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THURSDAY, JULY 9, 2015
Vol 8.28



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Democracy's New Dilemma How Will We Cope With A Hasidic Influx?

By Chris Rowley

REGIONAL – Kiryas Joel, a Hasidic Jewish community in the town of Monroe in Orange County, is growing rapidly. Its leadership seeks to annex lands around it to effectively double its area. Due to the emphasis on large families among the Satmar Hasidim that live there, and the cultural isolation that characterizes the sect, further growth is assured.

Meanwhile, relations with the outside world have not been amicable. This, a recent panel discussion at Orange County Community College in Middletown posited, poses some tricky questions for New York State and the counties in our reading area.

Speaking at the event were Rabbi Joel M. Schwab, religious leader of Temple Sinai for the past 33 years, Professor Gerald Benjamin, former Ulster County legislature chair and associate vice president of the Center for Research, Regional Education and Outreach at SUNY New Paltz, and Caren Fairweather, executive director of the Maternal-Infant Services Network, who has dealt extensively with mothers and children in Kiryas Joel. James Skoufis, the state assemblyman representing Woodbury, was slated to speak but was unable to attend due to the pressures of the last days of the legislative session in Albany. In his place, Cornwall mayor Brendan Coyne read a statement from Skoufis.

In his introduction, local historian Dr. Richard Hull — who started holding meetings on the subject nine months ago — noted his concern that the "hard attitudes" of the leadership of Kiryas Joel towards outsiders were pushing Orange County to a "tipping point." He added that he was concerned about anti-Semitism spreading as a result.

Much was noted about the particulars of Satmar Hasidim, who are considered less outgoing than Lubavitcher Hasidim, or Grer and Bobov Hasidim. These groups or sects, Hull said, are organized on monarchical lines, with leadership passed down through the families of the leading rebbes. They see the purpose in life for their men as a pursuit of religious study, and for their women as motherhood. They speak Yiddish rather than English, educate their children in their own schools, and ignore television, radio, movies and all other elements of popular culture.

It was also noted how Kiryas Joel reports median household income of less than \$20,000, a third below other Orange County villages, but a median home value of \$382,000, third highest in the county. The community reports a level of poverty far beyond any other in the state and a 93 percent dependence on Medicaid. And key to the recent panel discussion, they vote as a bloc, giving them a power beyond their numbers when it comes to influencing politicians.

In his remarks, Rabbi Schwab noted that a major benefit of American society was its "acceptance of others, and tolerance towards them." He posited that perhaps it would help outsiders to understand Kiryas Joel if they saw it as it sees itself. He explained that the Satmar, and all Hasidim, wish to spend their lives studying the Torah and other Jewish religious works.

"There are 613 commandments, in binding oral laws, divinely given, such as the requirement to pray three times a day," he explained, noting that the Hasidim need dense housing because they cannot drive on the Sabbath and yet wish to pray in their synagogue, which must therefore be within walking distance. He added that they create large families in response to the biblical commandment to be fruitful and multiply. Finally, the Rabbi said, "Crown Heights and Williamsburg are really full. Lots of people have left those neighborhoods in the city and are coming here. Hasidim need a place to live. Orange County's population growth has largely come from Kiryas Joel... I don't see why the Hasidim shouldn't be welcomed with open arms."

Professor Benjamin pointed out that demographic change was certain in the Mid-Hudson valley.

"Within twenty years the region will be majority Latino," he pointed out, suggesting that the arrival of the Satmar Hasidim should be seen as just another aspect of change.

Benjamin then listed some of the current issues related to Hasidic sects in New York. He mentioned the East Ramapo school district, where Grer Hasidim took control and downgraded the public schools while funneling money to their private schools and how that school district may be taken over by the state to remedy the situation. And he noted the more general problem of religious tax exemptions, which shift the costs of government to others. On the other hand, Benjamin also noted that within the Kiryas Joel community generosity was "legendary," but that "it's anything goes in relations with others." He said that the Satmar surround themselves with very high walls and that "exit is discouraged" from the community.

Benjamin added that he approved of large families and thought it was a fundamental human and American right to have them. However, he did not address the issue of whether society at large should carry the costs of such families. He concluded by noting that the Hasidim pose difficult questions for a democracy and that it would be a pity to see everything have to be resolved in the courts.

Fairweather restricted her remarks to issues related to motherhood and babies. She explained that while the rate of Caesarean section

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delivery in some regional hospitals is approaching 50 percent, among the Satmar it is 7 percent. She added that almost all pregnancies in Kiryas Joel are "intended" and contrasted that with the situation of teenage pregnancies in the wider society.

Skoufis's statement noted that "Kiryas Joel's leadership has direct access to the highest levels of state government. Their accumulation of power results from the exercise of the bloc vote in Brooklyn. The bloc vote is a democratic tool, and has been used many times in American history; the Hasidim have simply perfected its use. Now, however, 'United Monroe' — a political organization opposed to the annexations and further growth of Kiryas Joel — has arisen as a new bloc vote. This is causing rethinking and making candidates for election less overt in their embrace of the Satmar bloc. United Monroe changes the political dynamic."

The leadership in Kiryas Joel faces two possible pathways. The first would be to continue their "my way or the highway" approach with no consideration for others. The second would be to reach out to work together with the surrounding community. However, Skoufis concluded, "to this date, the Kiryas Joel village government has not shown an iota of doing this."

A question and answer period following the invited speakers' remarks produced some heat, but little light.

More such discussions are being planned for the greater region.

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