted back to the yeshiva.

"These documents show that, at the very foundation of the community, is an exclusionary policy that requires that persons moving here subscribe to a system of beliefs dictated by and only by the Grand Rebbe," says Michael Sussman, Joe Waldman's attorney.

Last December, when confronted with an internal memo from the congregation outlining this policy, the village leadership denied such a policy existed but could not think of one non-Satmar family living in the village.

"Sure, some people who lived here in the past were not Satmar, but I have trouble giving specifics," says Abraham Weider. Weider is deputy mayor, president of the public school board, con-

sworn testimony from none other than the village mayor, Leopold Lefkowitz, confirming it. On June 24, 1993, before New York Supreme Court judge Irving Kramer, Lefkowitz said, "There are many families there, 10 children to a family... and so that they might continue, so that the education may be continued, the builder of a house has to contribute \$10,000."

Meanwhile, millions of dollars of federal aid have flooded into Kiryas Joel under HUD's Small Cities Grant Program. U.S. taxpayers have paid \$675,000 for the construction of sidewalks and curbs, \$360,000 for the building of a medical center that was mysteriously burned down by unknown arsonists, and \$400,000 for the drilling of drinking-water wells. This does not include the millions paid out since 1989 under Federal Section 8 housing subsidies nor the myriad of county and state grants amassed by officials.

It should come as no surprise that in the Supreme Court case—which should be decided by this summer—the Satmar hierarchy are supported by Christian fundamentalists such as Pat Robertson, as well as the Archdiocese of New York and the Knights of Columbus, along with dozens of other religious groups.

Should the Supreme Court allow the Kiryas Joel school district to continue to operate, these groups will no longer need the funding generated by vouchers from parents who want to send their children to parochial schools. Any congregation that considers itself too pious for public school might be able to set up a public school district of its own.

Too bad Joe Waldman could not have adjourned with the justices to their chambers and shown them his homemade videotapes of the Satmar hierarchy's mobs in action. The justices could have seen what happens when the church becomes the state.

Research: Jens Jørgen Madsen

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