

Transcript

Welcome to the New Books Network.

Mark Klobas

Hello everyone, and welcome to another episode of Princeton University Press Ideas Podcast, a joint production of Princeton University Press and the New Books Network. I'm Mark Klobas, and today I'm talking with Nomi Stolzenberg and David Myers, co-authors of the book *American Shetel: The Making of Kiryas Joel, a Hasidic Village in Upstate New York*. Nomi and David, welcome to the New Books Network.

Nomi Stolzenberg

Thank you.

David Myers

Great to be with you, Mark.

Mark Klobas

It's great to have you on our show. I was wondering if you could start us off by telling our listeners something about yourselves.

Nomi Stolzenberg

Sure, I'll go first. So, I am a law professor at the University of Southern California. I've been a member of the law school faculty there since the late 1980s, and I came to USC after clerking for the chief judge of the Third Circuit Court of Appeals, and that was one year after graduating from Harvard Law School in 1987. And I mentioned that because I was in law school in the heyday of critical legal studies and really the moment of the birth of critical race theory and critical feminist legal theory, and those have been really significant influences on how I look at the law, and in particular, how I look at issues of law and religion.

David Myers

And this is David. I teach Jewish history at UCLA, where I have been on the faculty for 30 years. My work focuses on modern Jewish intellectual and cultural history. I studied and received my PhD at Columbia with the great Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi, one of the great Jewish historians of the last century—certainly half-century—and my work has typically focused on European Jewish intellectuals as well as the history of Zionism and Israel Palestine. And so this bookmark, *American Shetel*, really represents a significant departure for me. It's not been a sudden shift because we've been at work on this book for more than a decade and a half, and it's gratifying now to see it come to the point of publication.

Mark Klobas

It really is a fascinating book because of the way that the two of you integrate your questions of American law, questions of American society. You also talk about European history, Jewish history, Jewish culture. What was it that led you to undertake the topic of studying this one village in New York?

Nomi Stolzenberg

Mmm-hmm. So, it really proceeded in two stages, and initially it was just me before it became a collaborative project. In 1994, the United States Supreme Court handed down an opinion that got a

lot of press and a lot of public attention that was addressing a challenge to the constitutionality of the law that the state of New York had passed authorizing this community, this municipality, which was founded by this one particular group of Hasidic Jews, it allowed this municipality to form its own Public School District within the confines of the village, so that the constituency of the school district would be very religiously homogeneous.

So, somebody went to court, very interesting character by the name of Louis Grumet, and said, 'This must be a violation of the principle of separation of church and state that's embodied in what we call the Establishment Clause of the First Amendment. This is the clause of the First Amendment that says that governments can't make any law establishing religion. So, the Supreme Court handed down the decision in 1994. That was a long time ago. And I had already established myself as a scholar of law and religion, and this was an extremely interesting case about law and religion. So, I joined a small band of First Amendment and law and religion scholars in just writing about that one case.

But my intuition at the time was that this case and the issues addressed were really just the tip of the iceberg. And that you really could not begin to really understand, not only the community, but the role that American law plays vis-à-vis the community. Without a much, much more bottom-up approach, a much more bottom-up analysis. And a two-fold sense, meaning both you just needed a much more textured picture of how the community actually functions internally and what the nature of its relationship to the outside world is. But also from the bottom up, in the sense that in terms of the legal issues presented by the community, the Supreme Court case was focusing exclusively on what we call public law issues.

That is to say, legal issues pertaining to the community's public institutions. Its governmental entities, the village, the public school district. But in order to really understand how this community functions and how it's enabled by American law, you really have to shift your focus to the community's private institutions and private law. That is to say, the elements of our legal system that regulate the private market, the real estate market, the rights and obligations of private associations of the family.

So, I sort of let that idea simmer for a while, but I happen to have close by someone who was the indispensable person to provide that really bottom-up, textured portrait of the community.

David Myers

That is I. So, I would look over my shoulder at home—because it's important to add for those listeners out there that we're not only the co-authors of this book, but Nomi and I happen to be married—and I would be looking over her shoulder as she would be exploring these different intriguing religious sub-communities populating the landscape of the United States. And one of them really caught my attention, this community called Kiryas Joel, because it really reflected a phenomenon that has been of great interest to both Nomi and me for a very long time, which is the struggle of Jews in particular to assert a strong form of collective identity in the modern world, in the face of all sorts of countervailing currents and threats. The most obvious, of course, would be Nazi totalitarianism, which sought to remove Jews physically through an act of genocide. But there are other threats that Jews have faced in the modern world to their idea of collective identity, such as liberalism, liberal integrationism, assimilation.

And so, the struggle of Jews to assert a strong form of communal or collective identity has been a recurring interest of mine as well as a periodic interest of Nomi's. We wrote an article early in our careers about this. And then I saw Kiryas Joel, which is this stunning counterexample to the general trend of the evisceration of that strong form of community. This was a very strong form of community that managed to assert itself in the United States, right. In the United States, where the

Constitution asserts that there should be no state establishment of religion. In the United States, where the principle of separation of religion and state is enshrined in our legal DNA.

And I really ask myself: what was it about this community that was, at one level, anomalous in history, and yet seemingly so at home in the United States? Because when we look closely, we couldn't find many examples of Jewish communities—certainly in the diaspora—that had managed to achieve the degree of homogeneity as Kiryas Joel, and none that had achieved validation in the form of incorporation as a municipality recognized by the state.

But when we look closely at the United States, we saw in fact that, as I suggested a minute ago, the landscape was really populated with all sorts of strong forms of particularly religious community that have not only survived, but flourished, sometimes in the face of, and in some kind of ironic sense, bolstered by, strengthened by, fortified by conflict. Perhaps the most famous example of such a community would be the Mormons, who really sought to assert a strong form of collective identity, sought recognition as a legal entity, as a polity. First in Nauvoo, Illinois, and then later in Salt Lake City and what became the state of Utah.

And yet, along the way, conflict was a constant. Well, this is a very similar story for Kiryas Joel. And in fact, when you look back at the origins of the community, you will see that conflict has been present from really the inception, that in fact, the founder of the Satmar Hasidic dynasty, Rabbi Joel Teitelbaum, came from a family for which conflict and combat were constant features and were in some sense embraced as essential in order to face off against and vanquish the forces of corruption and pollution in the modern world.

Mark Klobas

And that concept of conflict and combat as you've described in the book is almost written into the DNA of the community and is, as you illustrated, you know, one of the keys to success, how they've learned how to use various legal tools and societal norms to persevere and prosper as community, thanks to combat and sometimes confrontation.

David Myers

Yeah. Yeah. Well, I just want to say that—because maybe not all the listeners are familiar with Hasidim, of which the Satmar group is one branch today, the largest branch of Hasidim in the world. Hasidim began as a movement of rebellion or protest against what was the mainstream Jewish culture in Eastern Europe, a culture which really established a very clear hierarchy at the top of, which stood elite Torah scholars. Hasidim saw it at once to infuse more piety into the Judaism of its day and to democratize Judaism, to sort of upend this hierarchy and infuse both more piety and democracy. Now, as the movement developed, the piety remained, the Democracy less so, because Hasidim also developed a new model of leadership for Jewish communities, and that is the notion of the charismatic rebbe, or Tzadik, who was almost understood as an intercessor between human and divine realms. So, major branches of this movement, called Chassidism, establish what were known as courts at the center of which stood the rebbe, or the Tzadik.

Rabbi Joel Teitelbaum was one such rebbe or Tzadik, who established his dynasty first in the city of Satmar, or Satu Mare. It was previously in Hungary, and then after 1920 and the Treaty of Trianon, became Romania, the Romanian city of Satu Mare. And there he establishes community for 10 years or so before surviving the Holocaust in a very interesting way, coming to the United States, bringing with him that combative spirit that both was rooted in Chassidism and particularly present in the Teitelbaum family, and then parlayed that combative spirit into the complete rejuvenation, the rebirth of his community that had been decimated by the Holocaust. Along the way, conflict was present. It was embraced, and you know, one of the laudatory pamphlets about Joel Teitelbaum

produced by his followers was entitled [inaudible], a warrior, man of war. Very characteristic of his combat for spiritual purity in the world.

Nomi Stolzenberg

But it's important to add that that combative, or even, martial, spirit has always coexisted with something quite the opposite, which is a theological commitment to political quietism. So, like many separatist religious groups on that impulse to separate from the rest of society is attached to a theological belief that the exercise of power—the exercise of political power—is inherently corrupt and something that a pure spiritual community has to separate itself from. So, there has to be, you know, a renunciation of participation in politics and the exercise of political power. So, you have this real contradiction between that impulse, which is completely genuine and sincere, and yet it's almost a necessity in order to defend their right to separate and to defend themselves, both from external attack and internal challenges, it's necessary to do battle against these external and internal threats.

David Myers

So, if it weren't complicated enough, I have to add one more strand to this fabric. We have this combative spirit that we've talked about, which in the first phase of Satmar history was really directed against other Jews. We have this quietism, which holds that it is the obligation of Jews to adhere to the laws of the Gentile State until the time of the Messianic end.

The third strand is a tradition of political accommodationism. Alongside these character traits and theological principles was already in Europe a willingness on the part of the Satmar community to engage political authorities in order to advance the interests of the Satmar community. This belongs to a long tradition in pre-modern Jewish life known as [inaudible], the practice of intercession whereby someone would be designated to represent the community with Gentile authorities and was picked up, and, I would say, sharpened and perfected by the Satmar community already in Europe, this principle of accommodation, which sort of cut against the quietism, but at the same time also coexisted with it. So, you had a kind of interesting thread of political attitudes and behavior that already was forged in Europe before supper came to the United States. And then when it did, it was transformed in very interesting ways.

Mark Klobas

One of the questions that I had as I was reading the book is how the experience in Europe, you know, shaped or perhaps confirmed Teitelbaum's approach to building a community in the United States. Because you describe in the book about the experience. I was thinking about the accommodation and the quietism was reflected in the degree to which they receive that degree of official tolerance. Maybe acceptance might be an appropriate word, maybe it's a little too strong. Because I think in particular, for example, the picture of where Rebbe Teitelbaum is meeting with King Carol of Romania and how there is the sense that you have this authority that they'll be the head of state of Romania is saying that, in effect that you know, you have this picture which implies that he is accepting their presence here and how that gets disrupted, first by the reassignment of the territory to Hungary, then the Nazis coming in 1944 and cleaning up the community.

And I can't help but wonder about how that, you know, might have shaped Teitelbaum's approach to deal with [inaudible] because, as well, to be clear, this is one of the things I found so fascinating about Teitelbaum and that question of community is how he, for all of the sense of community, he is, you know, very adamantly opposed to Zionism, and how he's opposed to, on religious grounds, to the creation of a Jewish State. And how that, which so many Jews, you know, coming out of the Second World War experience were like this is what we need to preserve ourselves. He rejects that, but at the same time I can't help but wonder, what was it that he took from that experience that he said that he needed to have America to ensure that they had a community that not only, you know,

that upheld the law, but maybe avoided, you know, that haven't quite as accepted maybe something similar happened in [inaudible].

David Myers

Yeah. Well, there is a way in which we can understand the creation of Kiryas Joel as a counter-Zion, as a kind of theological, political vision of Rabbi Teitelbaum's that stood in contrast to, but at the same time shared some qualities with, the experiment underway in Palestine and later the state of Israel. The Zionism for him was, as he described it in his famous book devoted—one of his two books—devoted to the subject 1959 by [inaudible], the greatest form of spiritual pollution the world has ever seen.

And what he thought Zionism represented was an attempt by human beings to arrogate to themselves the right to hasten the Messianic end. That was an entirely divine prerogative, and Zionism, he argued, sought to assert itself as a kind of divine force in hastening the Messianic process. But I believe that something of Zionism, sort of, well, it constantly stuck in his craw. He was constantly—he was obsessed with Zionism. He was undone by Zionism. And something about Zionism, I think, also figured into his own vision of creating an enclave that would really provide that safe haven for his community. Europe seemed to have the potential to do that, until it didn't. So, you know, it's important to note that Teitelbaum and Summers learned from the European experience.

Satu Mare, or Satmar, was not an isolated, segregated spiritual enclave. It was a diverse, multi-ethnic, multicultural, multilingual city in—first in Hungary, in the northeast quadrant of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, and then in Romania. The experience of living amongst the Gentiles allowed the community to flourish for about 10 years until March 19, 1944, when the Nazis broke the alliance between Hitler and Admiral Horthy and began a process of rapid deportation of three-quarters of the Hungarian community. And then when Teitelbaum came to the United States, he felt, I think, that it was possible to—and necessary—to use all those instruments of communal fortification and governance that had been tested in Europe, but he also felt that it was possible to sort of achieve a degree of insularity that was not possible in Europe, to create a true spiritual enclave. And there's an interesting development in sort of the imagination of what that was because when Satmars in the United States thought of the old country, they thought of it as sort of an ideal of homogeneous spiritual enclave. But that wasn't what Satu Mare was. America, in interesting and seemingly ironic counter intuitive ways, afforded that opportunity, and Satmars in America felt a sense of entitlement. Both because of what they had undergone in the Holocaust and because they believed that the United States was a different kind of political entity. A [inaudible], a kingdom of grace.

Nomi Stolzenberg

And just to highlight something sort of embedded in what David just said, you had originally asked, you know, I think you framed the question in terms of what might the community have learned from its experience in Europe that would have sort of—what lessons did they learn in terms of how to avoid something like a holocaust? I don't think that—I mean David, correct me if you think I'm putting this incorrectly, but I think it would be a mistake to think that the quest of this community was to find a place of refuge in the sense of physical safety.

The quest was to find a refuge in the sense of spiritual purity. In fact, the belief was it was by virtue of not being spiritually pure that Jews had, dare I say, really brought the Holocaust upon themselves. I mean, that's a shocking thing to say, but that is part of the theology. So, the imperative is to be spiritually pure and to find conditions that will permit this collective exercise of spiritual purity to take place.

Mark Klobas

As you make clear in the book, though, that getting, finding that place where they could be spiritually pure was not easy. That it took the better part of a century—

Nomi Stolzenberg

And not so pure.

Mark Klobas

I was thinking about how it took them a quarter of a century to eventually establish Kiriya Joel, and yet it was something where, as you explain it, that it wasn't just a matter of finding that community. It was—they were doing so at a time where they were facing increasing impurity in the world that you're talking about. This is happening at a time, you know, that they're still searching for this community in the 1960s when you have the baby boom generation, you have the sexual revolution, when you have all of these social forces which are changing the country as a whole, which makes the need for that community more of an imperative. And yet, as you explain, it was very difficult to find that place where that could happen. There were hardly any in terms of, you know, establishing a Hasidic Community, but to find one that met all of what, you know, Teitelbaum and the community, as you explained, was not easy. It wasn't simply a matter of saying, we're going to go ahead and, you know, just, you know, start occupying this building, or we're going to go ahead and just move into this neighborhood. They wanted something much more, and it took a long time to achieve that.

David Myers

No, I mean it was very hard. So, just to give some historical context, Joel Teitelbaum arrives in the United States on the second day of Rosh Hashanah 1946, September 1946.

He makes his way from Manhattan to Williamsburg, which becomes and remains the largest center of Satmar demographic concentration in the world. Williamsburg in Brooklyn. But almost immediately, he realizes that there are seductions and allures in New York City that pose risks to the spiritual integrity of his community. And he entrusts his lieutenant with the task of finding a place that can become a shtetl. Again, a kind of fantastical version thereof, because Satu Mare was nothing like the shtetl that they were imagining in the late 1940s and 1950s. It was more akin to what *Fiddler on the Roof* was like, Anatevka in *Fiddler on the Roof*. And it was very hard to find a community that would serve the purpose. So, they first sought out land in Staten Island in the 1950s, and that didn't work out. And then they sought out land in New Jersey, model of New Jersey, in the early 1960s. And by that point, the problematic had become quite clear, which is, turns out, no group of suburban, largely white suburban dwellers, were that interested in having an influx of foreign Hasidic Jews in their community.

And that problem continued through the 60s and into the early 70s until the Satmar Hasidim got wise to the fact that that suburban landowners weren't keen on selling them property. And they entrusted the brother-in-law of one of the leaders of the community, who is not himself a religiously observant person, someone by the name of Oscar Fisher, who was the brother-in-law of one of Joel Teitelbaum's leading assistants, leading aids, member the name of [inaudible], then trusted Oscar Fisher with the task of serving as the front man for the purchase of land in the town of Monroe, in Orange County, New York in 1972.

They sort of figured it out. Oscar Fish succeeded in purchasing land, creating a development corporation to buy and then develop the land, which they did so surreptitiously. Some Hasidim would come up from Brooklyn to oversee the construction of the first 80 apartments in 25 single family homes between 1972 and 1974 in a windowless caravan lest they be detected. And that's how sort of the first settlement was created that became Kiriya Joel.

Nomi Stolzenberg

And if I can just gloss what David said, you know, I think you can extract from all of these details, this very detailed narrative, and the details are so juicy and interesting, but there were really, I would say, two primary obstacles to achieving this goal of being able to create an enclave outside of the city, one which was relatively easily overcome and the other which was more difficult.

So, the first obstacle was just, you know, in the United States of America, the only way you can do this, like the only way you can do most anything, is with money. Capital, right? You know, it's in other societies, a community—a religiously homogeneous community—might gain a piece of territory a bit. It might achieve something that looks like Kiriyas Joel, but that would be done in a top-down manner, right? A government officially recognizes certain communities and privileges them with a charter, maybe granting them land, granting them limited powers of jurisdiction and government. That can happen. That's a sort of top-down approach.

We don't do that here in the United States of America. Instead, we see the formation of enclave communities from the bottom up, meaning through private initiative. Meaning, more specifically, through the exercise of the rights of private property by buying land, by buying and developing real estate. And so, on the one hand, there's an opportunity to do that here, but the ability to take that opportunity is completely contingent on having enough money, having enough capital. And what's interesting in this case is, you know, per capita, this is one of the poorest communities in America. You know, these are not, you know, your typical Satmar is not a wealthy and affluent, educated person. They shun higher education, they have a low level of education. They have low income. Yet—right, and that's something that has no other subgroups that are poor have been really stymied from being able to do what the Satmars did, namely acquire real estate and create, because of the lack of economic resources. So interestingly, that was obstacle the community was able to overcome by, I mean, David can describe them in more details, but notwithstanding the poverty of the community overall, there have always been wealthy members of the community who really serve as benefactors, and there was a kind of pooling of assets.

So, they were able to overcome that obstacle, but the second obstacle which David described was much more difficult to overcome and that was nobody wanted them. Nobody wanted them in their backyard, so rejection and exclusion. So, you know, if you think about those two obstacles, the first one—again, notwithstanding the poverty of a typical member of the community—nonetheless, the community was able to amass enough wealth. So, from that point of view, you could say occupied a place of relative privilege economically and I think also its ability to access capital, loans, and so on and so forth. It certainly also benefited from being perceived as a white community, right? So, sort of whiteness and access to capital that those were privileges they had. But when they tried to use that capital to buy property, as soon as other white people got wind that they were coming, they didn't really think of them as fellow white people.

And from that, from the standpoint of that second obstacle, they were really, you know, I wouldn't say a racialized other, but they were certainly a religious other. An alien as David said, and they did not occupy a position of privilege. Quite the opposite. They were victims of exclusionary zoning tactics. So, it's an interesting mix of privilege and barriers.

David Myers

Yeah, I want to just build on that if I can, Mark, but I want to just clarify one point. Satmars have a low level of secular education. They have a very high level of Jewish education. They deeply value education. It's one of the pillars on which the community is built. What they do not do, because they're steadfastly resistant to the idea of assimilation, is encourage children to attend colleges and universities. Something like 5% of the community has attended college and university, which is a very stark contrast to the rate by which American Jews in general attend university and colleges. So,

there's one very interesting juxtaposition between the American Jewish mainstream, the liberal American Jewish mainstream, and the [inaudible] or Satmar Hasidic world.

But I want to just convey, if I can, what really is the drama in the story—one of the dramas in the story. And that is the lightning speed with which a private association, such as this aggregation of property owners in the town of Monroe in 1972 represented, can be transformed into a public square. So, almost overnight, you have this private association, in a matter of two years or so, becoming a legally recognized municipality, and how could that be? Well, it turns out to be very simple.

You need to have accumulated private property. You need to own land. You need to have a degree of coherence—group coherence—and homogeneity that in this instance, the free exercise of religion enabled. And you need to have a state law such as New York did that allowed 500 residents of a particular piece of land to secede or to establish an existing village—a new village within an existing town?

All of this transpired very quickly, and, it should be noted, not according to the original Satmar design. The original Satmar design was to create a shtetl, a neighborhood or a community within an existing polity consistent with the principle that Jews should not, or need not, assume political power themselves. That was the mistake of the Zionists. But it became clear over the course of several years—principally because of conflicts over zoning regulations that the town of Monroe sought to uphold. For example, over what constituted a single-family home, or whether it was legal or illegal to have a nursery, a school, a synagogue, a matzo bakery, in the basement of an apartment building.

These kinds of zoning issues, in a certain sense, impelled the Satmar residents of the town of Monroe to say, 'This isn't working. We need to transform ourselves from a shtetl into a legally recognized village.' And it turned out the path was quite easy to do. So, that's kind of one of the interesting points of drama in the story, how easy it is. What a seemingly available script there is.

Nomi Stolzenberg

Yeah, how easy American law makes it, and how easy the principles of American democracy, local democracy, make it for a group of unincorporated, just private citizens to transform themselves into a legally Incorporated municipality.

Mark Klobas

For me, is one of the fascinating parts, going back to what you were both talking about earlier, about how that compromise that you just highlighted where they were having to walk, you know, accept some sort of, you know, watering down to the other principles in order to achieve this vision of a cohesive community. Maybe not quite that shtetl that they were that they had envisioned, but something awfully close to it. And how this requires them to assume political power. And this is something you highlight book about how they're meeting with state senators, they're meeting with the members of Congress, they're meeting with United States senators, and how they become politically quite visible. And there is a sense—this is not something that it is necessarily in your book, but I thought that the people were treading very carefully around them because this was a group that delivered themselves politically when it came time to cast ballots, and how it reflected the they were a community that, you know, if you compare it to the size of New York in general, not very large, but in terms of that region, they had enormous power because they were united, and they did share, you know, a lot of the same goals.

Nomi Stolzenberg

Yeah. Yeah, two things. One, just a sort of caveat. You were sort of describing a watering down of the of the theology or philosophy of the community in exchange for, you know, what was gained by that bargain. There is a sizable faction of Satmars. They are known as the dissonance within the community who would describe what happened in just those terms. They would see the assumption of the powers of government entailed and becoming a village as a watering down, or to say the least, really as a kind of sacrilege and betrayal of—but the I'm not sure, you know, that's one point of view, you know. The establishment would defend itself by saying, look there's—you know, going back to the continuities with Europe—we've always had—not, you know, in order to shelter and insulate most of the community—we've always had, you know, designated, you know—it's an extension of the [inaudible], there's always been people who play the role of interacting with Gentile authorities. That's, you know, a time-honored tradition. It's not inconsistent. That does not represent a watering down. So, I just want to make clear, you know, it's not an objective fact that this constant—it depends upon your understanding of what the original theology was.

But your main point is In America, which is this system of, you know, democracy, a particular form of democracy. It's interest group politics, right? And so, the power of the block vote is huge. And being such a cohesive community that would, you know, follow the directions of the rebbe about whom to vote for, that is, you know, that enables—the more cohesive a community is, the more able it is to deliver a block vote. And the more able community is to deliver a block vote, the more able it is to sort of magnify its political influence. So, you know, this is sort of the corollary to what I was saying earlier about the way in which, even though per capita, they were quite poor, but by virtue of their social cohesion, they were able to magnify the impact of their economic resources and sort of, you know, scrape—more than scrape—together the requisite capital. Likewise, they're able to magnify their political influence by virtue of delivering, quite reliably, at least up until now, a block vote.

David Myers

Yeah, I would say that the United States enabled Satmars to perfect their political skills that they had really begun to develop already in Europe. But the way in which interest group politics is played out in the United States, the freedom given to various groups to play that game, the Satmars seized on the opportunity and really perfected their political game. At the same time, and this is really an important point in the book, they underwent a process that we call unwitting assimilation, by which we mean they absorbed many norms from the surrounding society in a somewhat unconscious process in order to defend and guard their distinctive way of life. And we think particularly of political and legal norms. So, they learned how to play the game of interest group politics by delivering a block vote. They learned how to lobby politicians on a daily basis by going up to Albany or Washington or bringing politicians into the community. They learned how to preserve their interests by overturning a deeply ingrained rabbinic principle of never appealing to Gentile courts by constantly appealing to non-Jewish courts by litigating against themselves and the outside world in order to gain advantage. All of these—and many other developments in the community—we think belong to this process of unwitting assimilation, a very ironic and counterintuitive proposition given that the community professes openly that one of the chief social ills that it seeks to forestall is assimilation.

Mark Klobas

I actually want to—we've been talking about the community in, you know, the focus has been on community and written so, but there's another element of the book that I do want to incorporate into this. And that is what was happening more broadly in American law during this time. And this hints to some of the things that you talked earlier, Nomi, which was how American law during this time was changing. That you were seeing a reconsideration of certain issues regarding religion and its place in the public sphere. And as you describe that these trends, you know, they were driven by

a lot of groups that were completely unconnected from this Hasid community from the Satmar. They're nonetheless benefiting from them and using them to achieve their goals.

Nomi Stolzenberg

Yeah. I mean, that's absolutely right. So, you know, we've been talking about, you know, American law, and the rights and values that are embodied in American law, but you know, that's not a completely homogeneous culture. It's a culture, and as in any culture, there are divisions, and there are different interpretations, you know, even insofar as there's agreement about what the fundamental principles of the legal order are, there are very different ways of interpreting them. So, there's two key ideas. Interpretations that are really undergoing a very sustained challenge in precisely the period of time in which Kiriyas Joel is being formed.

So, you mentioned one: the place of religion in the public square. And to that, I would add the second interpretation of, you know, the American constitutional order that is being subject to sustain challenge at this point in time is the ideal of integration, right? So, you know, prior to the period of time that we're talking about—which is basically the 70s and 80s, when Kiriyas Joel is being formed—in the 50s and 60s, you saw the crystallization of what is often times referred to as Liberal Consensus, which actually was a relatively new way of understanding what America stands for. But it, you know, really in the post-war era, the idea that the separation of church and state means that that the public realm has to be a realm from which religion is evacuated. This is the period of time, in which, for the very first time in the early 60s, the Supreme Court says no prayer in public schools. No devotional Bible reading. No religion in the public schools. And, right, no religion in the public schools, no religion in the public square, even though nowhere in the text of the Constitution does it say separation of church and state, that's the proper way of interpreting the religion clauses in the First Amendment. In the very same time period, right, we get *Brown v. Board*, we get the Civil Rights Movement, the Liberal Consensus, that separate separation is inherently unequal, and therefore, the fundamental principle of equal citizenship that America is dedicated to requires integration, right.

So, those two ideas—integration and the separation of church and state—were the key components of the Liberal Consensus. Well, that Liberal Consensus is breaking down, right. And that's in large part a story about the rise of conservatism in America, and in particular, the religious wing of the conservative political movement and the conservative legal movement. The religious right, right, which is absolutely insisting that the idea that The Constitution embodies the principle of separation of church and state, that's a myth, that was a mistake, the Supreme Court never should have said that. We need to return religion the public square and restore religion to its traditional role as a public authority. And, at the same time, there's a massive retreat from integrationism.

But let's be clear: at the same time that the ideals of integration and separation of church and state are being challenged by the religious right and the larger political, conservative political movement, it's also taking a beating from the left from progressives. This is the time when communitarianism, and then multiculturalism, and sort of identity politics from the left also are emerging. So, that's a really important part of the backdrop and the way in which law is being reshaped and reinterpreted in ways that turn out to greatly benefit the Satmar project.

David Myers

I want to just amplify one point that Nomi made and that really draws back to an observation you had, Mark, which is about how Kiriyas Joel really takes rise—and by the way, Kiriyas Joel, the name means Village of Joel. It's named after the founding Rabbi of the Satmar community, Joel Teitelbaum. It really takes rise against the backdrop of sort of the countercultural movement of the

1960s, and Nomi just hinted, just alluded to the fact that in response to the countercultural movement of the 1960s, we see a new conservative movement take rise. A religious conservative movement take rise, to it the Moral Majority, which is established in 1979, two years after the formal incorporation of Kiryas Joel. So, I think we can see, really, beginning in the late 70s, the Arc of a new era of religious conservatism of which Kiryas Joel is a part. I don't want to argue it's mthe main part, but it is a part of that arc of historical development that extends up to the present, a 40-year arc of sort of the rise of religious conservatism.

And over the course of time, Kiryas Joel has grown dramatically from two thousand residents in 1980 to 33 thousand residents in 2020. And in some ways, it has become more American in the ways of particularly white, religious conservatives. Especially insofar as we saw in 2020 in speaking the language of religious liberties as the transcendently significant freedom of freedoms in the United States. And understanding how religious liberties have become so important—just look at Supreme Court litigation in the recent year or two—understanding that is an important part of understanding the rise and success and evolution of Kiryas Joel in New York.

Mark Klobas

And yet I was thinking about what you described in the first chapter and then that you return to at the end of the book, which is how for all their success, it's built on these compromises. And I talked about political ones, but I was also struck by some of the social ones that you describe. For example, how you have the—going back to the discussion of education, about how the emphasis is upon Jewish Education, and that's focused, and secular education is frowned upon. And how within that though, you have these—you describe how Kiryas Joel gets education because they don't have that same opportunity of religious education, they tend to get more of a secular education, and how that creates opportunities that the community benefits from economically, but at the same time is an example of how they can't really entirely disengage and isolate themselves from all these trends that are taking place.

You describe, for example, the presence of the internet, and how that something that is both, at the same time discouraging, but also contributes to the prosperity of the community in terms of Internet businesses. And I just found that, again, going back to the point that we're just making, David, there is something so quintessentially American about this, and I kept thinking about that as I was reading the book back, how some of these contradictions are microcosms of contradictions that we see, you know, in this country to this day in terms of how we address these issues.

David Myers

Right. Well, just to say a word about girls' education versus boys. There's a total separate spheres ideology work in that regard. Boys are deemed those who are obligated to study religious texts as a matter of daily practice. Girls are not obligated, and therefore the educational curriculum—there is segregation in the private school system, and the educational curriculum is very, very different. Girls are afforded much more secular and English language education, which is why girls and women in the community are fluent English speakers, which is not always the case with boys and men raised in the community.

But at the same time, I think it's really important to just emphasize again, notwithstanding, you know, the traditional features of this community, notwithstanding the preservation of separate spheres ideology, notwithstanding the preservation of the Yiddish language as the lingua franca of the community, notwithstanding the community's commitment to what it calls the path of the ancient Israel. Notwithstanding that, there is this ongoing process of unwitting assimilation with ,you know, the Internet really being, in a certain sense, the most interesting and potentially subversive

element as part of that process of assimilation because the Internet really just explodes boundaries without even having to leave the physical environments of the community.

It's why community leaders see it as perhaps the greatest threat to the survival and well-being of the community. And it will be very interesting to see, you know, as we look ahead, it'll be very interesting to see how, I think, two vectors interact with one another. One will be growing access to the internet and social media that will open up new worlds to Satmar Hasidim, and particularly a small number, who will be very attracted. Some of whom may choose to leave the community in larger numbers than they do at present. Some of whom may stay but simply live, what a colleague of ours calls, a double life, right. Outwardly part of the community, but inwardly just living a life of, you know, that takes place on the Internet.

So, there's that vector. As against that, and indeed in reaction to it—yes, this is our colleague Ayala Fader who came up with this idea of double lifers in a wonderful book called *Hidden Heretics*, which I encourage everybody to go out and read. But in reaction to that, sort of in the dialectics of Satmar religious and cultural history, we will, I think, also see a retrenchment amongst contemporaries of those who are drawn to the Internet. An increasing commitment to ritual observance, an increasing commitment to tightening the boundaries, to preventing access to dangerous social media. And these two vectors, which move in opposite directions, I think are going to intensify in coming years.

Mark Klobas

Well, I've taken up a lot of your time, but before we go, can you tell us what you're working on now?

Nomi Stolzenberg

Well, David mentioned the increasing visibility of controversies over religious liberty. And so that's, actually, that's been a research project of mine for quite a number of years, you know, thinking particularly in the context of legal disputes, when people go to court saying they have a right not to follow laws that they have religious objections to, and they say I have this right because there's this clause in the First Amendment that says the government cannot prohibit the free exercise of religion, and making me follow a law—maybe it's a covid restriction, maybe it's a civil rights ordinance that prohibits, you know, that says purveyors of goods and services cannot deny services to customers on the basis of their sexual orientation—whatever the law is, you know, the claim that we see being made more and more, and that we see the courts, and in particular, the Supreme Court being more and more receptive to is that being forced to follow a law that everybody is required to follow is discrimination against people whose religious beliefs conflict with that law. And that's a violation of the right to the free exercise of religion. That, I think—so, my project is to really try to develop a better understanding of what does it mean to be discriminated against on the basis of belief, or to discriminate against people on the basis of their beliefs. And by the way, you know, that's an issue that extends beyond the specific case of religious beliefs. People also make claims that they're being discriminated against on the basis of their political beliefs. Well, I think we don't have a very good comprehension of what that means. So, my project is dedicated to that.

David Myers

Yeah. Thank you for asking, Mark. So, I'm—in one sense I want to mention, very quickly, two ideas. I'm now working, researching a book called *Victims of Victims* that explores the interconnections amongst three important population displacements in the mid-twentieth century. The displacement of Jews in Europe during the Second World War, the displacement of Palestinians in 1948 during the Nakba, and the displacement of Jews from Arab countries, and really look at the serial and causal relations amongst these three.

But—so, that takes me back to a sort of one of my older pursuits—but I'm also involved in a new collaborative called the [inaudible] Research Group that is studying the history, the ethnography, the

demography of traditionally observant Jews like Satmar Hasidim. And for me, really, one of the most interesting questions is, what does 2020—the year 2020—represent? A continuity, or a dramatic rupture? This is the year of COVID, the last year of the Trump presidency—at least the first Trump presidency. And we saw a new—what seemed to be—a new form of behavior amongst [inaudible] Hasidic Jews, including something Satmar Hasidim. A new boldness, a new audacity, a new alignment with white religious conservatives, manifesting in a very interesting data point in Kiryas Joel, which maybe I'll conclude with and just say, I'm interested in knowing more about this. In the year 2016, 55% of Kiryas Joel voted for Donald Trump, 45% for Hillary Clinton. In 2020, over 99% of Kiryas Joel voted for Donald Trump. That's, on the face of it, a dramatic shift that requires much more research and analysis.

Mark Klobas

Well, those all sound like fascinating projects, and I look forward to seeing the results of them.

David Myers

Well, thank you so much for having us. It's really been a pleasure.

Nomi Stolzenberg

Thank you.