

Between Supersessionism and Atavism: Toward a Neo-Secular View of Religion

DAVID N. MYERS

The three participants in this forum represent three distinct political, intellectual, and methodological perspectives within the field of Jewish history. And yet, what brought us together to propose a research group at the Katz Center for Advanced Judaic Studies was a shared interest in the relevance of recent debates over the secular to the field of Jewish studies, and vice versa. Two core assumptions animated the organizers.

First, secularism is important because it is, and can only be, about religion—or, perhaps to strip away the ideological sheen of “*secularism*,” we can say, following Talal Asad, that “the concept of the secular cannot do without the idea of religion.”¹ The two are inextricably linked, even though we have been taught to think of them as antithetical to and corrosive of one other.

The second proposition is that religion is undeniably important in modern society, an exceptionally potent force in our lives and imaginations, from Southeast Asia to Southern California, Islam to Hinduism, Christianity to Judaism, from fundamentalism to new religious movements. Accordingly, it would seem that we can rather easily dispatch with one of the stereotypical claims attributed to the classic “secularization thesis”—namely, that the rise of the secular entailed the fall of religion *tout court*.²

But if so, then we are obligated to accept, syllogistically, that if the secular and the religious are inextricably linked, and religion is important, then so too is the secular? How so and in what ways? Before arriving at a more

definitive response, I propose, in the first section of this essay, to identify two distinct currents of understanding of the secular in recent debate, and then to situate them in a pair of important though contrasting genealogies central to twentieth-century intellectual culture. In the second section, I illustrate the co-existence of seemingly competing currents in a fascinating laboratory of religious change: Kiryas Joel, New York, a legally recognized village in New York comprising, almost exclusively, Satmar Hasidic Jews. In the final section, I enumerate a set of “neo-secularist” propositions as a prod to the debates in and beyond the field of Jewish studies to which this book seeks to contribute.

Entangled Web: The Religious and the Secular

The first conceptual and discursive current calls attention to the undeniable religious roots of the secular, all the while looking on with a good deal of skepticism at claims of secularism’s creation *ex nihilo* and, for that matter, its benevolence. For example, Talal Asad, among others, makes the important etymological point that the very term “saeculum” (whence the English term “secular”) originated in the heart of a robust medieval and early modern theological discourse.³ Indeed, in those periods the term connoted Catholic clerics who did not live a monastic existence. Amnon Raz-Krakotzkin affirms this etiological and etymological point, albeit in a somewhat more specific context, by arguing that the secular Jewish national ideal—at once an object and bearer of Western Orientalism—derived from “the theological imagination” of Protestantism.⁴

These efforts at exposing the indebted and derivative nature of the secular aim to strip away from secularism its long-assumed primacy over religious expression and movements. A key prod to and partner of secularism in this regard is nationalism, which often shares the same instinct to cast religion as reactionary, antiquated, and dangerous. This is a key point in the work of both Asad and Raz-Krakotzkin, and it anchors the Indian scholar Ashis Nandy’s “anti-secularist manifesto” (1985), in which he argues that the modern state, particularly the Indian state, imposes a notion of secularism that treats “any one who is not secular [as] definitionally intolerant.”⁵ In fact, Nandy counters, those Hindus and Muslims who do not submit to the logic of a statist secularism are more inclined to tolerance than their secularist critics.

Against this skeptical view of the concept of secularism stands a more conventional belief in the originary force of the secular. In the field of Jewish

history, a pair of recent books makes clear the ongoing potency of this view from a variety of angles. The American scholar David Biale proposes in his *Not in the Heavens: The Tradition of Jewish Secular Thought* (2010) a lineage of Jewish secular thought that reaches well past modern times into the Middle Ages and even antiquity. Shmuel Feiner, for his part, bites off a narrower chunk of time and space in *The Origins of Jewish Secularization in Eighteenth-Century Europe* (2010). Feiner seeks to demonstrate that there was a marked shift in norms, behavior, and beliefs among German Jews in the eighteenth century even before the rise of a conscious and declared Jewish Enlightenment project, the *Haskalah*.

So deeply did this shift take hold, it is argued, that even those whom we might describe as “traditionalists”—self-consciously anti-secular in outlook—were as much “children of modernity” as proud secularists. This was the position of the distinguished scholar Jacob Katz and his disciples in Jewish history.⁶ Secularization modified and altered religion such that it too emerged an unmistakable product of modernity—notwithstanding the fact that it was often defined by its most conservative adherents as an unbroken link with the ancient past. An especially important version of this thesis has come from the sociologist José Casanova in his well-known book *Public Religions in the Modern World* (1994). According to Casanova, if empirical evidence and plain observation make it impossible to maintain any longer that religion has been vanquished by the forces of secularization, one can still point to the differentiation of spheres—religious from secular, public from private—that secularism wrought. But differentiation of spheres entails neither stasis nor linear decline. Rather, Casanova argues, religion unshackled itself from the margins of the private realm and resurfaced with new vigor in the public sphere, resulting in the modern, secular phenomenon of “deprivatized religion.”⁷

Up to this point, I have identified two broad modes of thought about the secular, one convinced of the power of secularism to transform, if not altogether dispose of, traditional religious forms, and the other marked by suspicion about secularism’s claims to originality, as well about its benign quality. These two outlooks have deeper roots in the intellectual firmament of twentieth-century Europe. The former current has its anchor in the thought of the greatest of modern sociologists, Max Weber. Weber is known less for his explicit use of the word “secularization” than for the term he famously introduced in his lecture “Wissenschaft als Beruf” (“Science as a Vocation”) from 1917, *Entzauberung*.⁸

Weber meant to convey by this term that the modern age was marked by a degree of “disenchantment” or “demystification” from a previous world in which “mysterious incalculable forces” reigned supreme. While observing that moderns did not necessarily know more about the world in which they lived, Weber contended that they surely possessed the rational and intellectual tools to do so without making “recourse to magical means in order to master or implore the spirits.” This resulting “intellectualization” was a powerful form of disenchantment and betokened a new age that challenged the primacy of traditional modes of religious knowledge, authority, and leadership.⁹

A second tradition that fuels debates over the secular today is rooted in the thought of a near contemporary of Weber’s, the German legal theorist Carl Schmitt, known equally well for his Nazi sympathies as for his scholarship. Schmitt’s 1922 book *Political Theology* offered a number of trenchant insights into the nature of the modern notions of sovereignty and state power. It contained his oft-quoted belief that “all significant concepts of the modern theory of the state are secularized theological concepts” rooted in medieval and early modern conservative Catholic thought. Schmitt pointed to linguistic, historical, and structural affinities between the premodern political order and the modern notion of sovereignty. In this regard, he reversed the process analyzed by Weber, arguing that religious norms and rhetoric powerfully, if sometimes imperceptibly, informed the modern state.¹⁰

This recognition of the earlier theological roots of the secular seems to gesture toward what we might call an *atavistic* perspective that identifies the inescapably religious origins of all things modern. By contrast, the Weberian legacy points toward what we might call with more than a tinge of irony—given its religious overtones—a *supersessionist* perspective. Such a perspective announces the triumph of a modern secular, rational, disenchanted sensibility over mystical, enchanted, and superstitious religion.

These two theoretical poles are, admittedly, exaggerated versions of more nuanced stances. Weber did not herald with unrestrained enthusiasm the advent of a new age of disenchantment. Schmitt, for his part, did not seek to reduce all of modern political thought to a primordial religious script, but, in the first instance, to note the parallel in “systematic structure” between early modern theological concepts and modern notions of sovereignty. Still, it is important to observe the competing directions in which the *atavistic* and *supersessionist* narrative vectors move; in one case, the secular emerges out of a medieval theological bed, and in the other, religion is continually on the

defensive in the face of secular challenges. Perhaps the greatest value of these constructs is not to crown one or the other with the mantle of victory, but rather to see that the seemingly opposing vectors are quite entangled—as the following case study reveals.

The Village of Kiryas Joel: Hasidic—and Secular?

If anything, Kiryas Joel would seem to hammer a final nail into the coffin of classic secularization theory. It is, as noted, a legally recognized village in the state of New York that comprises a population that is almost entirely Satmar Hasidim—22,000 in all. Arguably, there never has been, in the long annals of the Jewish dispersion, a *shtetl*—to borrow the Yiddish term for an all-enveloping Jewish town—as large and homogeneous as Kiryas Joel. It is particularly striking that a community of this nature took rise not in the heartland of the shtetl, nineteenth-century Eastern Europe, but in late twentieth-century America.

The exotic allure of Kiryas Joel—the extraordinary existence of a legally recognized, autonomous municipality of Hasidic Jews—has drawn the attention of the media, earning it nearly daily coverage in the newspapers of Orange County, New York, periodic stories in the *New York Times*, and a segment on *60 Minutes* (in 1994). Scholarly attention has been more scattered.¹¹ The 1994 Supreme Court case surrounding the constitutionality of a public school in Kiryas Joel generated the most impressive body of scholarship. It afforded an opportunity for legal theorists, both liberals and communitarians, to debate the extent to which a public school in Kiryas Joel did or did not transgress the boundary between religion and state.¹² Jonathan Boyarin concisely summarized the differing scholarly positions, as well as those of the Supreme Court justices in the 1994 case, in a chapter of his coauthored *Powers of Diaspora*.¹³ There he sought to alter the terms of reference in the debate by looking beyond the stark opposition between religious and secular to which commentators frequently resort in understanding the creation of Kiryas Joel and its school district. In a parallel (and characteristic) move, Boyarin suggested that we understand the origins of the community not as the result of the drive toward “individual and territorial liberty,” but rather as based on “genealogical and diasporic loyalty.”¹⁴

More recently, Leora Batnitzky addressed the community in the coda to a book devoted to the invention of Judaism as a religion in the modern age.

Batnitzky followed Jacob Katz and Michael Silber in noting that “ultraorthodoxy is of course just as much modernity’s child” as other religious expressions of the era, including Reform Judaism.¹⁵ At the same time, she noted that traditionalist groups like the Satmar Hasidim proved unwilling to fit themselves into the modern secular notion of religion that was a *sine qua non* of Emancipation; that is, they did not see themselves as members of a purely religious confession confined to the private sphere whose public lives and identity were defined by the surrounding gentile society. According to their worldview, the worldview of Kiryas Joel, religion, culture, and politics are inextricably entwined.

Both Boyarin and Batnitzky challenge, in their respective modes, the religious/secular binarism in the case of Kiryas Joel. Building on this pair of contributions, I would like to illustrate how the community entangles the very categories of religious and secular. To do so requires tracing the roots of the community, and especially its founding leader, back to Europe.

Kiryas Joel came about as the result of a distinctive religious and political vision—political theology, we might say—developed by the first grand rabbi of Satmar Hasidism, Joel Teitelbaum (1887–1979). Rabbi Teitelbaum was born into one of the most distinguished, combative, and stringently observant families in Hungary. More particularly, he and his family came from the Hungarian Unterland, in the northeast corner of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, which was one of the main birthplaces of Haredi or ultra-Orthodox Judaism in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Joel Teitelbaum served both as a charismatic Hasidic rebbe and as community rabbi in a number of towns and cities in Hungary and, after the Treaty of Trianon in 1920, Romania. His last position in Europe was as rabbi of the city of Satu Mare (or Szatmár in Hungarian), from which the Satmar Hasidic brand of Orthodoxy drew its name. Already in Europe, Rabbi Teitelbaum gained a reputation as one of the most forceful proponents of Haredi Judaism in the world. For him, the challenge was nothing less than survival in a modern world rife with pollution and corruption. In fact, Teitelbaum imagined himself and his followers to be surrounded by concentric circles of enmity: the outermost circle was the gentile world, followed next by non-observant Reform-oriented Jews, then the putatively observant Jews (e.g., the so-called Modern Orthodox), and then fellow traditionalist Jews who appeared to be bound to Torah but actually were not. But Rabbi Teitelbaum reserved his greatest opprobrium for Zionists, who failed to heed, in his view, the rabbinic injunction against humanly inspired action to return to the Land

of Israel. Against these various circles of enmity, all products of the perilous modern world, Teitelbaum preached constant battle.¹⁶

Given this constitutive combativeness, it is perhaps surprising to note that Teitelbaum routinely interacted with local political officials in Satu Mare and other venues where he served as rabbi. Drawing on the ancient rabbinic proposition that “the law of the kingdom is the law,” he and his advisors—latter-day *stadlanim* (communal intercessors)—practiced a form of pragmatic political accommodation in order to advance the interests of the community. That is, they openly respected the authority of the mayor, governor, and king—one of the most iconic pictures of Rabbi Teitelbaum is of him bowing to greet King Carol II of Romania in 1936—and went to great lengths to manifest their loyalty to state power.

One could argue that this impulse toward accommodation even played a role in Teitelbaum’s survival during the darkest days of the Nazi assault in Hungary in 1944. He was chosen for inclusion on a list of some 1,700 Jews to be saved by the Hungarian Zionist official Rudolf Kasztner. Despite Teitelbaum’s ferocious opposition to Zionism, he did agree to be included on the list that emerged out of Kasztner’s negotiations with Adolf Eichmann.¹⁷

In fact, Teitelbaum’s personality and approach to life offer an intriguing blend of pugnacious defense of tradition and skillful political accommodation, both in Europe and his new life in America. After liberation in December 1944, Teitelbaum made brief sojourns in Switzerland and Palestine before arriving in New York on Rosh Hashanah in 1946. He quickly settled in the Williamsburg section of Brooklyn, already home to a sizeable Orthodox population. As he had in his earlier rabbinic postings, he introduced a new degree of ritual stringency into Jewish Williamsburg, attracting a mix of older American residents and recently arrived survivors.¹⁸ Within a decade and a half, he had built up a community of thousands of adherents in his main synagogue, Congregation Yetev Lev. What drew adherents to Rabbi Teitelbaum was his own powerful example of personal piety that went hand in hand with a distinctive theological worldview, among whose key pillars were the following:

- the belief that modernity represented a monumental rupture in the conduct and sanctity of traditional Jewish life; returning to the “way of the ancient Israel” (*derekh Yisra’el sava*) required a ceaseless battle against the forces of secularization;

- the belief that the resulting crisis of modernity impelled a life lived between passive acceptance of ultimate messianic redemption and steadfast and aggressive action, under the guidance of a rabbinic leader whose authority was absolute;¹⁹
- the demand to create a space of purity at a remove from the seductions and allures of modern urban life—and from Jews who were not fully Torah observant;²⁰
- an unrelenting battle against those deemed to be the source of greatest spiritual contamination, the Zionists.²¹

These tenets represent articles of Rabbi Teitelbaum's traditionalist faith, which we might juxtapose with his willingness to engage the secular political process for manifestly instrumental reasons. In America, both the separatism inhering in that faith and his accommodationist instinct gained new force. In fact, they converged at the point of creating Kiryas Joel, New York.

A few short years after settling in Brooklyn, Teitelbaum began to urge his close advisors to scout out possible sites of settlement outside of the city. He did so for two primary reasons. First, and of greatest urgency, the Satmar community was growing at such a rate (with six to eight children per family) that its members were rapidly outgrowing the available housing stock in Williamsburg. And second, the very fact that Satmar Hasidim resided in the heart of a teeming, multi-ethnic urban center posed dangers to their way of life. Accordingly, the lay leadership of Satmar, as represented by Lipa Friedman and Leopold (Leibish) Lefkowitz, two Hungarian survivors who served successively as presidents of the community, heeded the rebbe's desire and began to purchase land in the greater metropolitan area. They relied on a mix of political savvy, business acumen, and cloak-and-dagger tactics in going about their work. In 1952, Satmar representatives entered into negotiations with borough officials on Staten Island to explore the possibility of creating an enclave community there. The rebbe was drawn to the idea of creating a satellite Satmar settlement on an island—one that did not yet have a bridge connecting it to Brooklyn.²² Where better to realize the ideal of separation that he had in mind?

Ideal though Staten Island may have been, the negotiations did not pan out. Satmar representatives sought new venues in Dover, New Jersey, and Mt. Kisco and Congers Lake, New York. In pursuing land in these locales, they were mindful of and intent on realizing two basic rights enshrined in

the U.S. Constitution, both of which were anchors of a modern secular mindset: the right to private property (Fifth Amendment), and the right to the free exercise of religion without interference from the state (First Amendment). The former was the essential precondition of the latter, for to create the kind of separatist community that Teitelbaum had in mind required the purchase of property. But this was not as simple as it might appear. For as they began to prospect for land in New Jersey and New York, Satmar officials encountered resistance from local landowners who were not intent on selling property to foreign-looking Hasidic Jews. By the time they turned their attention to Orange County, New York, in the early 1970s, they were wiser and more chastened. Thus, they recruited a non-Hasidic Jew by the name of Oscar Fisher as their front man in purchasing property in and around the Town of Monroe beginning in 1972.²³ By the spring of 1974, after Fisher succeeded in purchasing several hundred acres of land, the secret began to be revealed. Non-Hasidic neighbors heard indirectly (such as through reports of ads in the Yiddish press and offers to purchase their homes) of plans for a major new Satmar settlement in their midst.²⁴ By August, the first Hasidim began to move from Brooklyn to the new community.

It did not take long for tensions between the new community and the residents and officials of Monroe to heat up.²⁵ Apart from the “colossal” culture gap between the pious Yiddish-speaking Hasidim and the Monroe residents, as one local reporter described it, there were sharp differences in the way the two groups interpreted the zoning laws of the town.²⁶ Monroe officials understood single-family homes to be intended for relatively small nuclear families. Meanwhile, the Satmar Hasidim imagined such homes to be domiciles for their typical families of eight or more persons; they outfitted and arranged them accordingly, which led to regular conflicts with the town inspector. In addition, the particular religious needs of the community prompted contractors to build small synagogues, schools, ritual baths, markets, and bakeries in the new Satmar apartment buildings, in apparent violation of existing Monroe zoning ordinances. The struggle over zoning continued with growing intensity over two years, punctuated by spot visits, warrants, and even arrests. The Satmar did not roll over and surrender.²⁷ They insisted that such zoning practices were essential to preserving their way of life—and entirely consistent with their right to private property and the free exercise of religion. They also attempted to explain themselves to their neighbors, as Leopold Lefkowitz did in an editorial to the local paper: “We intend only good. Though our customs are different, the American system

of protection of all people with all beliefs is profoundly important to us. The law, applied evenly and equally, must protect all of us.”²⁸

To ensure protection under the law, the Satmars assembled a team of lawyers to defend their claims in various jurisdictions. Finally, after two years of escalating friction with Monroe, Satmar leaders, after consulting with Rabbi Teitelbaum, determined in September 1976 that the best path forward would be to create a self-standing, autonomous village as part of the Town of Monroe.²⁹ This would allow the Satmars, among other effects, to establish their own zoning norms.

A rapid flurry of additional legal maneuvers followed that almost derailed the plan, including the threat of annexation of Satmar land by Monroe residents and the counter-threat of a federal discrimination suit brought by the Satmars against Monroe residents. But this and other challenges were averted through intense negotiation, and Satmar officials quickly navigated the relatively few hurdles required to gain official recognition as a village in the state of New York.³⁰ On March 2, 1977, Kiryas Joel was officially born. In a strikingly brief period of time, from 1974 to 1977, the Satmar community was transformed from a collection of private property owners into a Hasidic public square.

It is important to recall that official recognition as a village was not Rabbi Teitelbaum’s original aim. His desire was to establish a shtetl, an enclave of like-minded Hasidim at a remove from the city, but not necessarily a legal village, with all the responsibilities of governance implied therein. But if the Satmar Hasidim learned anything from their time in America, it was how to play with and within the rules of the system to promote their interests. They knew about and insisted on their constitutional rights. They also knew how to operate in the more mundane world of American legal and political practice, with the aid of skilled lawyers who crafted effective arguments intended to demonstrate that the Satmar were simply seeking to live their collective life according to the laws of the country. And as they grew in numbers through the exceptionally high birthrate of the community, they assumed new political heft, drawing the attention of local and state politicians desirous of their affection and, more particularly, votes—and simultaneously incurring the ire of neighbors fearful of the loss of precious autonomy and resources.

Kiryas Joel is not altogether unique. Strong forms of religious communitarianism are quite common in the history of the United States. Kiryas Joel was not even the first Hasidic group to establish its own village. The Skverer

Hasidim preceded the Satmars by more than a decade and a half when they created a self-standing village incorporated as New Square, New York, in 1961. In fact, America has been home to hundreds of communes—516 by one count, as of 1998—created by idealists of different stripes, most, though not all motivated by religion, who are intent on creating a model society removed from the dangers and impurities of mainstream culture. The story may be said to begin with the arrival of the Pilgrims to Plymouth Rock in 1620 and reached a peak in the nineteenth century with the bold fusion of sacred and secular values by the Mormons in Utah.³¹ Closer to home in time and space, Orange County, New York, where Kiryas Joel is located, has been particularly receptive to such communal forms in recent decades, with the Ananda Ashram (1964) and the Bruderhof community of Bellvale (2001) as two prime examples.

That said, few American religious subcommunities have achieved the notoriety or political power of Kiryas Joel, which leads a fascinating dual existence: as an officially recognized municipality that is required to adhere to the laws, norms, and standards of the state of New York, and as an autonomous Hasidic community that operates according to the regulating principles of Halakhah (Jewish law) and Satmar Hasidic customs. Concomitantly, there are two sources of power and authority in Kiryas Joel: the state-recognized political apparatus of the village (board, mayor, and administrator), and the community's rabbinic leadership, currently headed by Rabbi Aron Teitelbaum (great-nephew of Joel Teitelbaum), whose word reigns supreme in many different aspects of village life, from ritual matters to economic behavior to modesty norms in dress. Not surprisingly, there are frequent complications and tensions between these two sources of authority to the point that even some Satmar residents of Kiryas Joel have gone to court to dissolve the village on the grounds that it violates the constitutionally mandated separation of church and state.³² These efforts at dissolution point to the existence of deep schisms that developed within the community following the death of Joel Teitelbaum in 1979. Most recently, Rabbi Aron Teitelbaum has been locked in a bitter feud with his brother in Williamsburg, Rabbi Zalman Leib Teitelbaum, over control of the global Satmar empire. The feud turned particularly intense following the death of their father, the second Satmar grand rabbi, Moses Teitelbaum, in 2006. One key effect has been the division of the Satmar community into Aroni and Zali factions, including in Kiryas Joel. Whereas once Rabbi Aron's supporters were the overwhelming majority of residents there, the two sides are now more evenly divided in the village.

To be sure, both camps agree on core principles. They uphold the proudly insular, Torah-centered world of Kiryas Joel and regard it as an attempt to bend the arc of history away from the corrosive forces of modern, secular change toward a regime grounded in ancient religious values and practices. It does not take much imagination to identify in this vision strong elements of an atavistic perspective mentioned in the previous section: the mooring in traditional sources and ways of life; the renewed assertion of rabbinic authority; the declared commitment to the ancient political principle *Dina di-malkhuta dina* (the law of the kingdom is the law); and the erection of a communal structure, a *kehillah*, regulated by the dictates of Halakhah.

And yet, it seems impossible to narrate the rise of the Satmar community, and particularly its success in bringing Kiryas Joel to life, without recognizing the “traditionalist” nature of the enterprise—“traditionalist” not in the sense of unmediated access to the ways and precepts of old, as the Satmars themselves profess, but in a different sense, as we noted earlier—that is, of a tradition that takes shape by encountering the very forces of modernity against which it inveighs.³³ An important part of the “traditionalist” creed is a fastidious attention to boundary maintenance.

But the story Satmar Hasidim tell less frequently is about their engagement, interaction, and accommodation to the broader secular world around, consistent with the contours of the supersessionist claim outlined earlier. Despite the powerful communal narrative of protest against assimilation, Satmar do not now and never did maintain a completely impermeable cultural border, as they often claim. In their own mythic rendering, Hasidim and other Haredi Jews assert their steadfast adherence to upholding “ShaLeM,” the Hebrew acronym for “Name,” “Language,” and “Dress” that spells the word for “wholeness.” Traditionalist Jews vow to resist assimilating to foreign norms in these three domains of life.³⁴ But they, and Satmar Hasidim among them, have regularly assumed non-Jewish names alongside their Jewish names; they also regularly acquire and make use of languages other than Jewish tongues (spoken Yiddish and ritual Hebrew)—Hungarian in Hungary, English in the United States and England, French and Flemish in Belgium, to mention a few. Moreover, Satmar Hasidim have repeatedly used modern media, from newspapers to radio to the internet, to communicate and stay engaged with the world.³⁵ Making recourse to such media is often discouraged as a formal matter; for example, home internet use for anything but economic reasons is proscribed by leading Satmar rabbis.

Nonetheless, there is a constant and seemingly irreversible pull among the Satmar rank and file to stay in touch with each other and the broader world through new communication technologies. They exchange information and blog through websites such as “Kiryas Joel Voice,” “Be-hadre haredim,” or “Satmarnews.”³⁶

In that sense, the Satmar community, for all its commitment to insularity, is of this world. The doors that the community opened to political engagement during its nearly seven decades in America, through which hundreds of millions of dollars in state and federal support have flowed to its coffers, have also allowed for the entry of a steady if slow current of American social, cultural, and political values.³⁷ Kiryas Joel is a good example. Although initially built at the behest of its all-powerful eponymous rebbe, it has become, in many respects, a two-party system, whose competing sides strain against each other to balance the demands of democracy and heteronomy, state law and Halakhah.

How, then, to make sense of Kiryas Joel as it navigates the shoals of religious and secular identities? It is, as a formal matter, an instrument of New York state government answerable to all its demands for accountability and transparency. Simultaneously, it is manifestly and unmistakably a religious community—not a diluted *Religionsgemeinschaft* as nineteenth-century German Reform Jews imagined their loose religious affiliation, but a robust form bound by the dictates of halakhic obligation and part of a long-standing American communitarian tradition.³⁸

It might be helpful to imagine the community as hewing to neither a purely atavistic pole nor a purely supersessionist pole, but rather as an exemplar of what José Casanova has called “deprivatized religion.” Casanova argues that since the Enlightenment, religion has been “forced to withdraw from the modern secular state and the modern capitalist economy to find refuge in the newly found private sphere.”³⁹ But he hastens to point out that “religious traditions throughout the world are refusing to accept the marginal and privatized role which theories of modernity as well as theories of secularization have reserved for them.”⁴⁰ Indeed, religious institutions and individuals have pushed beyond the margins of the private sphere into the public domain, newly energized with a sense of political possibility and mission. The Satmar Hasidim of Kiryas Joel certainly seem to reflect that impulse to push beyond the private realm to the public sphere, armed with a sense of confidence and entitlement to assert their rights on the American landscape. Such a move is a bold act of religious self-assertion. And yet, the legal form

of the community, as well as the means it has used to take rise and flourish, attest to the inescapability of secular forces of change that alter and transform, but do not dispense altogether with, religion. This perspective echoes Andrea Schatz's reflections in this forum on secular time in the Haskalah. There, she acknowledges the disruptive effects of "secular interpretations of historical time," while also recognizing the limitations of such a secular regime of time—indeed, its inability to "control all historical time."⁴¹

Beyond the Divide: Neo-Secularism

Following the discussion of the case of Kiryas Joel, we can proceed, at last, to our final task: the articulation of a number of "neo-secular" propositions that aim to balance between historical texture and commonsense observation. The "neo-secular" nomenclature is employed in contradistinction to an uncritical *supersessionist* theory of secularization, on one hand, and an overly simplistic and *atavistic* anti-secularist theory, on the other. This language hints at different phases and faces of the secular, and thereby seeks to challenge the image of a hegemonic monolith that asserts its power in sweeping, uniform, and irreversible fashion. My notion, in contrast to that of Amnon Raz-Krakotzkin, is of a more fragmented and historically contingent version of the secular and its effects. The specific example of Kiryas Joel, with all of its idiosyncrasies, embodies this version well.

And yet, in advancing this claim, I do not mean to suggest that the neo-secularist principles below apply only to the limited case of Kiryas Joel. Rather, they seek to make historical sense of the passage of religious movements and individuals through the byways of modernity, as they undergo large-scale economic, cultural, and political change. Neither fully continuous nor disjunctive, neither totally supersessionist nor atavistic, the neo-secular charts its own course, following the tortuous currents that bend, reshape, and propel forward religion in its manifold modern forms.

Five Neo-Secular Propositions

1. In both etymological and historical terms, the idea of the secular is not a modern *novum*, but has its roots in medieval and early modern theological notions and ecclesiastical politics.

2. Following in the wake of the Weberian tradition, it is clear that the plausibility structure of normative religious authority in Europe underwent a process of erosion from the sixteenth to the eighteenth centuries, culminating in the nineteenth in a differentiation of spheres between religious and secular.⁴²
3. This differentiation did not spell the ultimate demise or disappearance of religion. Rather, it successively enfeebled and then empowered religious movements, initially forcing them to the private sphere, but in the process fortifying their resolve and imparting survival tools that allowed for their reemergence in the public sphere. The result was, per Casanova, deprivatized religion.
4. Deprivatized religious movements, as Asad argues, can and do disrupt the public spheres they enter—traversing, effacing, and redrawing the very boundary between private and public in the process.
5. This redrawing of the boundary between private and public, resulting from a constant series of course corrections, retrenchments, and resurgences, affirms the dynamism of a “neo-secular” age that highlights (and amplifies) the mutability, vitality, and vulnerability of religion.

In this last regard, it remains an open question whether Kiryas Joel, New York, fast on its way to becoming the first all-Hasidic city in the world, can preserve its distinctive and insular way of life. The need to engage the outside political world on a daily basis, an essential feature of life in the public sphere, threatens to introduce new and unwelcome values into the community. More ominously, the ever-changing forms of electronic social media not only redefine the bounds of community for their consumers. They also offer new—and in the eyes of Kiryas Joel’s leaders, dangerous—sources of attraction to the village’s young people, bearing the potential to draw them definitively away from “the way of the ancient Israel.”⁴³

cleave to the house of Jacob’’ (b. Kiddushin 70b). It is also interesting to note that Rabbi Unterman chose those prophetic passages from Isaiah and did not mention the pact between Ezra and those who returned to Zion, which represents a contradictory idea: “Let us make a covenant with our God to put away all the [foreign] wives, and such as are born of them” (Ezra 10:2–3).

65. See Arye Edrei, “Divine Spirit and Physical Power: Rabbi Shlomo Goren and the Military Ethic of the Israel Defense Forces,” *Theoretical Enquiries in the Law* 7 (2005–6): 255–97; Arye Edrei, “From Kibiyah to Beirut—The Revival of the Jewish Laws of War,” *Cardozo Law Review* 28, no.1 (2006): 187–227.

66. Rabbi Shlomo Goren, “The Heresy of the Jewish People in Matters of Divorce,” in *Shanah Be-Shanah* [Hebrew] (Jerusalem: Hekhal Shlomo, 1983), 149–50. In his manner, he tied these ideas to the essence of the messianic vision, for implicit here is his approach that views the very establishment of the State of Israel—the national, Israeli, and contemporary—as the beginning of the fulfillment of the vision of the end of days: “Also the vision of the end of days is connected first and foremost with the establishment and strengthening of Jewish nationalism as a people” (154).

67. *Ibid.*, 156.

68. Thus, for example, Rabbi Helbo’s statement that “converts are as difficult for Israel as a scab” appears several times in the Babylonian Talmud (e.g., b. Yevamot 47b), and in other places the Babylonian Talmud connects to this additional statements that are fundamentally opposed to conversion, such as “Evil after evil will come upon those who accept converts” (b. Yevamot 109b) and “Converts and those who marry young girls [lit. “play with children”] prevent the coming of the Messiah” (b. Niddah 13 b). None of these are mentioned in the Jerusalem Talmud, even though Rabbi Helbo was a Palestinian *amora*.

69. Tractate Gerim is a late text that was edited after the completion of the Talmud but incorporates more ancient texts that were apparently produced in the Land of Israel. They were largely based on the *braitot*—tannaitic sources that were not included in the Mishnah—and other ancient literature.

70. Rabbi Shlomo Goren, “Conversion from the Perspective of the Generations and the *Halakhah*” [Hebrew], in *Shanah Be-Shanah* (Jerusalem: Hekhal Shlomo, 1986), 150–76.

71. As indicated previously, Rabbis Unterman and Goren came from different social and academic backgrounds. Thus they arrived at their similar conclusions independently, due to the fact that they were both Religious Zionists.

CHAPTER 12

1. Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2003), 200.

2. For a still valuable survey of key positions in the debate over secularization theory, see William H. Swatos Jr. and Kevin T. Christiano, “Secularization Theory: The Course of a Concept,” *Journal of Sociology* 60 (Autumn 1999): 209–28.

3. Asad, *Formations of the Secular*, 192.

4. Amnon Raz-Krakotzkin, “Secularism, the Christian Ambivalence Toward the Jews, and the Notion of Exile,” in the present volume.

5. Ashis Nandy, “An Anti-Secularist Manifesto,” *Seminar* 314 (October 1985): 24.

6. See, for example, Jacob Katz, “Orthodoxy in Historical Perspective,” *Studies in Contemporary Jewry* 2 (1986): 3–17, as well as the important article by his student Michael K. Silber, “The Emergence of Ultra-Orthodoxy: The Invention of Tradition,” in *The Uses of Tradition: Jewish Continuity in the Modern Era*, ed. Jack Wertheimer (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary, 1999), 23–84. In writing of Hungarian ultra-Orthodoxy, Silber observes that “it is in fact not an unchanged and unchanging remnant of pre-modern, traditional Jewish society, but as much a child of modernity and change as any of its ‘modern’ rivals.” Silber, “The Emergence of Ultra-Orthodoxy,” 24.

7. José Casanova, *Public Religions in the Modern World* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 5ff.

8. Weber’s lecture, published in 1919, may be found at www.wsp-kultur.uni-bremen.de/summerschool/download%20oss%202006/Max%20Weber%20-%20Wissenschaft%20als%20Beruf.pdf. An English translation, “Science as a Vocation,” can be found at www.ne.jp/asahi/moriyuki/abukuma/weber/lecture/science_frame.html.

9. Weber, “Science as a Vocation,” www.ne.jp/asahi/moriyuki/abukuma/weber/lecure/science_frame.html.

10. Carl Schmitt, *Political Theology: Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty*, trans. George Schwab (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 36. Notwithstanding his toxic past, Schmitt’s ideas have had resonance among contemporary thinkers. For example, Talal Asad has inquired into Schmitt’s proposition that “secularized concepts contain a *religious essence*.” Asad, for his part, resists the impulse to essentialize religion. But he does follow Schmitt in noting that, in historical-terminological respects, “the ‘secular’” was hardly a modern invention; rather, it “was part of a theological discourse” rooted in medieval Europe. Asad, *Formations of the Secular*, 190.

11. The best account of the community in English remains Jerome Mintz, *Hasidic People: A Place in the New World* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1992). Meanwhile, the Satmar scholar Sh. Y. Gelbman has produced a deeply detailed, one-volume history of Kiryas Joel, *Retzon tzadik* (Kiryas Joel, N.Y.: Sh. Y. Gelbman, 1998). The Satmar community in Williamsburg, meanwhile, has attracted monographic attention from a group of sociologists, including two works by George Kranzler, *Williamsburg: A Jewish Community in Transition* (New York: P. Feldheim, 1961), and *Hasidic Williamsburg: A Contemporary American Hasidic Community* (Northvale, N.J.: Jason Aronson, 1995), as well as Solomon Poll, *The Hasidic Community of Williamsburg* (New York: Free Press, 1962), and Israel Rubin, *Satmar: An Island in the City* (Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1972).

12. See, for example, the contributions in *Columbia Law Review* 96 (1996), including Abner Greene, “*Kiryas Joel* and Two Mistakes About Equality,” *Columbia Law Review* 96 (1996): 1–86; Christopher Eisgruber, “The Constitutional Value of Assimilation,” *Columbia Law Review* 96 (1996): 87–103; and Ira Lupu, “Uncovering the Village of Kiryas Joel,” *Columbia Law Review* 96 (1996): 104–20. See also the important work of Nomi M. Stolzenberg, “A Tale of Two Villages (or Legal Realism Comes to Town),” *NOMOS XXXIX: Ethnicity and Group Rights* (1997): 290–346, and “The Puzzling Persistence of Community: The Cases of Airmont and Kiryas Joel,” in *From Ghetto to Emancipation: Historical and Contemporary Reconsiderations of the Jewish Community*, ed. David N. Myers and William V. Rowe (Scranton, Pa.: University of Scranton Press, 1997), 75–107.

13. Boyarin’s chapter there, “Circumscribing Constitutional Loyalties in *Kiryas Joel*,” is based on an article in the *Yale Law Review* 106, no. 5 (1997): 1537–70. See Jonathan and Daniel Boyarin, *Powers of Diaspora: Two Essays on the Relevance of Jewish Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002).

14. Boyarin, “Circumscribing Constitutional Loyalties,” 127. For a broader discussion of the “genealogical” and “diasporic” grounds of Jewish identity, see Daniel and Jonathan Boyarin, “Diaspora: Generation and the Ground of Jewish Identity,” *Critical Inquiry* 19, no. 4 (Summer 1993): 693–725.

15. Leora Batnitzky, *How Judaism Became a Religion: An Introduction to Modern Jewish Thought* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2011), 183.

16. Leora Batnitzky argues that ultra-Orthodox groups such as Satmar Hasidim “do not perceive the modern world as problematic per se but rather view it as the purview of non-Jews.” *Ibid.*, 185. For a contrary view, see David N. Myers, “‘Commanded War’: Three Chapters in the ‘Military’ History of Satmar Hasidism,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 81 (2013): 311–56. For important discussions of the distinctive theological and ideological universe of Joel Teitelbaum, see Allan L. Nadler, “Piety and Politics: The Case of the Satmar Rebbe,” *Judaism* 31 (Spring 1982): 135–52; Zvi Jonathan Kaplan, “Rabbi Joel Teitelbaum, Zionism, and Hungarian Ultra-Orthodoxy,” *Modern Judaism* 24, no. 2 (2004): 165–78; and the recent biography by Menachem Keren-Kratz, “R. Yoel Teitelbaum: Ha-rabi mi-Satmar (1887–1979)” (Ph.D. diss., Tel Aviv University, 2013).

17. On Kasztner, see Yechiam Weitz, *Ha-ish she-nirtsah pa’amayim* (Jerusalem: Keter, 1995), and Ronald W. Zweig, *The Gold Train: The Destruction of the Jews and the Looting of Hungary* (New York: HarperCollins, 2002). This is not the place to enter into a more detailed discussion of the Kasztner affair nor even of Joel Teitelbaum’s rescue. But it is important to note that some have accused Rabbi Teitelbaum of choosing expediency over principle in the case of his own rescue. See the account of a one-time follower of Rabbi Teitelbaum, Itzik, in an interview for the online Israeli news service Ynet, www.ynet.co.il/articles/0,7340,L-3538199,00.html.

18. For a vivid first-hand account of the transformations of Williamsburg’s Orthodox community, particularly its increasing stringency after the Second World War owing to the presence of Satmar Hasidim, see Philip Fishman, *A Sukkah Is Burning* (Minneapolis: Mill City Press, 2012).

19. Gershom Scholem famously described the traditional Jewish messianic belief as inducing a “life lived in deferment.” Scholem, *The Messianic Idea in Judaism* (New York: Schocken, 1971), 35.

20. According to the village’s prolific historian, Shlomo Yankel Gelbman, “the idea of a ‘shtetl’ never left the agenda during our youth.” He continues by noting that it was Rabbi Teitelbaum’s desire “to build a community outside of the city that was made up of four cubits pure and clean of any intrusion or blemish.” See Gelbman’s history of Kiryas Joel, *Retzon tzadik*. This desire for a community of purity reflected a larger commitment to separation that challenges Jonathan Boyarin’s claim that “segregation is not an essential tenet of Satmar beliefs.” Boyarin and Boyarin, *Powers of Diaspora*, 122. Cf. Emanuel Sivan’s discussion of the “enclave” ethos of Haredim in “The Enclave Culture,” in Gavriel A. Almond, R. Scott Appleby, and Emanuel Sivan, *Strong Religion: The Rise of Fundamentalism Around the World* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 23–89.

21. The motif of fighting the forces of evil and impurity in Zionism anchors Joel Teitelbaum’s best-known treatise, *Va-yo’el Mosheh* (Brooklyn: S. Deutsch, 1959).

22. Gelbman’s book on Kiryas Joel is entitled *The Will of the Righteous One*, indicating the strong will of Joel Teitelbaum to create a separatist enclave. On Staten Island, see Gelbman, *Retzon tzadik*, 28–29. Curiously, it was precisely the separatist impulse—and the concomitant quality of standing out so visibly—that led Lipa Friedman to oppose the efforts to create a shtetl initially. Ultimately, his loyalty to Rabbi Teitelbaum outweighed his opposition.

23. Fisher was recruited to the task by his brother-in-law, Leopold (Leibish) Lefkowitz. Interview with Debra Fisher, Oscar’s daughter, December 8, 2009.

24. Monroe resident Abraham Genen told the Town Board that Hasidic Jews approached him with an offer to buy his home. See Minutes of Town of Monroe Board, April 1, 1974. See also “Development Accused of Fraudulent Advertising,” *Middletown Times Herald Record*, April 2, 1974.

25. Minutes of Town of Monroe Board, May 6, 1974.

26. David Swanson, “Hasids in Monroe: A Clash of Cultures or Point of Law?,” *Times Herald Record*, October 10, 1976.

27. In early June 1976, a member of the Satmar community, Nuchem Friedman, was arrested for refusing to close a grocery store he ran in a trailer outside of his house. “Zoning Law Beats Dietary Law,” *Times Herald Record*, June 4, 1976. The following month, Monroe residents vented their anger at a town board meeting: “Angry Monroe Residents Urge Enforcement Against Hasids,” *Times Herald Record*, July 13, 1976.

28. Leibish Lefkowitz, “Letter to the Editor from the Satmar Hasidic Community in Monroe,” *Monroe Gazette*, July 29, 1976.

29. “Hasids Take Steps to Form Separate Village,” *Times Herald Record*, September 15, 1976.

30. The law to establish a village in New York reads: “A territory of 500 or more inhabitants may incorporate as a village in New York State, provided that the territory is not already part of a city or village.” “Incorporation of a Village in New York State,” *Local Government Handbook* (Albany: State of New York, 2009).

31. For a catalogue of such communities, see Foster Stockwell, *Encyclopedia of American Communes, 1663–1963* (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland, 1998).

32. One particularly active “dissident” within the community, Joseph Waldman, has gone to court on several occasions (1994, 1999–2000) seeking the dissolution of the village. The most recent attempt was dismissed by federal district judge Jed Rakoff in November 2011. See *Kiryas Joel Alliance v. Village of Kiryas Joel*, 11 CIV. 3982 (JSR).

33. This is the sense of the term used by Jacob Katz. For Katz, “traditionalists” are those whose “loyalty to tradition was the result of a conscious decision, or was at the very least a stance assumed in defiance of a possible alternative suggested by the life style of other Jews.” Katz, “Orthodoxy in Historical Perspective,” 4.

34. A cardinal tenet of ultra-Orthodox ideology in general, and Satmar thought in particular, was the imperative of resisting any modifications in the realm of “ShaLeM.” For a discussion, see Batnitzky, *How Judaism Became a Religion*, 185, and Michael Silber, “The Emergence of Ultra-Orthodoxy,” 68–72.

35. One close observer of Satmar life observed that “while in many respects anti-modern, Satmar culture does not restrict the use of modern technology’s products.” Rubin, *Satmar: An Island in the City*, 162.

36. For example, Kiryas Joel’s chief rabbi has recently renewed his long-standing campaign against home internet use, arguing that “it claimed many *korbanos* [sacrifices] and destroyed many Jewish homes.” Rabbi Teitelbaum’s speech is excerpted in “Satmar Rebbe Rav Aaron Teitelbaum Gives Passionate Detailed Speech About Dangers of Technology and Internet,” thepartialview.blogspot.com/2012/02/satmar-rebbe-rav-aaron-teitelbaum-gives.html. Meanwhile, the national Jewish newspaper the *Forward* has reported that “Twitter use is not uncommon among young Satmar Hasidim in Brooklyn’s Williamsburg neighborhood.” See “Orthodox Rally for a More Kosher Internet,” *Forward*, May 14, 2012, forward.com/articles/156102/orthodox-rally-for-a-more-kosher-internet/?p=all. The article was dedicated to a large rally of Haredim held at Citi Field in New York later that month (May 20, 2012) in which rabbis enjoined the audience to curb their use of the internet.

37. George Kranzler has discussed this engagement and its effects in *Hasidic Williamsburg: A Contemporary Hasidic Community*, esp. chaps. 8–9. See also forward.com/articles/164946/yeshivas-score-huge-pell-grant-windfall/?p=all.

38. On the juxtaposition between a thin *Religionsgemeinschaft* and a more robust *Volksgemeinschaft*, see Jehuda Reinharz, “Consensus and Conflict Between Zionists and Liberals in Germany Before World War I,” in *Texts and Responses: Studies Presented to Nahum N. Glatzer on the Occasion of His 70th Birthday by His Students* (Brill: Leiden, 1975), 229.

39. Casanova, *Public Religions*, 20, 25–26, 40.

40. *Ibid.*, 5.

41. Andrea Schatz, “‘Eleven Calendars’: Beyond Secular Time,” in this volume.

42. Among Weber’s followers who point to this decline, see Peter Berger, *Sacred Canopy* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1967); Thomas Luckmann, *The Invisible Religion*

(New York: Macmillan, 1968); and Bryan Wilson, *Religion in Modern Society* (London: Watts, 1966). For a brief synthesis, see John A. Coleman, “The Secular: A Sociological View,” *Way* 30, no. 1 (1990): 16–25. See also the comprehensive historical overview of Nikki Keddie in “Secularism and Its Discontents,” *Daedalus* (Summer 2003): 14–30. In particular, she refers to the period from 1860 to 1914 as “the heyday in Europe of expansive secularization.” Keddie, “Secularism and Its Discontents,” 18.

43. Conversations with Satmar leaders point to the internet as a chief source of concern in eroding the group’s closely guarded boundaries. Meanwhile, the increasing porousness of those boundaries has been highlighted by the case of the notable “defector,” Deborah Feldman, who authored a sensational memoir entitled *Unorthodox: The Scandalous Rejection of My Hasidic Roots* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2012).

CHAPTER 13

1. Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi, *Zakhor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1982), 8.

2. Carlo Ginzburg, “Distance and Perspective: Two Metaphors,” in Ginzburg, *Wooden Eyes: Nine Reflections on Distance* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001), 148. Also published as Carlo Ginzburg, “History and/or Memory: On the Principle of Accommodation,” *Thinking Impossibilities: The Intellectual Legacy of Amos Funkenstein*, ed. Robert S. Westman and David Biale (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2008), 193–206.

3. Ginzburg, “Distance and Perspective,” 155.

4. The theological origins of modern historical consciousness were discussed by many scholars, among them Funkenstein in his *Theology and the Scientific Imagination: From the Middle Ages to the Seventeenth Century* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1986). See also Karl Löwith, *Meaning in History: The Theological Implications of the Philosophy of History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1949); Thomas Albert Howard, *Religion and the Rise of Historicism: W. M. L. de Wette, Jacob Burckhardt and the Theological Origins of Nineteenth-Century Historical Consciousness* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000); Leonard S. Smith, *Religion and the Rise of History: Martin Luther and the Cultural Revolution in Germany 1760–1810* (Eugene, Ore.: Cascade Books, 2009); Michael Heyd, “Protestantism, Enthusiasm and Secularization in the Early Modern Period: Some Preliminary Reflections,” in *Religion, Ideology and Nationalism in Europe and America: Essays Presented in Honor of Yehoshua Arieli*, ed. Yehoshua Arieli (Jerusalem: Israel Historical Society, 1986), 15–27.

5. This observation was developed further by Kathleen Biddick in her book *The Typological Imaginary: Circumcision, Technology, History* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003). Biddick demonstrates the implications of supersessionary thinking that accompany the “typological thinking” and that the construction of the Christian new time (“this is now”) superseded the “that was then” of Israel. I read this study too late to

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