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CHAPTER 1

Life in the Shtetl

Every Friday in the late afternoon, as the sun gives way to dusk, a series of loud sirens pierce the air of a densely packed village located in a suburban town in the Catskill Mountains fifty miles north and slightly west of New York City. As in American company towns of yore, the blare marks an end to the busy work week. But instead of releasing thousands of laborers from the factory to their homes or the nearby bar, the sirens clear the streets of Kiryas Joel. The frantic pace of the hours leading up to the sirens, with women and men scurrying about to complete their chores, gives way to calm as the twenty-five-hour-long Jewish Sabbath enters, during which most forms of labor permitted during the week—the Talmud records thirty-nine varieties—are forbidden. The sirens thereby delineate the border between labor and rest, profane and sacred, weekday and *Shabbes*.

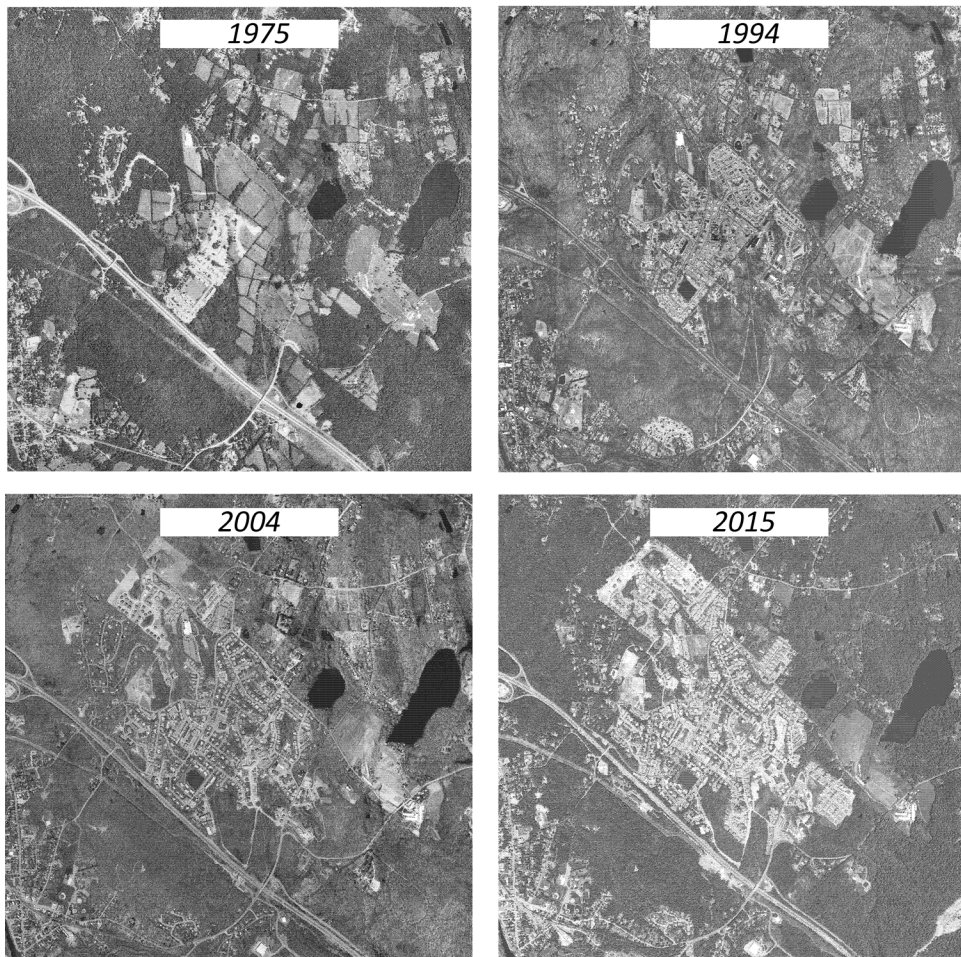
Rather than being controlled by a single business corporation, KJ is dominated by a religious corporation, the Congregation Yetev Lev D'Satmar, to which all of the residents, at least originally, belonged. It is the all-encompassing religious character of KJ life that leads members of the community to declare that their mode of living is the most organic way of life around.¹ When the main Yiddish newspaper of the Satmar community published a long article in 1978 declaring that Kiryas Joel was “a dream that became a reality,” the sentiment was no exaggeration. The first residents who made their way from Brooklyn to Orange County four years earlier knew well the difficulties they faced on the path to their suburban community.² They retained their deep faith that

it was God's will, along with the leadership of their spiritual shepherd, Rabbi Teitelbaum, that allowed the community to rise. And they were proud that their small settlement had become what they had originally hoped—a place of purity, an enclave at a remove from the rest of a society that, for all its willingness to countenance the creation of a Hasidic village, was still irredeemably *golus*, exile.

At the same time, they were proud of the community's success, as measured by its stunning growth; Kiryas Joel quickly became the fastest growing municipality in the state of New York, with an annual rate that sometimes reached 13 percent in a given year. Indeed, the village has grown from 2,000 people in 1980 to 7,500 in 1990, 13,000 in 2000, 20,000 in 2010, and 25,000 in 2019. According to one estimate, it may well reach 96,000 residents in 2040, thereby making it the first all-Hasidic city in the world.³

The chief official responsible for planning growth in Kiryas Joel is village administrator Gedalye Szegedin, an exceptionally capable Satmar Hasid, now in his early fifties, who speaks English with a Yiddish inflection, although he was born and raised in New York. Bespectacled and bearded, Szegedin wears the familiar workday outfit of most men in the community: a white shirt buttoned to the top, black pants, a black vest, and, when the occasion arises, a long black caftan (outer coat), and big round black hat. But he is unlike his Satmar peers in many other regards. He mixes the tasks of city manager, town planner, savvy politician, and decisive CEO to guide virtually every aspect of municipal life in Kiryas Joel, from residential development to traffic patterns and garbage collection. Admired by friends and resented by foes, who accuse him of working only on behalf of the establishment faction, Szegedin exudes an air of confidence born of more than twenty-five years of service as administrator as well as by his extensive web of local and statewide political ties. He is related to some of the leading figures in the village. His uncle is Mayer Hirsch, a wealthy and well-connected developer who is one of the most powerful people in KJ, serving as the moving force behind the semiofficial Vaad hakiryia (which oversees land acquisition and sale in the village); and his stepfather, Rabbi Wolf Gluck, was head of the largest private school system in town, the United Talmudic Academy. During

Aerial Photos of KJ Over Time



Photos From www.historicaerials.com

FIGURE 1.1. Aerial Photo of Kiryas Joel over Time. Courtesy of Mordechai Friedman.

his time in office, KJ has grown dramatically in terms of both population and village services. Szegedin observes with a mix of pride and amusement that some have called him the Robert Moses of KJ, referring to the legendary and controversial New York city planner.⁴

This picture of a blessedly insular but rapidly growing rural community is a key part of the story of Kiryas Joel. But this is only one strand of the

story. In many regards, the village is not a model of tranquility and orderly growth but is rather rife with tensions, both within and beyond.⁵ Satmar Hasidim may look to the uninitiated eye as identical to one another in appearance and worldview, but there are sharp divisions separating factions in the village, each of which follows its own leaders and maintains its own set of religious and educational institutions. The faction associated with the chief rabbi of the village, R. Aaron Teitelbaum, dominates the major institutions in town and has presided over the dramatic growth of the community; the main opposition party is associated with his younger brother and rival, R. Zalman of Williamsburg. And there is the smaller dissident group, Bnai Yoel, which follows neither rabbi.

In a curious reenactment of history, the Bnai Yoel are known as *misnagdim* (opponents), while the mainstream party goes by the name “Hasidim,” which literally means “pious ones.” This is the very set of terms—Hasidim and misnagdim—used to distinguish groups of Jews in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries in Eastern Europe, although the “Hasidic” camp was then the renegade upstart, whereas now it is the establishment. The misnagdim, in that earlier context, were precisely the opponents of Hasidim—in fact, the anti-Hasidim.

In the context of Kiryas Joel, the so-called misnagdim not only claim to be more pious and to maintain greater fidelity to the first Satmar Rebbe’s path but also assert that the establishment party of R. Aaron denies them religious and civil services and, in doing so, reveals KJ’s true colors as an authoritarian theocracy. They report being intimidated, pressured, excluded, and even attacked.⁶ By contrast, those associated with the ruling faction maintain that there is a “live and let live” policy that allows each group to provide for its members within the framework of a Satmar way of life. For the outside observer, it is difficult to reconcile the two sharply divergent accounts, both of which seem to contain more than a grain of truth.

Both the establishment and the dissidents are steadfast in their commitment to *halakhah* (Jewish law). They do, however, have different outlooks regarding how to approach neighbors beyond KJ’s borders, which stretch just to 1.5 square miles. The dissidents are keen on forging

harmonious relations with the gentile world and believe that the mainstream *k'hul* (from the Hebrew word *kahal* for congregation) has been needlessly aggressive in throwing its weight around. Since the early 2000s, an organization called the Kiryas Joel Alliance, associated with the Bnai Yoel, has sought to create a more favorable image of the community in the broader public eye by distinguishing between the residents and leaders of KJ.⁷ These good neighbor policies coexist, paradoxically, with the dissidents' commitment to religious separatism, which they believe has been breached by the establishment party's assumption of the powers of secular local government.

The leadership of KJ, for its part, maintains that the problem is neither politics nor an absence of neighborly relations. It is demographic, plain and simple. As Gedalye Szegedin formulated it in 2016, Kiryas Joel must continue to expand in order "to accommodate the needs of the community and secure the necessary infrastructure." Szegedin noted that there have been 2,500 babies born in the community since late 2013, during which time he himself issued 750 marriage licenses.⁸ It is that explosive growth that impels him to seek out more land, sewage capacity, and water at every turn.

It is also that rate of growth that makes Kiryas Joel an outlier in Orange County, New York. Neither its physical appearance nor its population density conforms to the classic American suburban ideal that one encounters in the rest of the town of Monroe, where the village of Kiryas Joel is located.⁹ There one finds, over twenty square miles, a mix of American creature comforts (restaurants, a movie theater, and small businesses), a diverse range of architectural styles, and generously spaced lots on which ranch-style homes sit. By contrast, KJ has had to cram more than 30,000 people into its 1.5 square miles, which, given its birth rate, has necessitated constant efforts to annex new territory. These have been met with vocal opposition by neighbors, who have felt the threat of encroachment by Kiryas Joel for decades. In fact, in 2013 a group of citizens in the town of Monroe, of which KJ was a part and constituted a majority until 2019, established an organization called United Monroe in order to check the expansion of KJ beyond its then present borders. In particular, United Monroe strenuously objected to

the village's desire to gain control over an additional 507 acres of land. It took aim at what it called, in somewhat ominous terms, the KJPE—the Kiryas Joel Political Elite—which it described as “masters of manipulation” intent on securing gain for themselves and their community at the expense of neighboring groups and individuals.¹⁰

The fact of the matter is that, over the course of its history, Kiryas Joel has punched well above its weight in the political arena, using its ability to deliver a bloc vote to elect candidates sympathetic to the community who, in turn, deliver economic and other benefits to it. Although KJ is a town of 25,000 residents, its leaders can pick up the phone and quickly reach top state and federal officials. A key question is whether the presence of increasingly assertive and independent dissenting factions within the community will mean the end of KJ's extraordinary political clout through the bloc vote. It is worth noting that in the town of Palm Tree, available voter registration records from 2019 revealed that 35 percent of the community identified as Democrats, 38 percent as Republicans, and 9 percent as Independents.¹¹

Past voting results yield conflicting signals. In the November 2016 election, the competing camps in KJ joined forces to support the reelection of Republican state senator Bill Larkin by a vote of 5,852 to 140. KJ voters were more divided on the race for state assembly in which a Haredi candidate from neighboring Spring Valley, Aron Wieder, garnered 4,598 votes in the village to his opponent's 1,491, though Wieder eventually lost. Meanwhile, the presidential contest was even more divided, with Donald Trump receiving 55 percent (1,592) and Hillary Clinton 45 percent (1,291). What was noteworthy in the 2016 election was that 3,000 fewer voters cast ballots in the presidential election than in the local races.¹² This suggests that, until the dramatic shift to Donald Trump in 2020, the Satmars of KJ had much more at stake, in terms of the welfare of their community, in local elections in which candidates are expected to bring direct, tangible benefits to their constituents.

The recent trend toward a more assertive national political presence requires much careful analysis in coming years. It reveals a new sensibility among Satmars—a conservative, libertarian, ideological Americanness. In the past, it was not at all uncommon to hear Satmar Hasidim

express appreciation and loyalty to the United States, which offered safe haven to the surviving remnant of their community after the Holocaust. But the 2020 presidential campaign featured a more forceful form of political identity, exemplified by the sight of flag-waving Haredim at pro-Trump rallies. In many ways, Satmar Hasidim operate with a good deal of cognitive dissonance, recognizing that America has been uniquely hospitable to Jews while still expressing the daily hope that the Messiah will come and liberate Jews from the state of exile in which they dwell. One of the sharpest formulations of this belief came from Zalman Teitelbaum, who declared in the midst of the 2020 campaign—and on the day marking the liberation of Joel Teitelbaum from Bergen-Belsen—that “we need to understand that we are in exile, we live here but we are not Americans.”¹³ In many regards, Satmar Hasidim today live in two zones of time: in the realm of messianic hope and in the everyday reality of their own legally recognized municipality, which, as we shall see, transformed a relatively small collection of private property owners into a sovereign shtetl.

An Uncommon Suburb

Out-of-towners are offered an eye-opening introduction to KJ’s unusual nature when they drive down Forest Road into the village; there they can see the sign that, since 2010, has urged those entering the village to respect THE TRADITIONS AND RELIGIOUS CUSTOMS of the Satmar community. As one proceeds further into town on Forest Road, one sees color-coded signs posted on either side advising men and women to walk on different sides of the street during the Sabbath and holidays.

Sidewalk segregation is actually not practiced in Kiryas Joel. Men and women cohabit public spaces in the heart of the village, where just to the left of Forest Road is a large lot of land containing the village’s first shopping center, to which is appended a suite of village government offices. Directly adjacent to the village offices is the Ezras Cholim, Kiryas Joel’s own health center.

Heading in the opposite direction, straight down Van Buren Road and then a right onto Quickway Drive, one arrives at a small body of

water known as Forest Road Lake, around which the first eighty garden apartments of the community were built between 1972 and 1974 in the subdivision known as Section I. The original residents had the benefit of proximity to water, but they eschewed the typical American suburban dream of single-family ranch homes with a lawn in an isolated wooded area. Rather, they moved into two-story rectangular red brick apartment buildings.

Apartment living became the norm in Kiryas Joel, where the density of housing units is seven times that of the regional norm.¹⁴ It had to be in order to accommodate large numbers of Satmar families interested in moving out of the city and finding affordable housing. Today, over 90 percent of the community live in rows of tightly packed multifamily dwellings, many of which are three, four, or even five stories high, with anywhere from twenty to forty apartments.¹⁵ If you drive around the village, you will see construction crews everywhere building new and larger buildings far beyond Section I. And yet there is no evident master plan at work.¹⁶ A small handful of private Satmar developers have put up edifices of differing style and scale, with far less attention paid to aesthetics than to functionality, which is the name of the game in a market that requires hundreds of new units each year to meet the housing demands of newly married couples.

The extraordinary density of Kiryas Joel, so unlike the suburban villages and towns that neighbor it, is reflected not only in the waves of multistory buildings but also within the apartments themselves. Given that procreation is a sacred ideal in the community, it is quite common for Satmar families to have between eight and fifteen children. Parents must become master interior designers to apportion space wisely. Suffice it to say that children rarely have their own bedrooms. (Parents, however, each have their own beds.) The sharing of space is, in the first instance, the product of necessity. As of 2018, nearly 50 percent of the community lived below the poverty line, making KJ, in statistical terms, one of the poorest communities in America.¹⁷ As a result, for many residents, there is little disposable income to make major home improvements.

But the sharing of space serves another purpose. It reinforces the importance of assuming one's place within the collective. While Kiryas

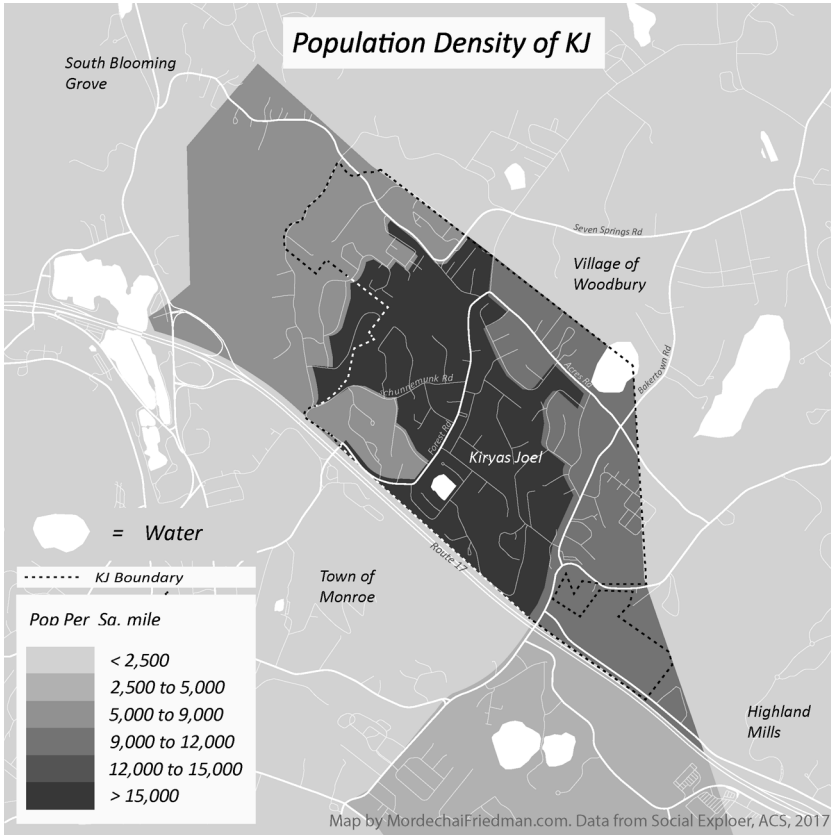


FIGURE 1.2. Population Density of Kiryas Joel. Courtesy of Mordechai Friedman.



FIGURE 1.3. Man Walking in Front of Typical Multiunit Apartment Buildings in Kiryas Joel. Courtesy of Jackson Krule.

Joel manifests its Americanness in various ways, one way in which it does *not* is by opting out of the celebration of individualism in American society. The Satmar Hasidim of Kiryas Joel place the collective above the individual, and children from an early age are taught to appreciate that principle. Conformity, not difference, is desired. Deviation is dealt with harshly.

Here is a subculture of America in which personal choice does not reign supreme. For a small number of people who grew up in Kiryas Joel and other communities like it, the absence of freedom to express themselves as individuals becomes unbearable. Testimonies from people in this group describe how the restrictions, whether they be on clothes, reading material, or open questioning of beliefs or practices, led them to transgress the norms of the community as teenagers. The vigorous reprimands they received from their parents might well have been bolstered by the suspicions of neighbors, which were then passed on to the village's Vaad hatsnius, or Modesty Committee. The resulting threats of the committee—or even an audience with Rabbi Aaron—deepened their sense of alienation and in some instances paved the way for exit.¹⁸ Struggles such as these have inspired a flurry of memoirs from those who fled communities such as Kiryas Joel. For example, Shulem Deen, who grew up in New Square, a nearby Hasidic village, writes eloquently in his memoir, *All Who Go Do Not Return*, of his inability to stifle his doubts about faith and thus the entire system of regulation in the community in which he grew up.¹⁹ He and others who have left attest to the primacy of community in a place such as Kiryas Joel, where the needs of the group heavily outweigh those of the individual member.

Following in “the Path of Ancient Israel”

A recurrent phrase in insider accounts of Satmar Hasidism and Kiryas Joel is that the community follows in “the path of ancient Israel” (*derekh Yisroel sava*), that is, in the way of one's forebears.²⁰ Fealty to the ideal of an unchanging tradition is considered a supreme obligation. Satmar leaders hold to the famous injunction of one of the nineteenth-century forebears of modern Haredi culture, the Hatam Sofer (Moses Sofer), who declared that “innovation is forbidden as a matter of Torah.”²¹



FIGURE 1.4. Audience of Satmar Men and Boys Gathered to Hear R. Aaron Teitelbaum.
Courtesy of Jackson Krule.

This commitment begins with physical appearance. At large gatherings in Kiryas Joel, one sees a sea of uniformity—men dressed in black pants, with *tzitzis* (fringes) hanging outside of their pants from their prayer shawl undergarment. On the Sabbath and holidays, men dress in their more formal garb of a long silk black coat called a *bekishe* and a large circular fur hat called a *streimel* (both of which differ in style from those worn by men of other Hasidic groups). Almost all men in the community have carefully twirled sidelocks known as *peyes* and long beards, the latter of which are left uncut in fulfillment of the injunction from Leviticus 19:26 that “ye shall not round the corners of your heads, neither shalt thou mar the corners of thy beard.”

The penchant for sartorial uniformity is also reflected in dressing children in identical clothes. Women are permitted somewhat more variety in their dress. But if conformity is the expectation for men in their dress habits, then its corollary, modesty or *tsnius*, is the paramount expectation for women in Kiryas Joel. Women are instructed, as the sign

at the entrance to the village indicates, to wear long skirts as well as tops that cover their necklines with sleeves that extend to the beginning of the wrist. When clothing deviates from established norms, the wrath of the community, in the form of the Modesty Committee, may fall upon the violator. This is the fate that befell a woman named Toby Greenberg in 2007. She was given to wearing jean skirts and colorful shirts, both of which were deemed inappropriate by the Modesty Committee. When she refused to modify her dress, self-appointed extremists disseminated flyers that accused her of contaminating the village. A group of them also slashed the tires of her car and delivered a letter to her home demanding that she and her family leave the village, which they eventually did.²²

In addition to modesty in outer clothing, Joel Teitelbaum insisted that girls and women should wear thick, not sheer, stockings, lest “a terrible breakdown of *tsnius*” (modesty) occur.²³ To guarantee this, he had one of his followers create a distinctive brand of tights for Satmar women known as “Palm” (the English translation of the Yiddish “Teitel”) of at least 90 denier (a measurement of thickness). He also insisted that married women should not merely cover their hair but also shave their heads every month. This was not an innovation of Satmar Hasidism but had become a major tenet of Teitelbaum’s stringent approach already in Europe. In Kiryas Joel today, there is a mix of head covering styles among women, with some favoring a *shaitel* (wig) over a *shpitzel* (a head covering with only a partial wig in the front). Some also wear a *tichel*, a scarf worn over the wig that covers the shaved head.²⁴ Most women accept these hair-related strictures as consistent with the values of modesty that they hope to uphold as virtuous “daughters of Israel.” Violating the standards—for example, by not fully shaving one’s hair or wearing insufficiently modest attire—carries a powerful threat. It was thuggish intimidation in the case of Toby Greenberg. For others, it is the real prospect of censure from the community and perhaps expulsion of one’s children from the community’s private religious schools.

Another expected, supervised, and mostly desired communal norm is the practice of regular visits to the ritual bathhouse (*mikveh*). Men are

expected to go on Friday before the onset of the Sabbath, but many go on a daily basis before morning prayers. Married women, meanwhile, are required to make regular use of the mikveh. They must adhere strictly to family purity laws that require a menstruating woman in a state of *niddah* (the Hebrew term for menstruation, which also carries the connotations of impurity and separation) to remain beyond the touch of her husband for two weeks every month; he is not even supposed to hand her a plate of food. After a week in which no menstrual blood is identified, a woman must go to the mikveh to be purified, after which she can return to sexual relations with her husband. Some formerly observant women regard this process of purification as intrusive and demeaning—and an attempt by male rabbis to control their bodies.²⁵ Many others regard it as a natural and integral part of the rhythm of Jewish life, which brings them not only a sense of order but a higher state of purity. It is also the case that some women and men in the Haredi world, in general, and in KJ, in particular, believe that abstaining from sex for two weeks enhances their mutual desire and the overall quality of their sex life during the other two weeks. To facilitate that practice, Satmar wives and husbands sleep in separate beds in their bedrooms.

Men and women in the Satmar world pair up at an early age, almost always through arranged marriages. Young women get married shortly after graduating high school. Prior to that time, they have virtually no contact with boys or young men other than family members. They live in an insular culture in which sexual attraction and flirtation are not only discouraged but, according to various accounts, often absent—at a time of peak interest and development among adolescents in mainstream American society.²⁶ This dissonance reveals but one of the ways in which Kiryas Joel is very different from the surrounding world.

But Kiryas Joel is also part of that world. Satmar Hasidim are people—flesh and blood like others. While there are strict rules about dress, Satmar girls and women devote a good deal of attention to style. Teenage girls in the community follow their American contemporaries in seeking thin bodies.²⁷ While they are strongly encouraged to resist sexual impulses throughout high school, abstinence is not a lifetime

commitment. Sex in the community is circumscribed but not proscribed—freely practiced for two weeks a month within the confines of marriage.

Marriage in Kiryas Joel is a socially regulated part of the Satmar life cycle at age eighteen for girls and twenty for boys. The first step toward a possible union is taken not by the young prospects themselves but usually by a woman matchmaker or *shadkhen*, who assesses the compatibility of the two families. Among the key criteria considered by the matchmaker are whether the families place a great deal of value on learning Torah, how committed they are to high ethical standards (*midos*), and whether they tend to the more conservative or open-minded side of the spectrum in terms of exposure to the wider world. After preliminary vetting by the parents, the prospective couple meets for a first encounter known as a *besho*, often at the home of one set of parents, spends a short amount of time together, often in awkward conversation, and reports back to the matchmaker who shares information with both sides and then tells their parents whether to move forward or not. If the couple gives a green light, it is usually a matter of months up to a year before the wedding takes place.

Immediately thereafter, the new husband and wife settle into a new home and begin to attempt to have children, which is seen as the ultimate *mitzvah*—a combined religious commandment and moral imperative. From the perspective of village officials in KJ, this oft-repeated pattern poses a significant, but quantifiable, problem. Given that the tradition in Satmar is for married daughters to remain close to their mothers, village officials can gauge the minimum number of apartments needed every year by the number of girls graduating from high school in a given year, usually around 250. In the past five years, there have been substantially more families seeking apartments in Kiryas Joel than available domiciles. In 2015–2016, for example, village planners estimated that 325 new families needed housing, although there were only 138 apartments available. They also projected that between 275 and 415 new apartments would be needed every year to satisfy demand.²⁸

How to make room in the already densely packed village? At various points in KJ's history, the village has sought to grow by annexing land

from the village of Monroe. These efforts have invariably elicited concern and opposition that have grown in intensity. For example, six years after the village was incorporated, in 1983, developers associated with the village leaders sought and eventually succeeded in annexing 370 acres from the town of Monroe.²⁹ Again, in 2003–2004, controversy arose when Kiryas Joel sought to build a thirteen-mile pipeline to tap into the New York State aqueduct, a move that prompted a new round of protests, including a spate of unpleasant antisemitic outbursts against the Satmar community. By 2004, when the pipeline plan had stalled, the Vaad hakiryas proposed to transform more than 300 acres that it owned outside of the community's boundaries into a second village.³⁰ A decade later, village officials set in motion the proposal to annex 507 acres from the town of Monroe to deal with the demands of growth. That plan was whittled down to a more modest 164 acres, which were added to KJ to make the new town of Palm Tree.³¹

Village leaders have justified the various annexation plans as not only logical and necessary but as intended to avoid imposing direct Satmar political control beyond Kiryas Joel. This would happen, they say, if Satmar Hasidim settled in large numbers in locations beyond the current boundaries of the village.³² That scenario would deviate from the KJ model of a self-standing Hasidic polity and make KJ more like nearby Ramapo, New York, and Lakewood, New Jersey, places where Orthodox Jews represent a substantial percentage of the town's population and have gained control over political institutions in the towns, including the school districts. This despite the fact that virtually none of the Orthodox children attend the district schools, leading to widespread public ire in both locales.³³

KJ, on one hand, and East Ramapo and Lakewood, on the other, represent two distinct models of political organization; the former favors complete separation between Haredim and the rest of the world, while the latter places Haredi Jews of various stripes in a religiously, economically, and racially diverse population. Even though the three KJ factions had different strategies for engaging the outside world, all came to accept the idea that the best—or least bad—solution was to sever KJ from Monroe and create the new Hasidic town of Palm Tree.

The Internet and Its Discontents

Even that step could not seal off the Satmars from the outside completely. In the internet age, residents of Kiryas Joel are exposed to more of the broader world than ever before. As a matter of policy, the internet is seen as a dangerous threat, and community officials seek to limit its use. According to census data, 32 percent of KJ residents have computers and 17 percent have internet subscriptions—in contrast to the national averages of 92 and 80 percent respectively.³⁴ Many in KJ stay off the internet out of the sincere conviction that it poses grave peril; but others abide by the norms because private religious schools require that parents sign a document affirming that they do not use the internet at home.

And yet a good number of KJ residents, especially those who work outside of the village, *do* have smartphones, with regular access to the internet, albeit with a “kosher” filter that limits exposure to pornographic or other potentially transgressive material. In fact, possession of cellphones is so widespread that the Modesty Committee cannot win the battle to eliminate them.

This reveals one way in which Kiryas Joel has been swept up in the tide of unwitting assimilation, even as it declares steadfast adherence to the “path of ancient Israel.” To give texture to the point, one encounters in the community a subset of young people who, while fully intending to remain there, are, in a sense, freethinkers: first, in letting their intellectual and cultural curiosity roam beyond the bounds of communal inhibitions, principally through the internet, though also via literature and travel; and second, in straining against what they perceive as the overly stringent authority structure of the community through subtle forms of resistance such as a man trimming his beard, a woman letting her hair grow, or a parent playing video content for children.³⁵

This kind of resistance was slowly revealed during a lengthy discussion among a group of a dozen proudly open-minded men in the community in an hours-long *melaveh malkah*, the meal that escorts the Sabbath queen out on Saturday night. As the eating and drinking extended into the wee hours of Sunday morning, the assembled guests became

more candid about the restrictions in the community. One person cast residents of KJ as “ignorant people” who blindly follow rules without any idea of why. Following on that comment, another participant took note of the fact that after making a brief appearance in the community, sushi was no longer available, having been deemed by some religious leaders too blatant a symbol of assimilation into American society to be acceptable. A third person, familiar with the widespread availability of sushi at many Orthodox Jewish restaurants and celebrations outside of KJ, jumped in to say that the ousting of sushi from KJ was a case of “manipulation for no reason.”

The topic of the freewheeling conversation then shifted, in somewhat random fashion, to the subject of marijuana. One participant averred, quite remarkably, that “it was the only thing that keeps us going.” It turned out that many of the guests at the table were personally familiar with marijuana and regarded its use as completely unproblematic. And clearly, they let on, they were not the only users of marijuana in the village. For them, it was a necessary escape valve from the strictures of the rabbis and their lay allies, many of which they found senseless. They even rolled their eyes.³⁶

In this conversation and several others, KJ residents made mention of another interesting deviation, seemingly of a less transgressive nature: the growing popularity of the Breslov brand of Hasidism within Kiryas Joel.³⁷ Given the expectation of lockstep adherence to Satmar ways, it is surprising, on first blush, to hear of the entry of Breslov Hasidism into the community. The two forms of religious expression are at the opposite ends of a wide spectrum of Hasidic cultures. Satmar, some say, is not really Hasidic, in that it does not subscribe to the same principle of ecstatic devotion on which the original movement—and many of its offshoots—rest.³⁸ Its bookishness is the opposite of the Breslov way, which is proudly ecstatic and whose followers revel in joyful singing and dancing, sometimes even at busy intersections (in Israel). The fact that hundreds in KJ are increasingly drawn to Breslov reflects a deep spiritual thirst that is not being met by Satmar Hasidism.

So why do these spiritual seekers not stray “off the *derech*” (OTD) in a more conclusive sense—that is, off the path of Orthodoxy? Why do

they choose to live as “double lifers,” as Ayala Fader calls them—holding to a critical perspective on life in the community and yet continuing to go through the motions of an observant life, complete with thrice-daily prayers and continuous Talmudic study? The assembled guests made clear that, for all of their criticism of the ruling regime in KJ, they loved their Jewish lives in the village. The regulated nature of life in the community, while excessive in their eyes, still lent structure and meaning to them. And they choose to remain because they feel that Kiryas Joel is a safe and healthy environment for their children, especially in guaranteeing that they will remain committed Jews. The importance of this point cannot be overstated. Kiryas Joel is a children’s society. The median age of its population is 12.4, and more than 60 percent of the community is under the age of eighteen.³⁹ During school hours, they are nowhere to be seen. But before and after and on the Sabbath, the streets and sidewalks of KJ abound with children racing after one another, jumping rope, or riding their Big Wheels.

To be sure, life is not idyllic for all. Former Satmar residents of KJ recall facing the wrath of their parents as adolescents when they transgressed the rules.⁴⁰ Their decision to leave the community was profoundly difficult, given the intensity of family ties and the insularity of their world. Their biggest fear, and an oft-voiced threat, is that by leaving they will lose custody of and contact with their children, which can lead to excruciating legal battles, exacerbated by the perception that courts frequently side with the parent who remains and even go so far as to award that parent “spiritual custody.” Another source of concern is that, coming from the sheltered world they do, Satmars have little understanding of how the outside world works; in the case of men, they may even lack functional levels of English required to make their way into a competitive labor market. In order to meet the needs of this cohort of exiters from KJ and other Haredi communities, a network of organizations and online resources has arisen to provide support, advice, training, legal and material resources, and community for those navigating this difficult journey—the most prominent of which is called Footsteps.⁴¹



FIGURE 1.5. Young Boy on Big Wheel. Courtesy of Jackson Krule.

Because of the risks and difficulties involved, the rate of exit is very low. Although there are no hard data, the total number of those who leave is likely no more than a few handfuls of people every year, including those who transition to a less stringent Orthodox life in neighboring Monsey, New York. Yet because the Satmar population itself has grown so large, there is a solid contingent of ex-Satmars in the community of former Haredim that groups such as Footsteps seek to assist after exit.

Gender and the Rhythms of Ritual and Work in KJ

The laws and customs of Satmar Hasidism provide a well-defined framework for the conduct of daily life. Men wake up between five and seven each morning, often going to the mikveh for ritual immersion before *shil* (as Satmar Hasidim pronounce the Yiddish word *shul* for synagogue). Kiryas Joel offers many options in this regard. Each of the three factions has its main synagogue on or near Forest Road, although there are scores of other synagogues or prayer spaces, as many as one hundred, closer to where many residents live. Most are small *shtiblekh* (often a room or couple of rooms in the basement of a house) in which members of one faction will join together in prayer. Not all synagogues begin services at the same time, which means that there are *minyanim* or prayer quorums running throughout the morning, afternoon, and evening. Men may study with a partner before morning prayers and then remain after for a short Talmudic *shi'ur*, or lesson. Joel Teitelbaum insisted that male followers not only pray the prescribed three times a day but also devote themselves to Talmud study in the morning and evening.

That said, he neither insisted nor desired that men in the community dedicate their entire lives to study. Whereas other Haredi rabbis encouraged men to continue full-time study throughout their adult lives—a phenomenon especially noticeable in Israel—the Satmar Rebbe expected men to go to work after getting married. In fact, one of the criteria in choosing a site in Orange County was that it had to be close enough for men to commute to New York for work every day. Over time, the premium placed in the community on excellence in Talmud Torah, the study of sacred texts, has prompted more and more young



FIGURE 1.6. Men in Study Hall in Main Aroni Synagogue. Courtesy of Jackson Krule.

men to lengthen the time they study in *kollel*, the religious institution in which married men study on a full-time basis. The trend represents a curious kind of religious innovation, one that pushes toward a more traditionalist or stringent form of religious life and inverts the original Hasidic impulse to reject the overly intellectual study-based approach of rabbinic Judaism.

One of the consequences of this new trend is that the burden of economic responsibility for young couples shifts to women. In general, women perform a mix of diverse and somewhat contradictory functions in Kiryas Joel. They do not have the same obligation as men to pray three times a day. Nor do they typically make their way to synagogue on the Sabbath. But they are the custodians of the domestic realm with responsibility to provide for the physical and emotional well-being of many children. As schoolgirls, they learn the intricacies of maintaining a strictly kosher kitchen and do most, if not all, of the cooking. They also learn through observation how to raise and organize a large number of children, whom they must pack up and send off to school every weekday morning, which includes Sunday.

In going about these tasks in Kiryas Joel, women are limited in their mobility because they are not permitted to drive, as a matter of long-standing Satmar custom.⁴² It is common to see mothers pushing strollers on the sidewalks of the community. To accommodate their transportation needs, there are bus lines within KJ and to New York City as well as a number of car services staffed by Satmar men to ferry them around. This is a rare setting in which women interact with men other than their husbands in unsupervised fashion. In many other public social settings, women and men are separated, often by a wall or divider known as a *mehitsah*.

For the most part, Satmar Hasidim seem to hold to a traditional “separate spheres” ideology according to which men and women inhabit different social and spiritual realms: men dominate in public, women in the domestic sphere. This division, as Rosalind Rosenberg noted in 1982, necessarily entails a significant difference in power between men and women.⁴³ But in at least one regard, women have a considerable advantage in dealing with the outside world. Girls receive far more exposure in school to secular subjects, especially the English language, than boys, who get a heavy dose of Jewish studies at the expense of secular subjects. Yiddish remains the language of the community, with more than 96 percent of residents declaring that a language other than English is spoken in their home. In some households, women use English in communicating with other women and their children, while retaining Yiddish in interactions with their husbands. Women’s fluency with English also makes them valuable assets in the workplace where, as office managers, clerks, and secretaries, they can effortlessly engage the outside world.⁴⁴ In this way, the division of gender roles associated with the ideology of separate spheres is inverted in ways that bestow significant privileges on women, even if they are expected to use those privileges on behalf of their families in fulfillment of traditional roles, and without subverting the man’s traditional role as head of the household.

Already in 1972, sociologist Israel Rubin, whose field study in Williamsburg yielded the book *Satmar: An Island in the City*, observed that “expectations concerning division of labor between husband and wife are undergoing radical change.” Increasingly, he noted, Satmar “women

share with their husbands the responsibility of providing for the family.⁴⁵ This trend has only increased over the past forty years, as feminism has led to greater opportunities for women in virtually every domain of American society. In today's world, Satmar women go to work after graduating high school, often as teachers in the KJ private schools, and, increasingly, continue working after giving birth to their first children. Work is, in the first instance, a matter of a large family's economic sustenance. Even if a man is working and not studying in *kollel*, making ends meet is challenging for the average Satmar family. The population density of the village makes real estate extremely expensive, for both renters and buyers.⁴⁶ Private school tuition, even though heavily subsidized, quickly adds up with families of more than five kids. And the most basic expenses—feeding and clothing a large family as well as a cleaning woman to help tend to the house—are substantial.

Women's work outside of the home is important both for economic reasons and for imparting a sense of purpose. Here is another instance in which Kiryas Joel, the insular Satmar Hasidic community, betrays traces of assimilation. Notwithstanding the widespread acceptance of traditional gender roles, many women, and some men, have absorbed, often unwittingly, elements of a most secular modern ideology, feminism. A conversation involving three women in Kiryas Joel, each of whom came from a family belonging to a different faction in town, revealed a range of attitudes in this regard. One of the women professed to having a limited understanding of what feminism was; she said she was content with the role that she had as a wife and mother who did not need to work outside of the house. Two of the other women chafed against the community's constraints on women. Of those two, one explicitly embraced the cause of feminism, especially in her desire to pursue her professional aspiration. Once, as a younger married woman, she had given thought to leaving KJ for a somewhat less confining Orthodox community. But she has stayed and raised her family in the village. Despite the limitations she experiences—on her attire, her desire to drive, and her passion for physical fitness, among others—she continues to believe in the virtue of the way of life in Kiryas Joel, particularly in ensuring the ongoing Jewish identity of her children.⁴⁷

The conversation among these women also pushed to the surface the question of the status of women relative to men in KJ. Echoing various versions of separate spheres ideology, the women all declared that their husbands treated them as equal partners in the raising of their families but recognized that this was not universally the case in the community. One woman reported that she had heard, and was drawn to, the claim that women did not have to perform all of the commandments that men did because they were born in a more perfect state. The women very much resonated with the view that men, including their husbands, were in an imperfect state and required constant efforts at self-improvement.

They also clearly felt a tension in living their lives in Kiryas Joel. Of course many Jews, though surely not Jews alone, experience a tension between their religious or ethnic identity and the inexorable pull of American society. The case of Kiryas Joel is an intriguing laboratory for observing how, in a society that professes to reject the values of modern society, that balance is struck. Seen from the outside as entirely cut off from the surrounding culture, KJ in fact draws from and is continually being reshaped by that culture—even as leaders within sternly warn against any surrender to it.

One of the last havens from the surrounding world and the tensions that emanate from it is Shabbes, the Jewish Sabbath. Shabbes is the culmination of the week, marking a twenty-five-hour period of abstinence from work, driving, and all forms of electric or electronic devices. Automotive traffic on the streets comes to a halt, save for the drive-bys of the village's non-Jewish Public Safety officers and the occasional forays of the Satmar-manned Hatzolah ambulance corps.

Adults and children alike look forward to the arrival of Shabbes (with the exception of the mostly silent minority for whom its many restrictions are suffocating). It is regarded as a temporal site of holiness, as distinct from the more mundane work or school week. All of the restrictions against work on Shabbes make preparing for it extremely labor-intensive, especially on Friday. Residents in KJ race around furiously to purchase the necessary items, clean the house, set automatic timers for lights, rip up toilet paper to avoid violating the rule against tearing on the day of rest, study the weekly Torah portion, place phone calls to

family members elsewhere, and smoke a final cigarette before the sounding of the siren. Well before that, the mother of the house (often aided by her older daughters) has prepared vast quantities of food for the main family meals on Friday night and Saturday lunch, since cooking is not permitted on the Sabbath. In home after home, including in the residences of the small number of Sephardic and Yemenite Jews in the community, the same menu is repeated in lockstep Satmar fashion. It is classic Ashkenazic fare: for dinner, chicken soup, gefilte fish, chicken, and then meat, with an assortment of side dishes; for lunch, gefilte fish, egg salad, and then the *pièce de résistance*, “chulent,” the traditional meat and bean stew that Jews have been eating for centuries because it can be kept warm without violating the laws of Shabbes (or losing its tastiness).⁴⁸

The Sabbath brings its own form of “separate spheres” between men and women. Men and boys shuttle back and forth for prayers in synagogue three or four times from the onset of Sabbath to its exit on Saturday night.⁴⁹ Women remain at home, chatting with other women friends or tending to their children. When meals come, the male head of the house will make the blessings over wine and bread, as will other men and boys above bar mitzvah age. Hewing to traditional gender roles, the women and girls first serve food to the men and then take their seats on the other side of the table. In some homes, the conversation is divided along gender lines, with men and women clustering in separate groups, whereas in other homes, the conversation is more integrated. In both cases, the pace of the meal is much slower than on a normal workday, allowing for more extended and intimate conversation among family members.

Shabbes in Kiryas Joel is illustrative of the multiple faces of the community. Its observance rates as one of the highest priorities of residents, as evidenced not only by their punctilious attention to detail but also by the amount of money they expend to mark it. Shabbes also contains the most traditional and, in some sense, restrictive elements of Jewish observance, while at the same time embodying the quintessence of joy in Judaism—as embodied in the phrase *oyneg Shabbes* (the pleasure of the Sabbath). It requires a tremendous amount of work and advanced

preparation but also symbolizes freedom from the rigors and strains of the week.⁵⁰

Just like Shabbes, the major holidays of the Jewish calendar are an intense mix of restriction and pleasure: Rosh Ha-Shanah, Yom Kippur, and the three major festivals of Sukkot, Passover, and Shavuot. Each of these holidays is governed by many of the same constraints as Shabbes as well as by its own distinctive customs.

In addition to these holidays, which are widely celebrated throughout the Jewish world, there are a number of days on the ritual calendar that reflect the particular customs of Rabbi Joel Teitelbaum and his followers. The first is the twenty-first day of the Hebrew month of Kislev (Kaf Alef Kislev), the day that commemorates Joel Teitelbaum's liberation from the Nazi concentration camp, Bergen-Belsen, and his passage across the border to Switzerland on December 7, 1944. Rabbi Teitelbaum's release from the clutches of Nazi captivity is marked every year by his followers with a celebratory banquet in Brooklyn. Initially staged in very modest fashion, eventually the annual dinner grew in size to include thousands of attendees, all male, who listened to hours of speeches extolling Joel Teitelbaum and warning against any deviation from his path (including regular admonitions against the internet and smartphones). It was also an opportunity for New York City politicians and public officials to pay tribute to and receive a blessing from the Rebbe. Following the split in the community between R. Aaron and R. Zalman Leib, two lavish dinners have been held at massive armories in Brooklyn, each of which attracts close to ten thousand participants. Busesloads of men make their way down from Kiryas Joel to participate in these events, which are the social highlight of the Satmar year as well as the most important fundraisers for Satmar educational institutions or *moysdes*. True to form, the Bnai Yoel hold their own celebratory dinner in Kiryas Joel. Meanwhile, schoolchildren put on their Shabbes best and are inculcated with a sense of the grandeur of the occasion, which one KJ resident referred to as "Satmar Independence Day."⁵¹

If Kaf Alef Kislev captures the community's joy over the survival of their towering leader, Hay Iyar captures his wrath. The fifth day of the Hebrew month of Iyar is Israeli Independence Day; it was on this day, on May 14, 1948, that David Ben-Gurion formally proclaimed the state

of Israel. While much of the Jewish world rejoiced at this occasion, Joel Teitelbaum considered it one of the darkest moments in Jewish history. For him, it represented a monstrous usurpation of God's prerogative to bring the Messiah by those whom he identified as Zionist "transgressors."⁵² Unlike some Haredi rabbis whose intense opposition gave way to tacit acceptance of the state of Israel, Teitelbaum's anti-Zionism never abated. He wrote fiercely against it and enjoined his community to remain vigilant against Zionism's dangers. Satmar boys study his major anti-Zionist treatise, *Va-yo'el Mosheh*, on this day.⁵³ A particularly extreme anti-Zionist group that draws inspiration from Joel Teitelbaum, the Neturei Karta, even arrives from nearby Monsey to Kiryas Joel to burn the Israeli flag.⁵⁴

A third day that reflects the distinctive outlook of the Satmar world is the twenty-sixth day of Av, which is Joel Teitelbaum's *yahrtzeit*, or anniversary of his death. Veteran residents of KJ still remember with painful exactitude the last hours of their revered Rebbe, who fell ill on Shabbes, August 18, and expired at seven thirty in the morning of August 19, 1979.⁵⁵ Notwithstanding his advanced age of ninety-two, residents of Kiryas Joel greeted his passing with disbelief. It was hard to imagine life without the charismatic founder. Later that day, in keeping with the Jewish tradition of rapid burial, some hundred thousand mourners converged on Kiryas Joel for the funeral. Any Satmar Hasid who could get to Upstate New York in time came, overflowing all routes of transportation from New York. The *New York Post* reported: "Roads into the Catskill mountain town were clogged by the caravans and traffic was brought to a standstill for 15 miles."⁵⁶ Ever since that dark day in Satmar history, thousands of his followers have made their way to Kiryas Joel annually to commemorate the day of Teitelbaum's death, which reveals the enduring depth of his impact on the community. Moreover, every day men and women make their way from Kiryas Joel and around the world to his *ohel*, or burial place, where he lies alongside his wife and next to his successor, Moshe Teitelbaum, and his wife. They come to the main cemetery in KJ to engage in prayer and quiet meditation and to place *kvitlekh*, notes of supplication, at his grave.

Unquestionably, the memory of Joel Teitelbaum continues to play a huge role in the Satmar world, particularly through the three major days



FIGURE 1.7. Graves of Alta Faiga (1912–2001), R. Joel Teitelbaum (1887–1979), and R. Moshe Teitelbaum (1914–2006) at Main Kiryas Joel Cemetery. Courtesy of Jackson Krule.

of ritual observance just mentioned. At the same time, his grand-nephew, Aaron, the chief rabbi of Kiryas Joel, has introduced his own annual variation of a ritual commemoration that draws thousands of participants. On Lag Ba-Omer (the thirty-third day of the Omer period that stretches from Passover to Shavuot), Aaron presides over a large sea of black-clad men in front of the main synagogue in KJ, with women off to the side. He transfixes the rhythmically chanting and swaying crowd by lighting a huge bonfire to mark the death of the second-century sage R. Shimon bar Yochai. Neither his father nor great-uncle marked Lag Ba-Omer in such a visible way. Since 2000, he has turned the commemoration into a major event that draws tens of thousands of participants and wide coverage on social media.⁵⁷ This event is one of the ways in which Reb Aaron seeks to escape the shadow of his predecessors and promote Kiryas Joel as capital of the Satmar kingdom, competing with his brother Zalman Leib's base of operation in Williamsburg.⁵⁸



FIGURE 1.8. R. Aaron Lighting Lag Ba-Omer Fire, 2019. Courtesy of Jackson Krule.



FIGURE 1.9. Women at Lag Ba-Omer Celebration under a Sign for Water, 2019. Courtesy of Jackson Krule.



FIGURE 1.10. Crowd of Men and Boys Gathered for Lag Ba-Omer Celebration.
Courtesy of Jackson Krule.

The Primacy of Torah: Education in Kiryas Joel

Education is the essential complement to ritual observance in the Satmar community. It is an activity of the highest value in Kiryas Joel and attracts a great deal of attention and resources. Indeed, there is no more cherished or prestigious designation for a young man than to be a *talmid chukhem* (a Torah scholar). The KJ private school network educates well over ten thousand students, employs the largest number of people in the community, and boasts a range of institutions designed for students ranging in age from toddlers to adults. Each of the three factions in KJ has its own school system with its own presiding Education Committee (*Vaad ha-chinech*) to raise funds and ensure curricular conformity; the mainstream faction's United Talmudic Academy (known also by its Hebrew name *Torah V'Yira*) has its institutions in Kiryas Joel itself, while the other two, the factions associated with R. Zalman Leib and the Bnai Yoel, have their schools just across the village lines.⁵⁹ Meanwhile, there is also a public school in the village that exclusively serves special needs children, most of whom come from KJ. As we shall see,

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