A SHTETL IN THE UNITED STATES?

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Joshua Holo: Welcome to the College Commons Podcast, passionate perspectives from Judaism's leading thinkers, brought to you by HUC Connect, the Hebrew Union College's online platform for continuing education. I'm Joshua Holo, your host.

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JH: Welcome to this episode of the College Commons Podcast and our conversation with professors Nomi Stolzenberg and David Myers. Nomi M. Stolzenberg holds the Nathan and Lilly Shapell Chair at the University of Southern California Gould School of Law. She publishes on law and religion, law and liberalism, law and feminism, law and psychoanalysis, and law and literature. She helped establish the USC Center for Law, History and Culture, one of the preeminent centers for the study of law and the humanities. David N. Myers is distinguished professor of history and holds the Sady and Ludwig Kahn Chair in Jewish History at UCLA, where he serves as the director of the UCLA Luskin Center for History and Policy. He also directs the new UCLA Initiative to Study Hate, is the author or editor of more than 15 books in the field of Jewish history. Together, Myers and Stolzenberg co-authored the topic of our conversation today, 'American Shtetl: The Making of Kiryas Joel, a Hasidic Village in Upstate New York, which came out from Princeton University Press in 2022, and which was awarded the 2022 National Jewish Book Award in American Jewish Studies. Professors Myers and Stolzenberg, Nomi and David, if I may, welcome and thank you for joining us on the College Commons Podcast.

Nomi Stolzenberg: Thank you for having us.

David Myers: Great to be with you, Josh.

JH: Introduce us if you would, to Kiryas Joel, who are on the one hand the Satmar Hasidim, and on the other hand, what is this town in Upstate New York?

DM: Kiryas Joel or Kiryas Joel or KJ, we'll probably use all three of those designations, is a legally recognized municipality in suburban New York, about an hour north of New York city, comprised almost entirely of Satmar Hasidic Jews. Satmar Hasidim are a Hasidic group that

come from what once was the northeast quadrant of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, and which after the First World War became Romania. So Satmar Hasidic Jews come from the city of Satu Mare, as it was known in Romanian, also Satmar as it was known prior to 1920 in Hungary that was part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. And one of the distinctive features of Satmar Hasidim is their commitment as reflected in the teachings of their founding rabbi, Rabbi Joel Teitelbaum. To fight for the purity of Torah, there's a built-in combative impulse in Satmar Hasidim that has allowed them to become, over time, one of the largest Hasidic groups in the world.

DM: This is a group of Hasidic believers who believe not just in fighting off sources of contamination in the world, but in somewhat ironic fashion, also worked together with Gentile political authorities in order to advance the interests of their community. That's an impulse that was evident already in Europe and became more pronounced in 1946 when Rabbi Joel Teitelbaum came to the United States. And from that point, the small number of dozens of followers that Joel Teitelbaum encountered in Brooklyn and Williamsburg grew exponentially. And over the course of time, Rabbi Teitelbaum asked his advisors to look for a site outside of New York city in the suburbs that would serve as a kind of enclave or safe haven away from the seductions of the city. And therein lies the efforts to find a community that would eventually become Kiryas Joel.

NS: Yeah. And I would just add, David pointed out these two different impulses that really define the Satmar community in general, and Kiryas Joel in particular, on the one hand this fierce commitment to withdraw from all of the rest of society, which is viewed as a source of spiritual contamination, but on the other hand, the readiness and indeed the skill at engaging with and working together with Gentile authorities. And there's an interesting tension between the impulse to withdraw, to separate, and the impulse to accommodate and work with authorities in the outside world. And what our book tries to show is that the same pair of conflicting impulses is characteristic of American society as well.

JH: We're gonna follow-up on that contradiction, tension, or paradox, in a few moments. But I wanna hover for a moment on this simple fact of Kiryas Joel or KJ being a recognized polity within the American political organization of villages, cities, states, etcetera. Because to those of us who know KJ only from afar by reputation, the entire undertaking seems to hinge on the separation of church and state, and its erosion from a hallowed principle of the republic to a tenuous and seemingly tendentious proposition. Accepting that the separation of church and state is only one among the many dynamics going on, where is, nevertheless, the separation of church and state the most meaningful lens through which to understand KJ?

NS: Well, I think it is certainly one of the critical lenses through which the community is inevitably seen. But I think when we try to understand how, or if the creation of this municipality is an event that violates the principle of separation of church and state as it was originally framed, that reveals some paradoxes within that principle itself. It would be easy to make the case if counterfactually the Satmar village had been created from the top-down. There's two different ways in which religiously homogeneous local governments can be formed. The top-down model would involve the government, whether it's the state or the federal government, some unit of government looking down, recognizing the existence of a minority religious

community and granting it, first of all, land, a place to live, and furthermore, powers of government, jurisdiction over that land. That's the mode of protection for religious communities that when times were good, Jews experienced in Europe or the Ottoman Empire, as did other religious communities. When it's a religious community to which the powers of government are being delegated, well, that's a very clear-cut case of not observing a separation between church and state.

NS: That's not how we do things in the United States of America. That's not how the Village of Kiryas Joel was created. The Village of Kiryas Joel was created from the bottom-up American style, using the most quintessentially American liberal individualistic rights oriented tools to it. Number one, the rights of private property. And number two, the right to vote in the context of local government and local democracy. So it turns out, under the laws of New York state and similar laws exist in virtually every state, all you have to do to be able to create your own village is first you acquire land in the private real estate market, and that's what happened. Agents of the Satmar community, it was hard to get people to sell land to them, but once they had overcome those obstacles, they acquired attractive land, they subdivided it, they developed it, they built units on it. This was all under Satmar control. Theoretically, this is all private action, not state action. And then those properties are sold and leased to Satmar families. Once there's a sufficient number of them, it turned out that under New York state law, it took 500 voters to put a petition on the ballot to incorporate a separate village within the township of Monroe where this settlement was created.

DM: I'm gonna add a little bit of granularity to Nomi's response. Shortly after Joel Teitelbaum arrives in the United States, he tells his close aides that he would like to find a place outside of the city, away from the seductions and allures of a teaming multicultural urban environment, and yet close enough to allow for daily commuting. The Rebbe was very clear that men in the community should work, and so they needed to find a place that was close enough and yet far enough, to achieve those two goals. Over the course of a quarter of a century, the close aides of Rabbi Teitelbaum attempted to purchase land in the New York metropolitan area. And it turns out that suburban New Yorkers and residents of New Jersey were not that keen on selling plots of land to these people whom they regarded as foreigners, who looked different, who spoke a different language, Yiddish, and who observed a different set of cultural practices.

DM: It was only in 1972 after the aides to Rabbi Teitelbaum got wise and found someone who was not a Satmar Hasidic to be the front person to buy land, that they began to actually aggregate enough land to build a community that fit the ideal that Rabbi Teitelbaum had dreamt of. And that ideal was known as a shtetl, a small town or neighborhood, which by the way, was very different than the actual historical shtetl in Europe, which was always a very proximate or even integrated neighborhood or town, part of a larger environment. Rabbi Teitelbaum had in mind the more mythic, ideal shtetl like we see in Fiddler on the Roof. So in 1972, land is purchased at a remove from the center of the town of Monroe, a new neighborhood is built. It took two years, 25 single-family homes, 80 garden apartments. Almost immediately, Satmar Hasidim encountered tensions with town officials and residents in Monroe, principally over zoning regulations. What was a single-family home? Was it permissible to have a ritual bath or a matzah bakery or a kindergarten in the garden apartments?

DM: This was not permissible according to the zoning regulations of the town of Monroe, but these things were deemed essential to maintaining a Satmar way of life for this group in Orange County. And things came to a head in 1976 when Satmar residents of the neighborhood of Monroe that would eventually become Kiryas Joel, brought a religious discrimination suit against residents and officials of the town of Monroe in federal district court. And in a late night negotiating session on October 23rd, 1976, negotiators from the town and representatives of the Satmar Rebbe agreed on the proposal that a village of Kiryas Joel, the term means village of Joel, named after Joel Teitelbaum, would be carved out of the town of Monroe. It would still be under the jurisdiction of the town of Monroe, but it would have control over its own zoning regulations. And that was formally approved and incorporated in March 1977. And from that point forward, we have no longer a shtetl, but a legally recognized village according to the laws of the state of New York.

NS: Yeah. And if I can just underscore a point, critics of the Village of Kiryas Joel, critics of the Satmars and of Hasidim, oftentimes one of the main objections is that they are exclusive, that they are exclusionary. But what we see in the events that led up to the formation of the village that David just recounted, most of the evidence, I think, supports the conclusion that when the Satmars first settled in the town of Monroe, it was not with the aim of creating their own separate municipality, it was rather that they were on the receiving end of what was coming to be called, precisely in this time period, in the early to mid '70s, exclusionary zoning. This is a moment in time when suburbs are developing very quickly, it's the time of white flight. The zoning is really essential to the American suburban project and the town of Monroe, as was typical, certainly in this era, the zoning really, it favored low-density housing. It limited commercial activities.

NS: It's expensive to have large lots and single-family homes. Not that this was a super affluent community, but these kinds of zoning regulations, whether they had the intent is debated, but they undeniably had the effect of excluding people who couldn't afford such housing. And so this is a period of time when legal advocates developed this theory of exclusionary zoning and were bringing lawsuits. Typically, the excluded groups were poor, black, disproportionately minority, or in this era, hippie commune, or student housing. And so there was this template for bringing claims against suburbs for zoning in ways that excluded people whose lifestyles weren't compatible with low-density zoning. The lawsuit David alluded to that the Satmars threatened to bring, in the context of that early dispute, the Satmars are the excluded. So there's this interesting question, are they excluders or are they the excluded? And it's both.

JH: I'd like to move from the legal principles of church and state to the political philosophies that you complicate in relating the story and the dynamics of this remarkable place. In particular, you write about COVID and the Trump presidency as major turning points in the political philosophy or political outlook perhaps, of the Satmar Hasidim. First, the Satmar Hasidim moved from a perhaps standoffish-ly transactional alliance with the American right wing, to in the course of COVID, in the Trump presidency, becoming political bedfellows in a much more genuine way. And second, they expanded their political horizon somewhat from more narrowly local politics to not only national politics, but to decidedly Trumpist national politics. And the question I have is this, despite the well-known and very vigorous, relentless even, anti-Zionism of Satmar Hasidim,

is it possible that there is a shadow Zionism that motivated this shift, in parallel with the American right which adopted an increasingly hawkish Israeli policy posture?

DM: What we would argue is that Joel Teitelbaum was raised in the Austro-Hungarian Empire in a time of major nationalist sentiment, thought, and organization. And although he would go on to be recognized as perhaps the leading Jewish anti-Zionist of the 20th century, he absorbed and internalized some of the ideals and communication strategies, as well as organizational impulses of Jewish nationalism. And thus, the very idea of creating something like Kiryas Joel is its own form of counter-Zionism. So there's a long-term perspective on that shadow Zionism that we need to put on the table that stands alongside the fervently and frequently declared anti-Zionism of Rabbi Teitelbaum who regarded Zionism, as he said, the greatest form of spiritual pollution the world has ever seen.

DM: What we see in 2020 is really the culmination of a number of trends or arcs that are going to converge. One is the growth of Kiryas Joel, not just as a self-standing village, but as a confident assertive community that knows how to wield its political power by playing the game of American interest group politics as well as anybody. In many respects, this is how the game is played. If you can deliver a block vote in a crucial district, you're gonna get benefits from it. There's nothing unique to Satmar Hasidim about that. One is the growing assertiveness of the community, but the other arc of significance is the arc of religious conservatism, which from around the time of the creation of Kiryas Joel, began to agitate for a greater place for people of faith in the public square. So the Moral Majority founded by Jerry Falwell in 1979, really commences a longstanding effort to erode that boundary of separation between religious activism and politics. And this is important to note, because by the end of the 2010s, there is emerging out of religious conservatives across the denominational spectrum, a commitment to the principle of religious liberties, as perhaps the paramount right afforded by the United States Constitution.

DM: That principle is delivered with remarkable consistency by one Donald Trump. And, the perception is that it is violated over and over again in the COVID crisis by the attempt of state actors to restrict the ongoing religious practices, norms, and commandments of communities like Satmar, how to say, the right to congregate, to engage in prayer, the right to send children to schools to be educated in the Satmar way. So there was a very stark moment at which the ethos and language of religious liberties came under attack in the eyes of Satmar and other religious conservatives. And that's what created that movement. In 2016, about 55% of Kiryas Joel voted for Donald Trump in the presidential election. And in 2020, 99% did. We could explain this, largely, as the result of a growing sense of commitment to religious liberties and the belief that Trump was the great redeemer who delivered it.

DM: Since we wrote the book, we've adopted a kind of more nuanced, I think, perspective on this and seeing that there are other local conditions that may have inclined Satmar Hasidim to vote for Trump in the numbers they did. And I've also engaged in a bit of surveying with my colleague Mark Trencher, and discovered that, no surprise, Haredi, which is a ultra-Orthodox or traditionalist Jews have voted Republican in overwhelming numbers, since the time of Ronald Reagan, which is when we began our survey. We did a more recent study in which we gauged

attitudes towards Zionism amongst various Haredi groups, including Satmar. And what we see is that Satmar remains an outlier, while other Haredi groups events greater appreciation for Zionism following October 7th, Satmar Hasidim do at a much lower level. And so there's definitely, I would say in the community, less of the ferocity of Rabbi Joel Teitelbaum's anti-Zionism, but it's still a defining feature of Satmar relative to other Hasidic or Haredi groups.

NS: Yeah. So you're asking about two distinct things. Your first question was, is there a way in which Kiryas Joel is a kind of shadow Zionism or mini Zionism or mini Israel? And then there's this question about the relationship between contemporary Satmar culture, very recent developments and the political culture of the Satmars and its relationship to Trumpism in general. And David really zeroed in on what we saw manifest in reaction to the COVID regulations, this embrace of a particular way of promoting and conceptualizing religious liberty claims, which is really a project of the Christian right. And while I think there are interconnections between these two different issues, I wanna point out how distinct they are. And there's certain ways in which they're quite antithetical, because the version of religious liberties that's being promoted by the religious right, that indeed the Satmars jumped on during the pandemic, that's a libertarian project. It's an anti-statist project. At least in theory, it's opposed to statism. It's a version of libertarianism that verges on anarchism. So extreme is its defiance of the authority of the state. And then of course, Zionism is a quintessentially statist project. And that's not to say that these two seemingly opposite things can't and don't intersect. But I do wanna point out that distinction.

DM: Yeah. I just wanna add one more word, if I may, that captures what is new in the moment that you identified. Satmar Hasidim operated like many other traditionalist Jewish groups. According to the ancient principle of dina d'malkhuta dina, the law of the kingdom is the law. While in exile, Jews are enjoined to heed the authority of the local sovereign in exchange for their loyalty and allegiance and the taxes they paid. They would have the right to conduct themselves religiously as they saw fit. And that's a principle that was articulated very frequently in the Satmar community, certainly when it existed in Europe. And I should note, it existed in Europe for a relatively brief period of time.

NS: What David just described is the top-down model.

JH: Right.

DM: So, what we see in 2020, as Nomi was just articulating, is an upending of that tradition of recognizing the law, the state as the law, it's anti-statist. This may be, in fact, a new day for Satmar Hasidic Jews.

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JH: Let's talk a little bit about those abundant ironies and recall early in our conversation the way in which you posit in your book that in some ways quite counterintuitively, the KJ experience somehow reflects the American experience, or at least aspects of it. You talk about some salient contradictions that you sort of tease out illiberalism and the contradiction of separatist civic participation. And you discuss the way in which KJ seems to offer a very stark and discreet example of those contradictions that characterize potentially all social enterprise, but certainly aspects of the American enterprise. But I'd like to ask the following, conceptually speaking, is there a point at which the extremity of the specific case, in this case, KJ, so radically changes its nature as to no longer relate or meaningfully reflect the broader social phenomena and context in which it resides?

NS: I take your point that this is in some ways an extreme case of religious liberty, separation. Oftentimes, the comparison is made with the Amish who in some ways seem similar. It's also a religious separatist group. It's also a hyper-traditionalist adhering to an archaic language, archaic modes of dress, hyper-traditional family and gender norms and so on. But the Amish did not have the temerity to make that bottom-up move. They kept their activities and forms of social organization within the private domain and did not seek to transform their private associations into little mini polities, local governments. I think it's that transformation of a very non-mainstream way of life that it's okay if it exists on the fringes of society and stays within the private domain, but to become an officially recognized sub-department of the state of New York, surely that is a violation of the separation of church and state. Surely that at that point is taking religious separatism and deviation from mainstream cultural norms to a point at which this is now wholly not just other and alien, but actually in conflict with the fundamental constitutional principles of the society.

NS: And so then the question becomes, well, what are the constitutional principles? And what we try to show is, first of all, there's not just one American society, there are competing visions of American society, one of which pulls in a more integrative direction. It's the idea that, yes, we're a free society in which we're not all one religion or one race, but we all share something, there's a common culture, there are common values, there's some kind of unity, we're all integrated. And of course, Kiryas Joel is formed in the very early '70s. This is just at the tail end of what was the high point of a belief in this integrationist model of what American, American values are all about. The idea of the melting pot, devotion to the public school as a place where children of every race, religion, ethnicity, would all be in the same school and get the same education, that belief in integration. That's one version of America. And there are certain ways of interpreting the principle of separation of church and state that are very congruent with that vision. But there's always been a competing vision of what American values are all about.

NS: Libertarianism is one manifestation of that competing vision, but it's certainly not the only one which pulls against integration, which says America is the place where basically everyone

has the right to opt out, to separate themselves, to segregate themselves. Both of those have very long pedigrees in American society. It was a pretty short-lived era in which the integrationist vision had the upper hand. 1954, when Brown versus Board of Education comes down, of course that immediately sparks a backlash with many, many different sources. We have, maybe 15 years, when that's kind of the regnant ideal, particularly if we're looking at the role of the Supreme Court in choosing between these two competing visions of American values, which is much of what the work is about. So by the end of the '60s, early '70s, that integrationist vision is being repudiated across the political spectrum, on the right, on the left, multiculturalists are repudiating it, the Christian right is repudiating it. An interpretation of American constitutional values is coming to the fore that really protects and fosters the ability of Americans to separate themselves.

JH: In their attempt to recreate a shtetl that never really was, I suppose, it is the internal tensions and downright conflict within the community that most to me seem to be the truest reflection of the Old World shtetl of yore. And as you pointed out, they even call themselves Hasidim and Misnagdim, that is to say, the partisan terms that defined the great conflict in the Old World. But in the New World, how do these conflicts betray the sophistication and the thoughtfulness with which the disputants view the world and their own Satmar Hasidism?

DM: Here it's important to note that the Teitelbaum family, spanning back to 19th century Hungary, was renowned for its combative spirit, even in a martial impulse, an impulse to see the world as an ongoing war, a war against contamination and pollution. And that war was often principally conducted against perceived outsiders, as I think of them, circles of enmity that surrounded the Satmar community. Oftentimes the most dangerous outsider was that closest to the community, another observant group or leader who resisted the authority or ideology of Satmar. But it was directed outward. And over the course of his very long reign, Joel Teitelbaum lived from 1887 to 1979, Joel Teitelbaum was a towering figure on the landscape of Haredi Judaism, and renowned as a fighter. In fact, one of the volumes, memory of Joel Teitelbaum, was entitled "Ish Milhamot", Man of War. What happens after Joel Teitelbaum dies is that combative spirit turns inward, directed by one group against another. And that is because there was a profound leadership crisis following his death, there was no readily apparent successor. He had no male heirs. His three daughters predeceased him.

DM: And almost immediately after his death, a circle of dissidents took rise who opposed the man who was appointed after a number of weeks as his successor, first as rabbi, and then a year later as Rebbe of the community, his nephew, Moshe Teitelbaum. This first circle of dissidents who opposed Moshe Teitelbaum was led, as it were, by the rebbetzin, by the widow of Joel Teitelbaum. And from that point forward, we identify circles of enmity within the Satmar community. So that traditional combativeness is now directed inward. What is distinctive about the mode of combat following the death of Joel Teitelbaum, is it's adjudicated far more frequently in the outside world, in Gentile, which is to say secular American courts, than within the community, thereby violating the traditional inhibition or taboo of traditionalist Jews from making their way to jurisdictions of the Gentiles. And Nomi can say a good deal more about that particular mode of combat.

NS: Yeah. I think you were asking whether these very intense political conflicts inside the community, do they betray or maybe reveal a sophistication, or alternatively, a loss of sophistication of some kind? And so, I would say they reveal tremendous sophistication of two different kinds that I'll describe in a moment, although it's important to acknowledge a contrary view. So the dissidents, that's the label that was given to the... Eventually multiple factions inside Kiryas Joel, who did not accept the legitimacy of the successor to the original Rebbe. Now, they don't think they're the dissidents. They think they are the truest continuators of the Rebbe's way.

DM: Who call themselves Bnai or Bnei Yoel, the Sons of Joel.

NS: Yeah. I just want to acknowledge there are those, that is to say, people on the establishment side of the community, as opposed to the dissident side, almost uniformly dismiss the dissidents and deny that the dissidents are motivated by anything principled. They think they're just disgruntled because they were in the power circle when the original Rebbe was alive, and then they were out. And there's no real disagreements, it's just a power struggle. But I think both of us observe in the course of these struggles that have been going on for, how long has it been? Half a century now, nearly. I think you see manifested in these struggles two types of sophistication. First of all, the dissidents, they say, "You, the new Rebbe, and all of the Rebbe's followers, you are the ones who are betraying the theology of the Rebbe. Specifically, they're very insistent upon the purest version of the separatist impulse, the impulse to withdraw from society, which is not only the impulse to separate yourself from Gentiles, but to separate yourself from the realm of worldly affairs, politics, power.

NS: There is a belief that to participate in the exercise of power rule over others, that this is an unholy business that is part of the reason why Zionism is so revived. But it's not only Zionism. Of course, Gentile politics are regarded as an inherently, deeply profane, impure kind of activity from which anyone who wants to be spiritually pure must separate themselves. So to the dissidents, the establishment of the municipality is a desecration, a violation of the Rebbe's way. Satmar should not be holding political office. They should not be wielding political power. They should not be commanding the levers of secular government. And from the point of view of that theology, you might call it a political theology or really an anti-political theology, government is by definition secular, whether it pretends to be religious or not from that theological point of view.

NS: So that's a very sophisticated theological position. David mentioned that they resort to the secular courts to, as it were, prosecute their case against the establishment. And when they do that, they have to translate that claim into the language of constitutional law. So there's a fascinating process of legal learning that occurs, both on the part of the dissidents and at least as much on the part of the Satmar establishment. They go in an incredibly short period of time from being new arrivals to the United States and almost wholly innocent of any knowledge, let alone sophistication about American law. And within short order, both, at least the leaders of the dissidents, but I think this trickles down and the establishment, they have become incredibly sophisticated about American law.

JH: When you described assimilation, you explicitly point out that for all the assimilationist blandishments that might draw some people away from the community, most stay, and moreover most express great affection for their life, despite fully recognizing its challenges. Now, I know you set out to avoid judgments as scholars in encountering and studying this remarkable place, but did this love resonate with you as observers or as fellow Jews, and perhaps surprise you?

NS: There is something stirring about it. There's something a little maybe chastising about it that people can be, I think, much too quick to judge. And that readiness to judge and criticize the Satmars oftentimes betrays the assumption that we, whoever the outsiders are who are judging the community, as if our way is so wonderful, but also even if our society were so wonderful, which it quite clearly is not, imposing one society's way of life on another. That's a very disturbing thing. And I talked about how the community is being formed in the early '70s in a moment when people are retreating from integration. And that has many sources, many of which are very pernicious. But it's wrapped up with a growing suspicion of assimilation, a growing suspicion of the melting pot ideal, and its homogenizing forces themselves being taken to an extreme. So, I still continue to be very critical about the excesses of self-segregation and separation that I think were all too well illustrated in the context of the refusal of many in the Satmar community, certainly not all, to comply with COVID regulations. And there are other examples of where the insularity of the community, I think, is worthy of criticism. But I do think that we need to temper our criticism with an awareness of the dangers of assimilationism.

DM: I wanna begin my response by invoking a memory of our beloved friend, teacher, and colleague, David Ellenson, who when one thinks about it, really can be described as one of the most important sociologists of Jewish religion of the last half century. David had a really unparalleled ability to understand the complexities of religious tradition and change over time, especially in the modern era, in ways that really deeply resonate with key themes in our book. And indeed, we had many occasions to talk with David about the book. And I wanna hold on to the spirit of David in responding by first saying, there's a measure in me of very real appreciation for the integrity of the community for its particular form of religious communitarianism, its ability to do what so many Jews have struggled and failed to do in the modern age, which is to hold onto a coherent sense of groupness.

DM: Well, here's a group that succeeds in doing that. And that's what initially attracted me to Kiryas Joel as a research subject. Many of the community would say their existence is the most beautiful form of life that they can imagine. A small minority realize early in life that this is not the mode of existence for them, and it is extremely difficult for them to live in the community. And those are ones who become the exiters who leave, or who stay, but live a kind of hidden life, what our friend and colleague Ayala Fader calls the life of hidden heretics. But the overwhelming majority, I would say, believe that this is a great way to live. And if one takes a step back, especially thinking about the growing place of Haredim in the demography of world Jewry, one has to look on with some measure of appreciation at the thickness of their culture.

NS: It's not only feeling like they have the most beautiful way of life that they pity the rest of us, right? They live in such conditions of loneliness and lack of community.

DM: What I would add to that is the sense that I always received when I went to the community, that for all of the ways in which I knew about the history and sociology of the community and all the ways in which people were actually happy to have me come to share my sense of what their community looked like. I was unmistakably an outsider. There was always a clear sense that this was not my community. And hence there was a tremendous amount of curiosity on the part of people I met in Kiryas Joel, about, "Why are you interested in studying us? We know of people who have nothing but venomous criticism of our community, but we don't know people who are just interested in studying us." And they delighted in the fact that I did know a lot about their history, but yet was not part of them. So I was an outsider, and it's not the mode of Jewish existence that I choose to live. So there is that important piece to add. And there's a final piece, and that is, yes, there is incredible integrity to the life of Kiryas Joel. It is indeed realizing Rabbi Joel Teitelbaum's ideal of living as he would say in the derekh of Yisrael Saba, in the way of the ancient Israel.

DM: But as we think of America at this juncture in the 21st century, and particularly after January 6th, 2021, I at least come to the realization that that form of separatism, and for that matter, that lack of appreciation for the principles of liberal democracy threatens the integrity of the American political project. And it's of course not just Satmar Hasidim who are capable of failing that edifice of American democracy, it's a much broader phenomenon about which I'm concerned and of which Satmar Hasidism is one piece. But it can't be that one can choose to opt out without any degree of adherence to the idea of a common good that embraces all Americans and all of their manifold differences. And so in thinking of the future of the community, I would never ask that Satmar Hasidim cease to live their lives as they see fit. But I think it is important to ask of all of us, including Satmar Hasidim, that they do as the French philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau asked in his work, that we surrender piece of our individual will into the collective, the common good. And in this case, the common good is defined not just by the mile square boundaries of Kiryas Joel, but rather by the boundaries of the United States.

JH: Well, on the notion therefore of the common good, let's close this interview with another note of thanks to Nomi Stolzenberg and David Myers. Thank you both for joining us on the College Commons Podcast and this incredibly rich conversation about your book, 'American Shtetl: The Making of Kiryas Joel, a Hasidic Village in Upstate New York. And congratulations on winning the 2022 National Jewish Book Award.

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NS: Thank you so much.

DM: Great to be with you, Josh.

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[music]

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