
“Commanded War”: Three Chapters in the “Military” History of Satmar Hasidism

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Religion, it has been noted, speaks the language of violence as often as of peace. This article explores the pronounced role of military language and a martial outlook in one particularly intriguing and unlikely branch of Judaism, the Satmar Hasidic movement. Widely known for its posture of theological quietism, Satmar Hasidism, under the leadership of founding rabbi Joel Teitelbaum (1887–1979), has frequently engaged in combative struggle against its foes, especially Zionism. This article highlights this martial impulse by examining three episodes in which the Teitelbaum family and Satmar Hasidim were engaged in conflict, exemplified by the publication of a series of books under the title “Commanded War.” Ranging over a century, these episodes reveal the way in which the pervasive language of war emerged out of a sense of the grave perils posed by modernity. They also illustrate how the martial language of Satmar turns over time from a focus on external enemies to a focus on internal rivals.

HASIDISM WAS a Jewish pietist movement that took rise in Eastern Europe in the late eighteenth century. It sought to restore a sense of the vibrancy of spiritual experience that had been neglected,

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according to its adepts, by the elitist culture of Torah study that was the pride of Eastern European (and more broadly, Ashkenazic) Jewry for centuries. As against a lifetime of Torah study, accessible only to a few, Hasidism developed a new theological system and ritual regimen that enfranchised hundreds of thousands of Jews. The new pietists were encouraged to seek out the ever-present God in all domains of their life, and to do so with enthusiasm, which was a foundational tenet of Hasidic belief and practice.

The guiding force behind the rise of Hasidism in its first stage of development was Yisra'el ben Eliezer (1700–1760), a poor faith healer and mystic from the Polish region of Podolia. Known as the Ba'al Shem Tov or BeShT (Master of the Good Name), the healer appealed to both learned kabbalists and simple Jews with his mystically based message of spiritual elevation. His simple pietistic charisma inspired a devoted cadre of disciples. It was these rabbinic followers who, from the late eighteenth century, spread the new ritual practices and conceptual innovations of the BeShT, a process hastened by the dismantling of the Kingdom of Poland in a series of three partitions (1772, 1793, and 1795). The disciples gained traction in Jewish communities in other parts of Poland, Galicia, Belorussia, Lithuania, and later Hungary (Assaf 2010). What aided them in spreading the new Hasidic message was the emergence of a new model of rabbinic leadership: the *tsadik* or *rebbe*, a charismatic leader believed to be possessed of great spiritual powers, including the ability to intercede with God on behalf of his adherents.

Hasidic *rebbes* established dynastic “courts” throughout East and East Central Europe in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, each of which contained its own distinctive teachings, ritual variations, music, sartorial norms, and lore. To the outside observer, Hasidic appearance and customs may appear uniform, but, in fact, there are scores and even hundreds of groups with their own variations—Bobov, Bratslav, Lubavitch, Sanz, Slonim, and Skvir, to mention only a very few—all rooted in the discrete locales in which the BeShT's followers and their descendants settled throughout the nineteenth century.¹

From a contemporary perspective, one of the latest and most significant Hasidic courts to be established was Satmar, named after the Romanian (and formerly Hungarian) city of Satu Mare, where the group's founder, Rabbi Joel Teitelbaum (1887–1979), left a profound imprint as chief rabbi in the 1930s. Although Teitelbaum attracted

¹For a brief survey of a range of American Hasidic movements, see Belcove-Shalin (1995: 9–13).

legions of devoted followers from that time and earlier periods when he lived in the city, the overwhelming majority of the Jewish community was deported and murdered at Auschwitz. It was largely in the United States after the Second World War that a distinctive brand of Hasidism known as Satmar can be said to have taken rise. In fact, it was on American soil that this brand developed into a “Satmar Kingdom,” as it has been called, an empire that includes what is assumed to be the largest group of Hasidic Jews in the world.

Teitelbaum embodied one of the great ironies of Hasidism. Having emerged as an upstart movement seeking to upend established norms of Jewish behavior in the name of spiritual revival, Hasidism became the guardian of traditional Jewish observance over the course of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. For his part, Rabbi Teitelbaum would gain renown as one of the leaders of the unique strain of *haredi* or Ultra-Orthodox Judaism that took rise in the northeast corner of the Austro-Hungarian Empire in the latter half of the nineteenth century.² To those outside of the *haredi* world, Teitelbaum was a radical whose extremism in both political and religious terms cast him beyond the mainstream. Meanwhile, to his followers, he was the great guardian of tradition, a leader who insisted on the most stringent and punctilious observance of Jewish ritual as a means of assuring boundary maintenance against the constantly encroaching forces of spiritual pollution.

Another seeming irony informed Rabbi Teitelbaum’s religious personality: the co-existence of his theologically rooted political passivity and his fiercely combative personality, marked by an unrelenting commitment to do battle against evil. On the face of it, the notion that Rabbi Teitelbaum had a martial side to him—or, for that matter, that Satmar Hasidism possessed a military history, as the title of this article proposes—would seem to strain the bounds of credulity. After all, there never was a Satmar army nor a sense of the importance of military service. On the contrary, Rabbi Teitelbaum, like many *haredi* rabbis in his time (and in Israel today), encouraged his followers to do whatever was necessary to avoid conscription in the armies in which they were called to serve (e.g., the Austro-Hungarian, Hungarian, Romanian, American, and Israeli).³ And similar to a number of other traditionalist

²The Hebrew term *haredi*, which connotes a sense of tremulous fear or awe (of God), will be used here instead of the term “Ultra Orthodox,” which is largely eschewed by *haredi* Jews themselves.

³On Rabbi Teitelbaum’s advice to followers to avoid military service in the Austro-Hungarian army, see Gelbman (1994: 306–308). Gelbman is the author of a comprehensive biography of Rabbi Teitelbaum, of which nine volumes have appeared to date.

rabbis, he urged his followers to remain in Europe during the Nazi rise to power, during which time they were to put their fate in God's hands rather than engage in armed resistance against those sworn to their destruction.⁴

This stance of passivity amounted to a distinctive—and as we shall see, selective—form of Jewish quietism in Teitelbaum (Ravitzky 1990: 14; Sacks 1992: 71). Unlike the more individualistic version of quietism associated with the seventeenth-century Spaniard Miguel de Molinos, Teitelbaum insisted that submission to God in the face of political or other external challenges was required of the *Jewish people* at large. This view was textually grounded in the “Three Oaths” mentioned in the Babylonian Talmud (Ketubot 111a), as follows:

One, that Israel not ascend the wall (of the Holy Land); one, that the Holy One, blessed be He, adjured Israel not to rebel against the nations of the world; and one, that the Holy One, blessed be He, adjured the idolaters not to oppress Israel overly much.

Notwithstanding the fact that these Oaths were embedded in the Talmud, the authoritative compendium of the Jewish Oral Law, most rabbinic commentators and modern scholars have regarded them as “aggadic and nonbinding”—that is, as not having the authority of enforceable principles of *Halakhah*, or Jewish law.⁵ And yet, as Aviezer Ravitzky has shown, a trail of rabbis from medieval to modern times has insisted on elevating the Oaths to a more binding status, as a kind of code of exilic conduct that demands political subservience (Ravitzky 1996: 212). This understanding figures prominently in the Hasidic movement, some of whose currents, as Gershom Scholem famously argued, “neutralized” the long-standing messianic impulse in Judaism that sought a physical return to the Holy Land (Scholem 1971: 176–202).

In this regard, Joel Teitelbaum was quintessentially Hasidic, for he transformed the Oaths into a key pillar of his legal and theological worldview. Drawing on the second Oath that enjoined Jews from

⁴See the account of one former Satmar Hasid who reported that the “Rebbe said: Stay in Europe.” “Ha-Rebbe amar: tish'aru be-Eropah” 2008. A similar impulse toward passivity characterized Joel Teitelbaum's fellow Hungarian traditionalist, the Munkaczer Rebbe (Hayim Elazar Shapira), who enjoined his followers not to flee the Russian army in the First World War. See Nadler (1994: 243). On the complicated question of traditionalist rabbis leaving Europe while their followers remained, see Farbstein (2007: 102–109).

⁵Classical rabbinical literature distinguishes between *aggadah*, nonlegal, homilectical material, and *halakhah*, which consists of legally binding material.

rebellious against the nations of the world, he demanded passive submission to Gentile hosts until the advent of the messianic age.⁶ Likewise, he was among the most adamant of twentieth-century Jews in maintaining that the first Oath—that “Israel should not breach the wall (of Erets Yisra’el)” —invalidated the underlying logic and purpose of Zionism.⁷ The refusal to accept political submission and the concomitant arrogation by human beings of the divine prerogative to trigger the return to *Erets Yisrae’el* were among Zionism’s gravest sins, as Teitelbaum argued vigorously in his controversial anti-Zionist treatises *Va-Yo’el Mosheh* (1959) and *‘Al ha-ge’ulah ve-‘al ha-temurah* (1967) (Teitelbaum 1959, 1967; cf. Nadler 2004).

And yet, the call to passivity hardly meant the absence either of martial imagery or of a deeply ingrained combativeness in Satmar Hasidism. On the contrary, Rabbi Teitelbaum regarded himself as having embarked on a dangerous, but necessary, battle against the forces of modernity. This battle was cast in stark Manichean terms: good vs. evil; light vs. darkness; and, perhaps most recurrently, pure vs. impure. Obsessed from childhood with personal cleanliness, Teitelbaum transposed his own hygienic imperative onto the life battle in which he was engaged (cf. Gelbman, 1994: 145). This required daily vigilance against the *tum’ah*—impurity—that threatened the Satmar way of life, which was often described in atavistic terms as *derekh Yisra’el sava*, or “the path of the Elder Israel.”

The aim of this article is to shed new light on the tradition of militarism in *haredi* Judaism, mindful of its intersection with a co-existing current of quietism. The particular prism through which this tradition is explored is the Teitelbaum family of Hungary, a distinguished rabbinic family that spawned generations of followers from the early nineteenth century to the present. The article explores three historical episodes, all of which involved the Teitelbaum family in an important way and, at the same time, featured the appearance of a book under the title “Commanded War.” To be sure, the title has ample precursors in the annals of Jewish literature. And yet, rather than treat the three

⁶This strong reading of the Oath provided a sharp reformulation of a long-standing principle guiding Jewish communal life in the Diaspora, rooted in third-century Sassanid Babylonia: namely, that Jews must acknowledge and respect the fact that the “law of the Kingdom is the law” (in the well-known Aramaic phrase *dina di-malkhuta dina*).

⁷The third Oath asserts that God made a vow with the nations of the world that they would not oppress the Jewish people too much, the violation of which could be seen as grounds for breaking the second Oath. For a discussion of Rabbi Teitelbaum’s understanding of the Three Oaths, see Ravitzky (1996: 63ff, 232). For further discussions, see the essays by Lamm (1971: 38–53), Nadler (2004: 1982: 135–152), and Kaplan (2004: 165–178).

episodes (and books) as isolated dots that only coincidentally connect to one another, this article seeks to demonstrate that when grouped together, they reveal the cumulative weight of a *haredi* militarism that typified, spelt success for, and, most recently, has been turned against the Teitelbaum rabbinic legacy. At the same time, by tracing these three episodes, we gain a *longue durée* perspective on the path of the family's most famous scion, Joel Teitelbaum, who survived the devastation of his community in Europe during the Nazi era and built up an empire centered in New York City and its environs. In charting this path, we see the centrality of a martial outlook—strategy, rhetoric, and temperament—in the rise of a “Satmar kingdom.”

The deployment of a martial sensibility reminds us of a rather simple and unsettling truth: “Violence has always been endemic to religion.” So Mark Juergensmeyer opens a collection of essays devoted to *Violence and the Sacred in the Modern World*. The volume title echoes René Girard's highly influential *La violence et le sacré* (Girard 1972). For Girard, symbols, myths, and rhetoric of violence in religion can serve to air, control, and defuse the real “feelings of violence and hostility that lie behind attempts to carry out violent activities” (Juergensmeyer 1991: 1, 3). But the case of Satmar Hasidism leads us to think less of this aspect of controlling violence than of another of Girard's key claims: his view of the “mimetic desire” that animates competition, rivalry, and violence, often times among those who seem to be closest in outlook to one another. In the case of the Satmar Hasidim, our case studies suggest that the desire to maintain strictly regulated boundaries of purity, or in Girard's language, to “acquire” the mantle of purity, was couched in war-like language—and that over the course of time, this language almost inescapably began to be used by one segment of the group's fervent believers against another camp of internal rivals. It is in this sense that one can speak of the “military history” of Satmar Hasidism.

Of course, Satmar Hasidim are not alone among Jews in this regard. In fact, there is a rather long history to rabbinic militarism. This was largely a theoretical militarism, without soldiers or brigades, because rabbinic Judaism took rise in the post-Temple conditions of statelessness—that is, after the failed revolt against the Romans that led to the destruction of the Second Temple in Jerusalem in 70 CE and after another failed revolt against the Romans by Bar Kochba and his Jewish followers (132–135 CE). The rabbis' avowed aversion to military activism following the two military debacles prompted a decided stance of subservience toward sovereign powers, quite in contrast to Jews in biblical times for

whom war was a regular and real component of their lived experience and God an active presence in their battles.

However, the absence of actual armies did not prevent the sages of the Mishnah and Talmud from engaging in discussions of war theory focused on the distinction between a commanded war (known in Hebrew as a *milhemet mitsvah* or *milhemet hovah*) and a discretionary war (*milhemet reshut*) (Mishnah Sotah 8; BT Sanhedrin 20A, 29B). Their medieval successors, at an even further remove from the days of active Jewish armies, also debated the distinction. But they usually had in mind wars from the ancient past. The legal scholar Aryeh Edrei observes that for the later rabbis, “(t)he Biblical war is now treated allegorically, relating not to military battle, but to the war of Torah (*milhamtah shel Torah*)” (Edrei 2006: 194, Ravitzky 2006: 3).⁸

Whether allegorical or not, the language of war has been a constant in Jewish history, from antiquity to the modern age.⁹ The Bible is replete with martial imagery, including the famous reference to God in the Song of the Sea (Exod. 15:3) as “*ish milhamah*,” a “man of war.” In our own time, the Brooklyn-based Chabad movement (of Lubavitcher Hasidim) is renowned for its *Tzivos ha-Shem*, its “armies of God” whose soldiers are engaged in a battle “to revive Jewish identity in children and provide them with a Jewish education through informal and entertaining programs” (cf. <http://www.tzivos-hashem.org> (n.d.); cf.

⁸Noteworthy in this regard is the great medieval jurist and philosopher, Maimonides (1135–1204), who discussed the two categories of war in his authoritative work of codification, the *Mishneh Torah*. A commanded war, he declared, is the one in which a king engages in order “to save (the people of) Israel from an enemy that has attacked them.” A discretionary war, by contrast, is the one in which a king seeks to “expand the borders of Israel, or to enhance his greatness and prestige” (*Mishneh Torah*, Laws of Kings 5: 1–2). It is striking that a figure such as Maimonides would devote any attention to this hypothetical topic, given the potential to anger or cause misunderstanding among Gentile hosts. At one level, it would seem as if his discussion had little to do with the conditions of his time and more with his desire to establish norms, safeguards, and limits for the messianic future in which political sovereignty would be restored to the people of Israel. At the same time, Maimonides’ notion of war was forged in a specific context. Noah Feldman has analyzed the ways in which Maimonides’ war theory bore clear traces of contemporaneous debates in the surrounding Muslim world. Even with the evident power differential between Jews and Muslims, Maimonides posed similar questions about war (e.g., about the distinction between idolaters and tolerated minorities) to those framed by Islamic philosophers. See Feldman (2006: 99–100).

⁹It is important to note, as Robert Eisen has argued in a recent book, that the three main strands of premodern Jewish intellectual culture—rabbinics, philosophy, and mysticism—all contain within them abundant sources that speak the language both of peace and violence. See Eisen (2011). Meanwhile, for a pair of diverse views, see Elliott Horowitz’s cultural history of the Jewish embrace of violence in Horowitz (2006) and Reuven Firestone (2012), who argues for a two millennia hiatus in Judaism from the idea of a holy war—from antiquity until the advent of modern Zionism. In an earlier article, Firestone provided a narrower focus, more relevant to our concerns (Firestone 2006: 954–982).

Fishkoff 2003; cf. Heilman and Friedman 2011). And over the centuries, numerous rabbis wrote books under the rubric of “commanded war” or “obligatory war.” In most instances, the wars they imagined were to be conducted not against the Gentile world, but against other Jews—or, as in the early fifteenth-century book *Milhemet mitsvah* (1438) of R. Shlomo ben Shimon Duran, against a former Jew turned hostile witness against his erstwhile co-religionists.

This kind of language, it must be emphasized, is not unique to Judaism. The histories of Islam and Christianity are filled with calls for holy war to be undertaken by armies of their faithful. The Crusades commenced as a movement to liberate the Holy Land from the hands of the Muslim “infidels” who controlled it in the late eleventh century. Far from disappearing from view, the Crusades became, according to one insightful Muslim observer, an organizing principle of Western attitudes to Islam into the modern age.¹⁰ It is curious to note the persistence of this martial image, and in a variety of settings, from the long-standing American organization, Campus Crusade for Christ, found on university campuses to the language invoked by former President George W. Bush in referring to the “war on terror.”¹¹

By the same token, Islamic *jihadi* movements, past and present, have often extended the meaning of the word *jihad* beyond the realm of personal struggle to connote a wider and more aggressive battle for the faith. In doing so, they have agitated not only to remove the presence of non-Muslims from *dar al-Islam* (the “realm of Islamic faithful”), but to carry the battle into the heart of the non-Muslim lands (known as “the realm of war” or *dar al-harb*).¹²

As in the case of Judaism, so too in the case of Christianity and Islam, the martial impulse has, frequently enough, been directed against wayward members of one’s own faith tradition. We recall that the *Hashashshin*, from which the word “assassin” derives, waged violent

¹⁰In the words of Muhammad Asad, “(W)hat Occidentals think and feel about Islam today is rooted in impressions that were born during the Crusades.” Asad was born Leopold Weiss, a Jew from Lemberg, before converting to Islam and spending the bulk of his adult life in the Muslim world, including as Pakistan’s first minister plenipotentiary to the United Nations. See his autobiography, *Asad* (1954: 5).

¹¹The Campus Crusade for Christ is an organization founded in 1951 that seeks to advance its mission “by winning people to faith in Jesus Christ, building them in their faith and sending them to win and build others.” See “Campus Crusade for Christ International at a Glance” (n.d.). Regarding President Bush, he noted in a press conference on September 16, 2001, that: “this is a new kind of—a new kind of evil. And we understand. And the American people are beginning to understand. This crusade, this war on terrorism is going to take a while.” See <http://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2001/09/20010916-2.html> (2001).

¹²See, for example, Cook (2005: 20). Cook notes that among the various uses to which the term was applied were “greater” and “lesser” jihads—that is, nonviolent or spiritual and violent or military.

campaigns against fellow Muslims in the Middle Ages. Meanwhile, the Spanish Inquisition was one of the most notorious of internally directed tools of war, aimed, as it was, against Christian heretics (i.e., *conversos*), not Jews. And of course, the Reformation began as an intramural Christian protest before fueling the passion for battle among warring Christian nations in the Thirty Years War.

More recent times proffer many examples of this internally directed martial spirit, both in word and deed. To take but one illustrative case, the British-Canadian Christian Fundamentalist T. T. Shields issued a “declaration of war” in 1926. His main target was “modernism,” that travesty of intellectual and cultural novelties that prompted the denial of “the divine inspiration and authority of the Scriptures.” In particular, it was *Christian* modernism that so enraged Shields, especially its repudiation of “the essential Deity of Christ . . . reducing Him to the level of a man” (Priest 2005: 69–101; Shields n.d.).

It was in this very period, albeit in a very different context, that Rabbi Joel Teitelbaum was waging his own war against “modernism.” Born in 1887 in the Hungarian Unterland in the northeast quadrant of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, Teitelbaum was raised in a highly charged religious environment that produced a new kind of traditionalist, antimodernist, *haredi* or ultra-Orthodox, Judaism. His family history, extending back to the early nineteenth-century Hasidic leader, R. Moshe Teitelbaum (1759–1841), known as the Yismach Moshe, was marked by frequent and often bitter combat with those believed to be deviants from the traditional path of Torah-true Judaism. The Teitelbaums were not alone as warriors; they inhabited a Jewish milieu in Hungary rife with fierce intra-Jewish disputation and recrimination. But they were first among equals in manifesting a distinctly militaristic version of Hasidism that was directed against various circles of enmity in their midst—Gentiles, but even more so, fellow Jews of different persuasions: reformers, traditionalists of competing camps, and Zionists. Indeed, while their “wars” were not waged by armed soldiers, as in biblical times, neither were they mere theoretical abstractions, as they had been for the late antique and medieval rabbis. Harsh rhetoric castigating one’s enemies in books, broadsides, and synagogues was common and at times spilled over into physical violence. Recalling the multiple connotations of the term *jihad*, we might contrast this approach to a more spiritualist Hasidism in which the battle against evil was waged *internally*, within an individual.¹³

¹³A good reflection of this latter approach is offered by R. Sholom Noah Berezofsky, the Slonimer Rebbe. In his commentary on the Torah portion “Ki Tetsch.” Berezofsky argues that the constant struggle in which the Jew must engage is that directed against the “evil inclination” within him. In

Upon assuming rabbinical posts in various Hungarian towns and cities in the 1910s and 1920s, Joel Teitelbaum made amply clear from the outset that he intended to follow in the footsteps of his forebears in doing battle against evil forces, which, though outside of his circle of followers, were within the Jewish fold. His chief targets were Jews of two kinds: first, “modernizers,” who were attempting to introduce innovations into Judaism through a mix of religious reform, secular education, and assimilation to Gentile culture; and second, Zionists, who believed in the power of human agency to effect a return to the ancestral homeland and thus violated in flagrant fashion the “Three Oaths.”

In both cases, Teitelbaum was animated by his life-long quest for purity, which Allan Nadler diagnoses as obsessive-compulsive (Nadler 2011). As a general matter, religious fundamentalists, of whom Rabbi Teitelbaum could be considered one (given his persistent instinct to return to the fundamentals of Judaism), place great emphasis on purity—and moreover, tend to divide the world into realms of purity and impurity (Antoun 2001: 73). Joel Teitelbaum’s concern for purity began early in life and was reflected in his fastidious attention to personal hygiene—for example, his repeated washing and bathroom visits as an essential prerequisite to prayer or his reported practice of trading food for toilet paper in Bergen-Belsen (Gelbman 2006: 82). The boundary between the personal and the theological became blurred for him: purity meant alignment with holiness; impurity meant passing over to the *sitra ahra* (the evil and impure “other side” discussed in the Jewish mystical tradition). This link between the hygienic and the theological yielded its own curious biopolitics. For indeed, maintaining purity was a key impetus behind Rabbi Teitelbaum’s desire to create, after he came to America, a self-standing Satmar community, removed from the allures and seductions of a polluted urban environment such as New York City. The result of this long-standing aspiration was the formal incorporation in March 1977 of Kiryas Joel, New York, today a village of over twenty thousand residents. The impulse to create the village was a reflection and fulfillment of the purity obsession that not only anchored Rabbi Teitelbaum’s worldview but is characteristic of religiously inspired “enclave cultures,” as Mary Douglas (n.d.) has described them.

The struggle to preserve purity requires constant vigilance and readiness for battle. Rabbi Teitelbaum inherited this martial impulse from his rabbinic ancestors, added his own stringent piety, and bequeathed it to his heirs. At one level, this process of transmission has been successful in

fact, Berezhofsky quotes a teaching of his predecessor (and father-in-law) that “a day in which a Jew has done nothing to upset the evil inclination is not considered a day in his life” (n.d.: 127).

perpetuating a strong sense of group cohesion. At another level, it has had a variety of deleterious effects. It must be remembered, as Max Weber observed, that the process of transmitting dynastic and especially charismatic authority within a family often proves to be exceptionally difficult (Weber 1968: 48–65). Such has been the case with the posthumous legacy of Joel Teitelbaum, who died in 1979. His nephew and successor, R. Moshe Teitelbaum, who died in 2006, never succeeded in commanding the full respect of or control over the Satmar community. Meanwhile, Moshe's sons, Aaron and Zalman Leib Teitelbaum, internalized the martial impulse of their great uncle but have largely directed it against one another. Their battle over leadership is conducted in a wide range of forums—in parallel and competing synagogues, yeshivahs, cemeteries, newspapers, and rabbinical opinions, as well as in regular litigation in New York state courts. The animating combativeness is a Teitelbaum family trademark, employed, in this instance, to gain control over the growing Satmar network of institutions and property.

The task of this article is to situate that combative tendency in an extended contextual web. It does so by tracing, in serial fashion, three instances of “commanded war” associated with the Teitelbaum family over the course of a century, noting both the galvanizing and corrosive effects of the martial impulse that has been so inextricably linked with the largest Hasidic group in the world.

THE FIRST “COMMANDED WAR”: THE BATTLE AGAINST THE “STATUS QUO”

Even more than the Hungarian city of Szatmár from which the Satmar Hasidim take their name, the town of Sziget, sixty-five miles east, was an early proving ground for the martial impulse in Hasidism. It was there that the son of the Yismach Moshe and the great-grandfather of Joel Teitelbaum, Eliezer Nissan Teitelbaum (1785–1854), settled in 1834 to serve as rabbi of the Jewish community. His appointment was greeted with dismay by a substantial number of the town's five hundred or so Jews—though not principally by reform-minded “modernizers” against whom his father regularly inveighed. Rather, opposition came from fellow Hasidim, members of the Kosov sect who favored a different candidate for the rabbinic post (Netzer and Szalai 2003: 19–20).¹⁴ Constant controversy dogged Eliezer Nissan, who opted

¹⁴See also the entry by Michael Silber on [Sziget Marmatjei \(n.d.\)](#) in the *YIVO Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe*.

to leave the position after six years for the Galician city of Drohobycz. Eighteen years later, his son, Yekutiel Yehudah (1808–83), known as the Yetev (or Yitav) Lev, reclaimed the position of rabbi of Sziget for the Teitelbaum family. Whereas his father chose to eschew the incessant battle in the fractious world of Sziget Jewry, the Yetev Lev was a ready combatant, eager to defend the bounds of piety against all transgressors.

As his grandson would in a later period and elsewhere, the Yetev Lev sought to introduce a more robust ritual regimen (e.g., *kashrut*, dress norms, etc.) soon after taking office in Sziget. It would be an understatement to say that he was received with less than universal acclaim. His support for a new ritual slaughterer who met his exacting standards led local butchers, according to a family legend, to throw a rock through the window of his home with the intent of doing him serious bodily harm (Teitelbaum 1982: 144). In fact, the threats he faced in town were many, including from his putative allies, fellow Orthodox and even Hasidic Jews who feared and disliked the power and particular forms of stringency of the Teitelbaum family. Indeed, infighting between Hasidic groups, between Hasidim and non-Hasidic traditionalists, and between traditionalist Orthodox and more freethinking Jews associated with the “Status Quo” community, was endemic in the Hungarian Unterland in the last half of the nineteenth century (Silber 1994: 124ff; Lupovitch 2003: 123ff).

This culture of contention and combat gained new force in the 1860s. In December 1867, the Jews of Austria and Hungary were, at long last, formally emancipated. A half year earlier, a group of Orthodox Jews organized an association of their own called the Shomrei Ha-Dat (Guardians of Religion) Society. After approving the bylaws of this new organization in March 1868, the liberal-minded Hungarian Minister of Education and Religion Joseph Eötvös called for the creation of a new national body to represent the entire Jewish community, especially in its relations with the state. He convened a congress in December 1868 with precisely this aim. As Jacob Katz has shown in great detail in *A House Divided*, rather than foster unity, the congress exposed deep and irreconcilable rifts between the competing sectors of Hungarian Jewry (Katz 1998). Disagreement arose at virtually every turn, whether over electing a congress president or determining if the sixteenth-century code of Jewish law, the *Shulhan 'Arukh*, should be authoritative in communal affairs.

On the face of it, the rift was between liberal and Orthodox camps. The former succeeded in passing a series of regulations at the congress intended to govern Jewish communities throughout Hungary. The latter, whose members had sought to assert their independence even before the congress through Shomrei Ha-Dat, vehemently opposed the

regulations. In a direct rebuttal of Eötvös, they appealed to the Hungarian parliament for the right to be exempted and to create their own national organization, which was granted in 1870. But the newly approved Orthodox organization did not have long to celebrate. It too found itself plagued by bitter division between more moderate and conservative factions—what we might call in contemporary terms “modern” and “traditionalist” Orthodoxy.

A clear sign of the worldview of the traditionalists can be gleaned from an assembly held earlier, in 1865, in the northeast Hungarian town of Michalowce (Michalowitz). Animated by the spirit of two fierce defenders of the faith who preceded them, the Yismach Moshe and the famous German-born Hatam Sofer of Pressburg (Moses Schreiber, 1762–1839), the delegates issued a nine-point resolution that began with a ban on sermons in any language other than Yiddish and concluded with a sweeping prohibition on change to “any Jewish custom or any traditional synagogue practice” (Guttmann 1977: 264–265; Katz 1998: 77–85; Silber 1999: 39, 50–59). While some notable and more modern Orthodox rabbis in Hungary did not sign the Michalowce declaration, the signatories did include the Yismach Moshe’s grandson, Rabbi Yekutiel Yehudah Teitelbaum, the Yetev Lev of Sziget.

For a good number of the signatories of the Michalowce declaration, including the Yetev Lev, the newly created Orthodox organization of 1870 did not go far enough in separating itself from the liberal Jewish mainstream. As a result, Sziget, under the leadership of the Yetev Lev, did not join the organization, insisting that traditionalists should not be taking orders from a centralized organization run by dubious authorities (Katz 1998: 205). This decision became the source of considerable controversy in Sziget, pushing to the fore a set of abiding tensions: first, those between the Orthodox leadership and the newly created, moderate faction of Jews assembled under the rubric “Status Quo”; and second, those between Hasidic and non-Hasidic traditionalists in town, as well as among different Hasidim themselves. Indeed, the underlying belief of the arch-traditionalists was that the modern world was full of unrestrained hostility, danger, and pollution that mandated ongoing battle.

It is in this world of enmity that a call to arms was sounded in Sziget, which brings us to the first and most well-known instance of “commanded war” to be discussed. In 1888, a volume entitled *Milhemet mitsvah* (Commanded War) was published that brought to a head the stormy controversy that had roiled the community for years, including in the last years of the life of the Yetev Lev. As noted, the Yetev Lev refused to accept the authority of the central Orthodox organization in Hungary. After his death in 1883, the question was reopened, with the

Yetev Lev's supporters eventually losing out to Rabbi Kalman Kahana and his followers who agreed to accept the authority of the central organization. Clearly, the fractious spirit that had riven the Hungarian Jewish Congress in 1868–69 was alive and well in Sziget. In fact, in 1887, a group of Hasidic (e.g., Kosov) and non-Hasidic Jews, all extremely pious, strained against—and finally broke from—the grip of the mainstream Orthodox establishment in town (consisting of both Kahana and Teitelbaum factions). The nascent “Status Quo” group, which sought to strike a balance between the *haredi* presence in Sziget and the reform-minded Neolog faction, joined in with this breakaway faction. These strange bedfellows—the break-away *haredim* and the Status Quo—came to be known as the *Sephardim* (Spanish Jews), largely owing to the fact that the Hasidim among them used the *minhag Sefarad* prayer rite, although they were not of Sephardic provenance.¹⁵

In framing the battle against these two allies, the editor of *Milhemet mitzvah* announced on the title-page that “the Orthodox congregation was fighting against those who rise up to destroy and abrogate all the regulations that sages and righteous men over the generations have set in place” (*Milhemet mitzvah*: Title Page) (Figure 1). The volume in question actually consisted of two main parts:

- (1) A forty-five-page section entitled “*Miktav galui*” (Open Letter) containing letters from rabbis throughout the Unterland opposing the efforts of the Status Quo to gain any footing. Among the letters was one from the Yetev Lev, while he was still alive, to which we shall return.
- (2) A one hundred-page section entitled “*Milhemet mitzvah*” (Commanded War) that included various subsections in which rabbinic figures from the Unterland expressed their opposition to the “Sephardic” breakaway community—and to the rabbinic supporters of that community who published their own approbations in 1887 under the title *Ohev mishpat* (Lover of Law). In response to the appearance of *Milhemet mitzvah* in 1888, the other group of rabbis, many of whom came from outside of Hungary (such as the renowned NeTsiV of Lithuania), published their own booklet called *Ohev shalom* (Lover of Peace).

¹⁵This kind of curious alliance was not unique to Sziget. See Lupovitch (2003: 127).



FIGURE 1. MILHEMET MITSVAH (COMMANDED WAR) SIGHET, 1888.

It is instructive to note the difference in pamphlet titles of the two groups of rabbis. The martial language of the Hungarian rabbis—and it is important to note that both Hasidic and non-Hasidic Hungarian rabbis contributed—stands in contrast to the more irenic rendering of the opposing rabbis from Galicia and Lithuania. This may not be accidental. Indeed, it was a battle that the Hungarians were prepared to wage against the *mithadshim*, the modernizers who sought to introduce

change into the ancient ways of Israel.¹⁶ And their home in the Hungarian Unterland was a distinctive incubator for a strain of Jewish “traditionalism” that regarded itself as involved in a fight to the death.¹⁷

The late Israeli historian Jacob Katz and his disciple Michael Silber have observed the ways in which Hungarian rabbis imagined themselves as unmediated continuators of a pure, authentic, traditional Judaism—all the while that they introduced a new regime of behavior and stringency and made use of communication and organizational strategies that bore the mark of their own time. This “traditionalism” was avowedly antimodern in intent, but at the same time, a clear byproduct of a modern and secular age. Keenly mindful of the threatening nature of the modern age, though not always of their debt to it, traditionalists adopted a pugnacious stance to defend the pure domain of faith from dangerous interlopers.¹⁸

It is that very impulse that prompted the Yetev Lev to join fellow traditionalists in wielding his sword. When asked if a Jew was permitted to avail himself of services provided by the Status Quo community, he thundered that “it is forbidden to enjoy the product of the ritual slaughter of the Status Quo, for it is an abomination.” In fact, those called Status Quo Jews today were yesterday’s Neologs, that is, reform-minded modernizers whose “cunning was intended to trip up the legs of the remnants of the children of Israel who still fear God and are whole in their faith” (*Milhemet mitzvah*: 3).

Dozens of similar admonitions by fellow Hasidic and non-Hasidic rabbis appeared in *Milhemet mitzvah*, taking to task the Status Quo and “Sephardic” communities for their transgressions. One of the developments to which the admonishers strenuously objected—and which they sought to prevent—was the decision of those groups to separate themselves from the main Orthodox organization in Sziget. Ironically, that latter organization was itself borne of the decision by Hungarian

¹⁶The Maharam Shik, a leading Hungarian rabbi and advocate of a separatist Orthodox community in Hungary, inveighed against the modernizers in his opening letter from 1868 in the “*Miktav galui*” section of *Milhemet mitzvah*, 1.

¹⁷At the same time, it is important to note that other parts of East and East Central Europe featured their own pitched intra-Jewish battles, as Raphael Mahler famously chronicled (Mahler 1984). The tensions rose to the level of murder, of Rabbi Abraham Kohn, in Lemberg, Galicia, in 1848. See Stanislawski (2007).

¹⁸In analyzing this brand of “traditionalists,” Jacob Katz asserts that “(t)he claim of the Orthodox to be no more than the guardians of the pure Judaism of old is a fiction.” See Katz (1986: 4). Meanwhile, one of the best analyses of this kind of “traditionalism” remains Michael Silber’s article, “The Emergence of Ultra-Orthodoxy: The Invention of Tradition” (Silber 1999: 23–84). For an important comparative discussion of traditionalist Orthodox attitudes toward non-observant Jews in Europe, see Ferziger (2005). And for a seminal discussion of latter-day traditionalism, see Soloveitchik (1994: 64–130).

traditionalists to separate themselves in 1870 from the more liberal national organization created out of the Jewish Congress. Indeed, this episode suggests that it is difficult to put the genie of separatism back in the bottle. Once unleashed, its dynamics trigger further defections, at which point yesterday's rebels become today's establishment. The Yetev Lev, who refused to accept the authority of the national Jewish organization in Hungary, also refused to recognize the legitimacy of Status Quo ritual slaughterers in his home-town of Sziget. He did so in the name of authenticity and unity, values that obviously dwell in the eyes of the beholder—and for which he and his descendents believed it necessary to engage in battle.

THE SECOND “COMMANDED WAR”: IN DEFENSE OF JOEL TEITELBAUM’S ELECTION AS RABBI OF SATU MARE

Although the second, and somewhat lesser known, episode of a “commanded war” took place forty years after the first, it makes little sense to regard the two in isolation from one another. To be sure, Sziget was the site of the first, and Szatmár the second, but both belonged to the same milieu of intense hostility among competing Jewish factions in the Hungarian Unterland. In both settings, the central rift was occasioned by traditionalists’ fears of modernizers who were transgressing the hallowed space of halakhic observance (even though the actual alliances forged brought traditionalists and modernizers together at times). And both instances featured members of the Teitelbaum family as *dramatis personae*. In the first case, the Yetev Lev was one of the prominent signatories to the first *Milhemet mitsvah*. More importantly, his strident opposition to forces of innovation while serving as rabbi of Sziget yielded not communal unity, but new, sharp lines of sectarian division.

The second case, as we shall now see, revolved around another Teitelbaum, the Yetev Lev’s grandson, Joel Teitelbaum. The younger Teitelbaum, as we noted above, was born in Sziget in 1887—that is, in the very time and place that gave rise to the first “commanded war.” Young Joel was a special boy, possessed of great gifts for Torah study and a proclivity for constant self-purification to ready himself for prayer. In recognition of his son’s unworldly bearing, the Kedushas Yom Tov was once said to have declared: “My son Yoelish was never a child” (Gelbman 2006: I, 59ff). Clearly conditioned for a life of intense piety and learning, young Joel was also equipped for battle, in the way of his forebears. Like them, he was uncompromising in his resistance to “modern” innovations in ritual, dress, language, or education.

What was not initially clear was *where* he would engage in combat. It was not his fate to inherit the family mantle in Sziget. In fact, his father imparted these words to Joel on his deathbed:

Your elder brother will take my place; he will become the rabbi of Sziget. I don't want two kings serving one crown, and you would make two rabbis in Sziget. I don't have a rabbinic position to bestow upon you, and so I will bequeath to you the spiritual powers that I received from the holy one, our teacher and master, the Yetev Lev, who received them from our distinguished forebear, the Yismach Moshe. (Gelbman 2006: I: 386–387)

Joel heeded the Kedushas Yom Tov's instructions to leave town. It was customary for the eldest son to inherit the mantle of leadership from his father and for the remaining sons to leave town to make room for their brother, but that does not mean that there were never instances of "two kings serving one crown." Succession battles were not uncommon in the Hasidic world, including in the Chabad court in the early nineteenth century (Assaf 2011: 37ff). In more recent times, New York has been the site of a number such struggles involving Bobover, Vishnitz, and Satmar Hasidim ("A Battle for Succession Takes No Holiday" 2005).

But perhaps the most contentious contemporary instances of "two kings serving one crown"—as Figure 2 suggests—involves Joel Teitelbaum's grand-nephews, Aaron and Zalman. They have bitterly contested one another since 1999 for leadership of the Satmar "kingdom." This reminds us that America has been the venue for the Satmar movement's greatest triumphs but also its most self-destructive rifts. But that is jumping ahead to the case of our third and final "commanded war."

In 1904, Joel Teitelbaum began his journey as a rabbi, making his way initially to Szatmár. Soon after arriving there, the young Teitelbaum, still in his late teens, began to demonstrate a mix of the pious charisma for which he would become known and his family's characteristic zeal. When he learned of a women's ritual bath that was located near a men's bath-house, he organized a group of supporters to raze the offending structure in the middle of the night (Fuchs 1980: 70). From this early stage in his career, Teitelbaum established a pattern that he would follow whenever he moved to a new locale: He would immediately seek to introduce a new regime of ritual stringency, focusing in particular on matters such as *kashrut* (dietary regulations), women's modesty norms, and educational priorities (e.g., religious study to the near total exclusion of secular subjects). Similar to his father and grandfather, he often focused his attention on the Status Quo community, whose standards of observance he unrelentingly condemned. Over the course of time, he expanded

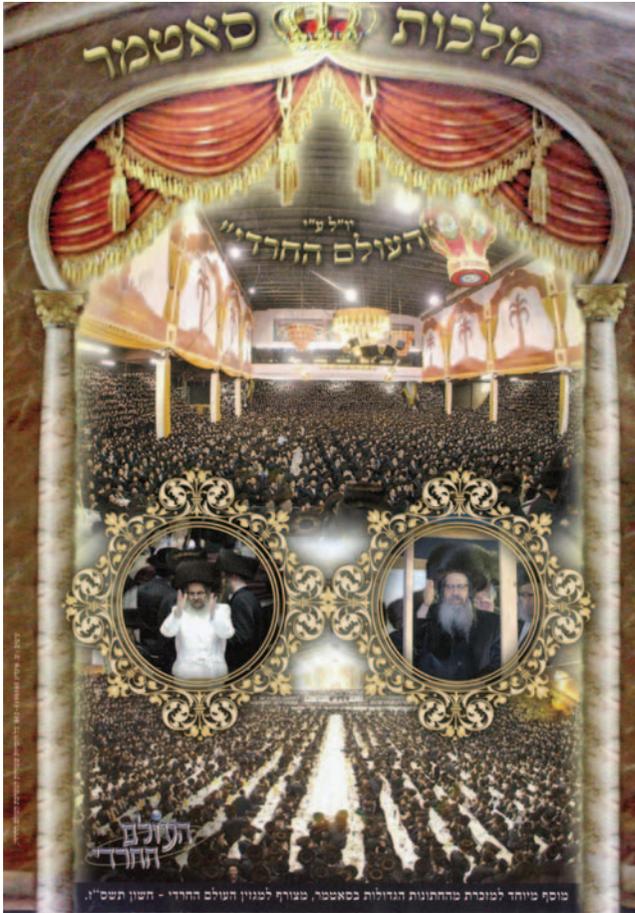


FIGURE 2. A DIVIDED “KINGDOM OF SATMAR”: RABBI AARON AND RABBI ZALMAN LEIB TEITELBAUM.

his range of targets to include members of the Neolog community (the Hungarian equivalent of Reform), as well as other Orthodox Jews, especially of the Agudat Yisrael movement. His greatest opprobrium, though, was reserved for the Zionists, whose violation of the Three Oaths he deemed unforgiveable. In this regard, Teitelbaum’s combativeness flowed in multiple directions and was rooted in matters of observance and theological principle alike.

Although it was in Sztatmár that he would solidify his reputation as a leading soldier in the battle for the soul of Judaism, it was not there

that Teitelbaum first made his name as a rabbi. When he moved to town, Szatmár already had a chief rabbi, Juda Grünwald. A number of years later, in 1910, the twenty-three-year old Teitelbaum was appointed to the post of rabbi and presiding judge of the rabbinical court of the small Hungarian Jewish community of Ilosva (known in Satmar and Yiddish sources as Orshava), some sixty miles away from Szatmár. There Teitelbaum went about establishing his distinctive ritual regime and attracting a cadre of devoted disciples. It is important to note at this point that he was serving as a “*rav*,” the appointed rabbi of a particular locale whose constituents were the entire membership of the Jewish community. Later, he would also come to serve as a *tsadik* or “*rebbe*,” a charismatic spiritual leader whose every word was deemed sacred by his band of Hasidic followers. Throughout his rabbinic career, Teitelbaum had to balance these two responsibilities.

Meanwhile, after the outbreak of the First World War in 1914, he fled Ilosva and made his way to Szatmár, where he would remain for eight years. There he encountered different circles of Hasidim—Sanz, Belz, Spinka, and Vishnitz—many of whom shared his vehement opposition to Zionism, as did a number of prominent neighboring rabbis including Yosef Zvi Dushinsky of Chust, later rabbi of the *’Edah haredit* (Haredi Community) in Jerusalem, and Hayim Elazar Shapira, the Munkaczzer Rebbe.

Once again, it was not during this eight-year period in Szatmár that Teitelbaum became the rabbi of the city. In March 1920, the incumbent, Juda Grünwald, died, prompting Teitelbaum’s supporters to advance his name as a prospect. At that time, his candidacy elicited significant opposition, and not just from the obvious Status Quo and Zionist factions. A significant number of non-Hasidic Orthodox Jews—known locally as Ashkenazim—together with various circles of Hasidim, opposed Teitelbaum as well. In Juda Grünwald’s stead, a rabbi from a neighboring village, Eliezer David Grünwald (no relation to Juda), was appointed rabbi of Szatmár.

In fact, Szatmár was not destined to remain in Szatmár for long. In August 1920, as part of the far-reaching realignment of the map of Europe following the First World, a huge portion of Hungary was transferred to other countries according to the terms of the Treaty of Trianon. As part of the Treaty, chunks of northern Transylvania were ceded to Romania. Szatmár became Satu Mare. Ilosva became Irșava. And it was to that small community that Teitelbaum returned in 1922, joined by a group of followers from Satu Mare. He served there for an additional four years before being appointed rabbi of the Jewish community in the larger city of Carei (known previously by its Hungarian

name Nagykároly or, in Yiddish, as Krule). Teitelbaum swept into Carei with the same mission of tightening up standards of ritual observance, as well as of confronting the city's Status Quo Jews who, to his ire, deigned to call themselves Orthodox (Teitelbaum 1982: 37, 155–164). His tenure in Carei was interrupted in 1928 by news of the death of the sitting rabbi of Satu Mare, Eliezer David Grünwald. Once again, supporters of Teitelbaum advanced his name as the successor to yet another Rabbi Grünwald. And once again, opponents—from Zionists and Neologs to various Orthodox Jews—lined up against him. It was in the throes of this battle that a second volume, *Milhemet mitsvah he-hadash* (The New Commanded War), was published in 1929 (Figure 3).

Printed in Satu Mare, the volume was a collection of Hebrew and Yiddish documents—some translated from the Hungarian, which remained the language of the community council—woven together by a running Hebrew narrative that tells the tale of the bitter dispute over Joel Teitelbaum's candidacy. The self-described sponsors of the pamphlet were “the sect of God-fearers of the Orthodox (community) of Satu Mare” (*Sefer milhemet mitsvah he-hadash* 1928/29). The war this group saw itself as waging was a defensive battle, intended to parry the attacks of “the sect of modernizers” who forcefully opposed Joel Teitelbaum. Although there were both Askhenazic and Hasidic Jews included among Teitelbaum's opponents, the focus in *Milhemet mitsvah he-hadash*, evident already from the beginning of the pamphlet, was on the liberal “modernizers” who “cleverly devised to publish many lies” and “want to gain control over the sect of God-fearers,” as well as “to weaken and denigrate them” (*Sefer milhemet mitsvah he-hadash*: Petah davar). In particular, the pamphlet noted the campaign against Rabbi Teitelbaum in *Új Kelet*, a Zionist newspaper from Cluj, and the frequent appeals to non-Jewish authorities—in violation of the long-standing Jewish communal injunction against recourse to “Gentile courts” (*arka'ot shel Goyim*).

Part of what complicated the struggle to appoint Joel Teitelbaum as rabbi of Satu Mare was, ironically enough, his own resistance. As supporters were agitating on his behalf and forging a solid majority of the community council—his nomination was approved by a vote of 19-5-2 on June 11, 1928—Teitelbaum himself was demurring. In a letter to council members, Teitelbaum thanked them for their vote of confidence. For his part, he professed doubts about assuming the position in Satu Mare owing to “the greatness of my deficiency” in administering a community the size of Satu Mare. He added that he would be loath to leave Carei, where his relationship with the Jewish community was

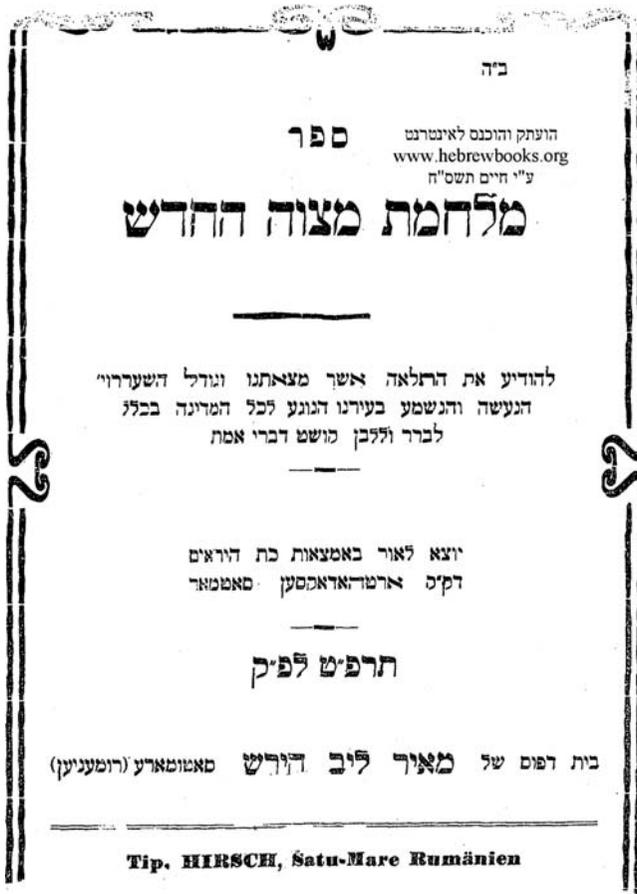


FIGURE 3. MILHEMET MITSVAH HE-HADASH (THE NEW COMMANDED WAR) SATU MARE, 1929.

marked by “pure love, peace, and tranquility” (*Sefer milhemet mitsvah he-hadash*: 7a–7b).

It may well be that he had trepidations about being rabbi of a larger Jewish community, even one with which he was intimately familiar. While he had accrued considerable experience as a *rav* in Carei and Iršava, he must certainly have been mindful of the vigorous opposition to his candidacy in Satu Mare. He must also have known that his nomination occurred in the midst of a deepening battle between the “modernizers” and “God-fearers” that broke out into the open in communal

elections in 1927. And yet, his own, at least public, reticence to engage in battle did not deter his supporters. They continued to press on. For their part, the opponents of Teitelbaum turned to the Romanian Ministry of Religion for assistance. They requested that the Ministry remove the entire community council and declare Joel Teitelbaum ineligible to be town rabbi because he was too extreme and did not know Romanian.

The result of this entreaty was the selection of a new community council (*Direktorium*). Unsettled by the appeal to state officials, supporters of Teitelbaum turned for advice to the head of the Orthodox Council in Transylvania, Rabbi Shlomo Zalman Ulman of Bistrița (Bistritz). Ulman sent a delegation of rabbis to investigate the episode. The investigating committee issued an opinion in which it determined that Joel Teitelbaum could not be disqualified as a candidate and that a second vote on his candidacy should be held, this time not restricted to members of the *Direktorium*.

Tensions mounted as the vote approached in early August. The narrator in *Milhemet mitsvah he-hadash* recounts that the opponents of Teitelbaum tried to disrupt the vote through a series of tactics, including violence. On one occasion, “their leaders marched with pride and contempt to the election committee headquarters to threaten those assembled there” (*Sefer milhemet mitsvah he-hadash*: 14b).

Despite the upheaval, nearly eight hundred tax-paying members of the Satu Mare Jewish community participated in the vote. Four hundred and thirty-seven voted in favor of Joel Teitelbaum, and 331 voted against him. Rather than resolve the matter definitively, the contested nature of the vote led to another visit by an inspector from the Ministry of Religion, as well as to an additional investigation by Rabbi Ulman’s Orthodox Council which resulted in the call for yet another election. The third election, held on September 27, 1928, yielded a far more decisive result: Of 780 eligible voters, 779 voted for Rabbi Teitelbaum, and one did not (*Sefer milhemet mitsvah he-hadash*: 21a–21b).

With this vote, the affair should well have come to an end. But it did not. The opposing faction continued to resist the appointment of Joel Teitelbaum by all means necessary. The pro-Teitelbaum camp, meanwhile, solicited a wide range of Orthodox rabbinic opinion to challenge the legitimacy of the opponents. One of the authorities declared that “all that they (the opponents) have done in turning to the Gentiles, which is not according to the opinion of the (Orthodox) Council and not according to the opinion of the rabbinic court, is

invalid.”¹⁹ The pro-Teitelbaum forces were not content merely to assemble an array of rabbinic luminaries on their side. They resorted to a tactic that was used in previous disputes involving the Teitelbaum family and that reflected the deep enmity between the “God-fearers” and the “modernizers.” They sought and gained the approval of Rabbi Ulman in 1929 to secede from the Satu Mare Jewish community and create a self-standing Orthodox community. In the final pages of *Milhemet mitsvah he-hadash*, we read from a protocol of a meeting of the pro-Teitelbaum faction that took place on December 10, 1929:

We proclaim and announce here that from this day forward we are distinct and separate from them in order to be a community in our own right under the flag of the Orthodox Council of Bistrița. We have nothing to do with them as a matter of Torah and in all communal affairs. (*Milhemet mitsvah*: unpaginated, 5 pages to the last)

We might add a pair of postscripts to this second version of a “Commanded War.” First, Joel Teitelbaum did not act on the events of 1928–29 by moving to Satu Mare, at least not immediately. And second, the secession of his followers proved to be short-lived. A shortage of revenue owing to the departure of a significant sector of the community compelled the anti-Teitelbaum forces to seek a reconciliation with the secessionists through the offices of Rabbi Ulman. Negotiations were held on February 11, 1930, in Dej (formerly Dés in Hungary) that resulted in a decision to reunite the factions and invite Joel Teitelbaum to Satu Mare to assume his position as rabbi (Gelbman 1999: 6: 83–84). Interestingly, though he was stationed in Carei, he viewed himself—from 1928—as the chief legal decisor on religious matters in Satu Mare (Gelbman 1999: 86). But he remained in Carei until 1934, when he felt support from the Satu Mare town council was at last solid enough. On February 27, Teitelbaum stole away from Carei in the early hours of the morning, hoping to avoid the detection and disappointment of the Jewish community there. One observer noted with sadness:

The Jews of Carei awoke to a most unpleasant surprise: our beloved and revered rebbe, Rabbi Joel Teitelbaum, left us in the early hours of the morning without giving us any advance notice or an opportunity

¹⁹See the opinion of Rabbi Menachem B. Braude in *Milhemet mitsvah he-hadash*: 1a (third section of the pamphlet). The pagination of *Milhemet mitsvah he-hadash* is doubly confusing. Not only does numerical sequencing occur on every other page rather than on every page (hence pages are numbered here either “a” or “b”), as with the Talmud, but there are also three sequences of pagination for the book’s three sections.

to part from him; ever since it became known that he plans to leave us, his followers have walked around in a state of mourning and perplexity. It pains us that we must part from our beloved leader. (Gelbman 1999: 116–117)

On the other side of the journey, thousands of Jews greeted Teitelbaum upon his entry to Satu Mare. His tenure in that city is an important subject worthy of more attention than can be offered here. It suffices to say that he remained in Satu Mare as chief rabbi from 1934 until 1944, when the Nazis invaded Hungary and laid murderous waste to that country's Jewish population.

As a final coda to this chapter, it is necessary to address the attitude of Joel Teitelbaum and his followers in this episode. Given the family's proclivity for aggressive engagement with perceived opponents, the defensive approach of the pro-Teitelbaum camp in this case is striking. To be sure, his camp cast the conflict in the appropriately martial language of a "commanded war," but Teitelbaum's followers often found themselves responding to, rather than initiating, the salvos. The alliance of Neolog, Status Quo, Ashkenazic, Hasidic, and Zionist opponents drove the action. Even after the election results were settled so decisively the third time, Joel Teitelbaum did not march into Satu Mare to impose his order. Rather, he demonstrated a different kind of military savvy, strategic restraint, that reflected his recognition of the stakes at hand in a community the size and significance of Satu Mare. It also reflected, we might add, his growing maturation as a political, as well as religious, leader.

Teitelbaum clearly understood that decades of aggressive combat had left scars. Along with other Hungarian *haredi* rabbis such as the Munkaczer Rebbe, Teitelbaum had been waging war against communal forces he believed to be impure. Not surprisingly, the Zionists, including the religious Zionist Mizrachi group, were at the top of the list.²⁰ Somewhat more surprising was the Agudat Yisrael, the movement of strictly Orthodox Jews from Germany and Poland that arose in 1912, in large measure, to challenge the growing success and boldness of secular Zionism. Rather than embrace the Agudah as partners in the battle against Zionist transgressors, Teitelbaum and fellow Hungarian *haredim*

²⁰Teitelbaum played a leading role in a gathering of traditionalist rabbis in Großwardein, Hungary, in 1920 that declared "an absolute prohibition on associating in any way with the band of Zionists or Mizrachi members, or assisting them in any way . . . or studying, God forbid, in their schools." The rabbinic declaration is reproduced in Gelbman (1994: 413).

framed the new Orthodox organization as a pernicious threat.²¹ This antagonistic attitude toward the Agudah, along with the fierce condemnation of the Zionists, contributed to the bellicose environment in the 1920s in which declarations of war were issued—and an array of “military” tactics deployed—by opponents and supporters of Joel Teitelbaum.²² Unlike the first war described in the above section, the battle waged in Satu Mare by the Teitelbaum forces was largely defensive. By contrast, the third and final “commanded war” to be discussed was an aggressive internal conflict involving the heirs of Joel Teitelbaum, suggesting to us that the martial language and maneuvers of the Teitelbaum family became so contagious as to be deployed against each another.

THE THIRD “COMMANDED WAR”: AGAINST A PUBLIC SCHOOL IN KIRYAS JOEL, NEW YORK

Following his liberation from Bergen-Belsen in December 1944, Joel Teitelbaum spent brief periods of time in Switzerland and Palestine before arriving in New York in 1946 on Rosh Ha-Shanah. He settled in the Williamsburg section of Brooklyn where he set out to rebuild his community which had been decimated by the Nazi genocidal assault on Hungarian Jewry in the spring and summer of 1944. With characteristic clarity of purpose, he also sought to introduce a new degree of ritual stringency into Williamsburg, a mixed neighborhood with a range of ethnicities and varying levels of Jewish observance.²³ Although Williamsburg would develop into a major center of Satmar Hasidism, Rabbi Teitelbaum often articulated the desire to create an enclave removed from the teeming city in which the Satmar way of life could be maintained without threat or interruption. Already in the late 1940s, he entrusted his close advisors with the task of seeking out potential sites of settlement in the metropolitan area—close enough to commute for employment

²¹For example, he joined forces with the Munkaczer Rebbe at a rabbinic conference in Csap, Czechoslovakia in the summer of 1922 to thwart the rise of the Agudah. Teitelbaum was the first signatory, after the Munkaczer Rebbe, of a proclamation that declared that “it is forbidden to us, according to the Holy Torah, to associate with the ‘Agudah.’” An account of the Csap meeting, including the declaration, can be found in Goldstein (1935/36: 31–40). See also the concise summary in Ravitzky (1990: 42–46).

²²It is somewhat ironic, in this regard, that both the Zionists and the Agudah had a major hand in Joel Teitelbaum’s rescue from the Nazis during the Second World War. Teitelbaum was among the nearly 1,700 Jews selected by Hungarian Zionist official Rudolf Kasztner to avoid deportation to Auschwitz as a result of Kasztner’s negotiations with Adolph Eichmann. Meanwhile, Agudah officials agitated on behalf of Rabbi Teitelbaum during the War and helped him secure entry to both Palestine (in 1945) and the United States (in 1946).

²³See the classic study of the transformation of Williamsburg into a traditionalist Orthodox center by Kranzler (1961).

purposes to New York City, but far enough removed to allow for a self-contained enclave (Gelbman 1998). Over the course of several years, his aides scouted various sites in New York and New Jersey, hoping to buy sufficient land (at least 150 acres) for a self-standing community, while going about their task surreptitiously so as to avoid arousing too much local opposition to the arrival of flocks of foreign-looking Hasidic Jews.

The Satmars were not the first Jewish traditionalists to make their way to the outlying New York area. In 1943, a prominent traditionalist rabbi who was not Hasidic (but anti-Zionist), Aharon Kotler, established a yeshivah in Lakewood, New Jersey, that would become one of the largest in the world. Kotler, a recent arrival from war-torn Europe, chose to leave New York for New Jersey in order “to isolate students from the perceived dangers of the city and the negative influence of the existent Jewish community” (Finkelman 2002: 61–82, 2007: 314). Interestingly, it was in America, more than Europe, that Kotler’s separatist vision could be most easily realized. As Yoel Finkelman has noted, the absence of an established Jewish communal structure recognized by the state, as in Europe, allowed for groups to assemble and organize on their own in America without government intervention (Finkelman 2002: 68). We might add that a key article of faith of American-style economic liberalism, the acquisition of private property, has permitted separatist groups throughout the history of the United States to transform themselves from a group of individuals into a collective, at a remove from the rest of society, with relative ease.

Indeed, separatist religious groups have repeatedly found receptive terrain in the United States, beginning with the first group of European religious dissenters who laid the foundation for the country—and extending to the Amish, Shakers, Mormons, various groups of followers of Indian religions, and diverse circles of traditionalist Jews, among many others. In commenting on the hundreds of enclave communities created in this country from the mid-seventeenth century, the editor of the *Encyclopedia of American Communes* notes that “(a)n American continent filled with comparatively inexpensive and unspoiled land encouraged such social experimentation” (Stockwell 1998: 3). To be sure, not all communes were religious communities, but both shared the goal of constructing a model society based on the ideals of integrity and purity without the distraction of mainstream society. And many utopian communes *were* animated by a deep sense of religious mission. In fact, the ethos of free religious expression, together with the potent strains of economic liberalism, have made small-scale communitarianism almost as American as apple pie.

Haredi groups new to America after the Second World War availed themselves of this tradition. The American ethos of religious freedom

lent them both a sense of opportunity and entitlement to found separatist communities. Thus, the prominent European rabbi Michael Dov Weissmandl established his Talmudic academy, the Nitra Yeshivah, in New Jersey in 1946, and then in 1949, moved it to Mt. Kisco, New York. Five years later, the Skvirer Hasidic group purchased property in Spring Valley, New York, with the aim of creating an inclusive, self-contained autonomous community. As would be the case with Kiryas Joel, struggles with the local town board and residents over zoning regulations prompted the Skvirer Hasidim to seek legal incorporation as a village, which they gained in 1961.²⁴

Meanwhile, after decades of searching, a team of Satmar advisers led by Leopold (“Leibish”) Lefkowitz and Haim Hirsch Leimzider began to purchase property in the early 1970s in Orange County, New York. By the summer of 1974, the first Satmar Hasidim began to move to the Town of Monroe in Orange County, about fifty miles from New York City (“Jewish Sect to Go to Orange County” July 21, 1974).²⁵ Originally planned for eighty garden apartments and twenty-five single-family homes (to contain approximately five hundred people), this new community became the site of a cat-and-mouse game between residents and local building inspectors from Monroe. The new residents lived in apartments in which rooms were set aside for synagogues, ritual baths, schools, and even bakeries whose existence violated Town of Monroe zoning ordinances. Those who dwelt in “single-family homes” often understood that term to mean dwellings inhabited by multiple families who were related. As tensions rose between the new residents and Monroe officials, so too did the legal stakes. Satmar Jews began to take steps to secede from the Town of Monroe, prompting lawyers in Monroe to propose a variety of tactics designed to prevent such a move (Gelbman 1998: 162–189). The two sides grew increasingly hostile toward one another, threatening litigation in both state and federal court. After months of mutual recrimination and threats in the summer

²⁴See Mintz (1992: 198–203). Mention should also be made of the Tash (or Tosh) Hasidim who established in 1963 their own village some twenty miles from Montreal in Canada. Information about Kiryas Tash can be gleaned from a Web site maintained by the leading scholar of the community, Shaffir (n.d.), <http://www.kiryastash.ca/index.shtml>.

²⁵Meanwhile, the Yiddish press reported several months earlier on the plan to have more than one hundred Satmar families settle in Monroe, New York. See “Iber hundred Satmarer families tsien zikh aroys fun Vilyamsburg, veln zikh bazetsn in a shtetl 100 mayl fun Nyu York” 1974. The actual process of gaining title over the property was a detailed operation that began in the late 1960s and included recruiting a non-Satmar and nonobservant Hungarian Jew, Oskar Fischer, to be the public face in dealing with Monroe officials and residents. Rabbi Teitelbaum’s chief advisors feared that local residents would not sell their land if they knew that its new inhabitants were Hasidic Jews.

and fall of 1976, a deal was brokered between the two sides to call off the lawsuits and allow the Satmar community to secede from the Town of Monroe. In March 1977, Kiryas Joel, the Village of Joel, was born as a legally incorporated Village in the state of New York.

Joel Teitelbaum's guiding vision, as described by the prolific Satmar historian Shlomo Yankel Gelbman, was to create an enclave of purity that harked back to the mythic *shtetl* of old:

The idea of a "*shtetl*" was a subject that never left the agenda during all of our years growing up; at every turn, one spoke of the Rebbe's desire to build a settlement outside of the city that would be four pure cubits devoid of any defect or flaw in which the Satmarer could devote themselves to Torah and awe of G-d, in the pure path and way of the holy Rebbe who taught us. (Gelbman 1998: 7)

The establishment of Kiryas Joel marked, it would seem, the realization of that vision: the creation of a Satmar *shtetl*, even if it was a highly romanticized version of the Eastern European Jewish town that bore that name. For indeed, the actual Eastern European *shtetl* was more heterogeneous—and less insular—than the mythic image etched into popular Jewish imagination by "Fiddler on the Roof."²⁶ Kiryas Joel, whose population is 99% Hasidic, is far closer to the mythic ideal of homogeneity and insularity.

At one level, the creation of Kiryas Joel represents a remarkable triumph for Joel Teitelbaum, who lost thousands of followers in the Holocaust. Not only did he succeed in reconstituting a global Satmar community of over one hundred thousand people from the ashes of Auschwitz; he also was able to marshal the rapid growth of his flock in New York into substantial political power, as reflected in the establishment of a Satmar municipality, as well as in the regular ability to influence elections in Brooklyn and Orange County through a strong bloc vote. Indeed, the Satmar community at large, and Kiryas Joel, in particular, have effectively leveraged their political power over the years into massive amounts of state and federal support. This helps explain why there are no discernable signs of poverty in Kiryas Joel, though it is statistically the poorest community in America according to recent United States census data²⁷ ("A Village with the Numbers, Not the Image, of the Poorest Place," April 20, 2011).

²⁶This point is made in the essays collected in Katz (2007). In introducing the volume, the historian Samuel Kassow states simply: "To see the shtetl as an entirely Jewish world is wrong . . ." (2).

²⁷It is worth noting the irony that Kiryas Joel represents one of the most successful instances of "autonomism" in modern Jewish history. "Autonomism" was a strain of early twentieth-century

At another level, the formal establishment of Kiryas Joel raised new challenges, not all of which were anticipated or welcome. In the first instance, it transformed the Rebbe's informal political operation into a formal government apparatus. For example, his chief mediator with city and state officials, who performed a role akin to the Jewish communal intercessor of premodern times or *shtadlan*, Leibish Lefkowitz, became the first mayor of Kiryas Joel. In the past, Lefkowitz would seek out financial support for various Satmar initiatives from political leaders. Now he and his colleagues were in charge of a municipality and responsible for the provision of services to the village's residents, a weighty task and a significant change in Satmar affairs.

Furthermore, the rapid transformation of a private group of religious Jews into a publicly recognized village brooked new entanglements with American law, especially the vaunted principle of separation of church and state embedded in the First Amendment of the Constitution. Both the mayor and the members of the village board regarded Rabbi Joel Teitelbaum with utmost reverence and sought out his advice on virtually all major decisions regarding the community's well-being. In that sense, he was the supreme authority of Kiryas Joel, an indisputable fact that invariably blurred the boundary lines between religious and political power.

Another substantial erosion of the boundary line came with the decision in the 1980s to establish a public school district in Kiryas Joel. It is at this point that we encounter the third and final chapter in the military history of Satmar Hasidism. For it is here that we discover deep divisions not only between Satmar and other Hasidic groups, but within the Satmar world itself. In this instance, it would seem as if the tradition of Satmar rhetorical militarism had turned in on itself, and in the place where the purest and most insular form of Jewish life envisaged by Joel Teitelbaum had taken root.

Meanwhile, the decision to form a public school district in a Hasidic enclave was not premeditated. Rather, it arose out of a chain of events commencing with the establishment of a small private school for special needs children in the village in 1983. The chief force behind the new school, Sha'arei Hemlah (Gates of Compassion), Wolf Lefkowitz,

Jewish nationalist ideology that sought to gain the right for Jews (a) to declare themselves a nation; and (b) to use their own language and control their own cultural and educational institutions with the support of the state. In fact, Satmar Hasidim were the ideological opposites of the autonomists, who tended to be decidedly secular in orientation. But along with the autonomist experiment in the Soviet Union (Birobidzhan), Kiryas Joel has achieved as much of the autonomist vision as any Jewish community outside of Israel.

was the father of a child with Down's syndrome.²⁸ The school was an early attempt at overcoming the neglect of special needs children in the community by providing them with access both to Jewish studies and special education. By all accounts, Sha'arei Hemlah got off to a fine start. But its existence was short-lived. The school relied on special education teachers from the neighboring Monroe-Woodbury public school district. The practice of using such teachers was enabled by the 1975 Handicapped Children Act passed by Congress that mandated that handicapped children be granted access to publicly funded education tailored to their needs. This arrangement lasted until 1985, when the U.S. Supreme Court handed down two decisions, *Aguilar v. Felton* and *Grand Rapids v. Ball*, that held that the use of public school teachers in parochial schools for remedial education was in violation of the Establishment Clause (*Board of Ed. Of Kiryas Joel v. Grumet*). Soon thereafter, parents in Kiryas Joel commenced litigation intended to create a neutral site where their children could receive special education rather than have them attend Monroe-Woodbury schools. For a brief time, this arrangement was permitted, but a New York State Appellate Court struck it down in 1988. As a result, the children were in a state of limbo, without formal education of any sort, until a group of parents in Kiryas Joel decided in 1989 to seek the creation of a public school district in the village. The sole aim of the parents, as reported in the *New York Times*, was "to obtain state funds to educate their children who are mentally or physically handicapped without sending them to nearby public schools that they find alien" ("Village Wants Hasidic Public School District" July 21, 1989).

This new gambit, won the support of the Monroe-Woodbury school district, as well as of a host of local and state politicians. It was subsequently introduced into law in 1989 by the New York State Legislature. Arrayed against the new law was a range of groups including the New York Civil Liberties Union and the New York State School Boards Association. Significantly, a number of Jewish groups including the Anti-Defamation League, the American Jewish Congress, and the American Jewish Committee lined up against it as well. While the opposition of these mainstream American Jewish groups rested on the defense of the separation of church and state, there was an additional line of attack from another Jewish quarter: Hasidim, both Satmars in Kiryas Joel and non-Satmars outside of it. For these groups, the creation of a public school district, intended for Hasidic children, within the carefully circumscribed

²⁸Helpful information on Sha'arei Hemlah and the ensuing public school controversy can be found in Jerome Mintz's excellent ethnographic study of American Hasidim (1992: 310ff).

בעזהש"ת

קונטרס

מלחמת חובה

בה יבואו ויקבעו בספר קובץ מאמרים וקו"ק מכ"ק
 הגאונים הצדיקים שרידי דור הישן מאורי הגולה שליט"א
 אשר יצאו בחרבם ובקסת"ם מול האבן נגף לשארית
 ישראל הנקרא "סקול דיסטריקט", "פאבליק סקול"
 והמסתעף שנתייסד ומתנהל ע"י בני ישראל

.

גם סיפחנו דרשות מאמרים וכרוזים שונים בענין הנ"ל,
 וגם קצת בענין בזיון תלמידי חכמים גדולי הדור שנתבזו
 באופן מבהיל אשר כמוהו לא נהייתה במחנה היראים

.

ברוקלין נ.י. יע"א
 חודש מנחם-אב תשנ"ה לפ"ק

FIGURE 4. *MILHEMET HOVAH* (OBLIGATORY WAR), BROOKLYN, 1995.

boundaries of the *shtetl* was sacrilege. It would allow for streams of polluted foreign values to flow into the community. To blunt the thrust of this dangerous plan required a war, an "obligatory war" (*Milhemet hovah*), as the title of a collection of opposing rabbinic views from 1995 declared (Figure 4).

It is important to note a key detail in the story. Rabbi Joel Teitelbaum, the towering founding father of Satmar Hasidism, was not

involved in this latest battle. He died after a long illness in August 1979, leaving behind no direct heirs to inherit the mantle of leadership. The most logical successor was his nephew, Rabbi Moshe Teitelbaum, known as the “Beirach Moshe,” who held the title of Szigeter Rebbe (after the town of Sziget) and presided over a small congregation in Boro Park (Mintz 1992: 126–138). Moshe Teitelbaum was appointed as *rav* of various Satmar communities after the *shiva* (seven-day mourning period) of his uncle—and as Satmar Rebbe after the first anniversary of his uncle’s death in 1980 (Gelbman 2012).

Despite the fact that he was the most obvious successor, it was clear that his tenure would be dramatically different from Joel Teitelbaum’s. He lacked the unquestioned command and respect that Joel Teitelbaum exercised over his Satmar flock. Doubts were raised not only about the quality of his mind, but also about the soundness of his judgment (Mintz 1992: 131–133). The circle of doubters found an unlikely symbolic leader in the formidable widow of Joel Teitelbaum, Feiga, known as “Alta Feiga” (Old Feiga). Alta Feiga, who came from a relatively urbane Polish setting, did not fit the model of a typically subservient Hungarian Hasidic woman. She not only had serious and long-standing tensions with her husband’s successor. She also maintained control, quite remarkable for a woman in the Satmar world, over a network of institutions or “*mosdos*” (e.g., school, orphanage, mikva, synagogue) in Kiryas Joel.

To that focal point of opposition around Alta Feiga was joined a group of Satmar Hasidim who refused to accept the new public school, preferring to establish their own private school for atypical children under the name “Bnai Joel” (Children of Joel). This group of dissidents had already run afoul of Rabbi Moshe and his son, Rabbi Aaron, whom he had appointed *rav* of the main congregation in Kiryas Joel, Yetev Lev de-Satmar, in 1985 (Gelbman 2012). The dissidents never fully embraced the authority of Moshe and even less Aaron, longing instead for the days of yore under the authority of the revered Joel Teitelbaum; conversely, they were punished for challenging the authority of the new regime through acts of banishment and exclusion from communal institutions in Kiryas Joel.

Just as the move to create a public school fostered opposition within Kiryas Joel, so too it generated waves of discontent in Hasidic circles beyond the village’s boundaries. A representative sampling of the opposing voices can be seen in *Milhemet hovah*, which contains 282 pages of rabbinic polemics, sermons, and discourses directed against the Kiryas Joel “public school” and “school district,” the English terms that were retained with contempt in both Yiddish and Hebrew

accounts. Especially prominent in this book were a number of neighboring Hasidic rabbis including Raphael Blum, rabbi of the Kasho community in Bedford Hills, New York; Mordechai Hager, the Vishnitzer Rebbe from Monsey, New York; Rabbi Avraham Leitner of Montevideo and Williamsburg; and Yechezkel Roth, the Karlsburger Rebbe from Boro Park. All of these rabbis were born and educated in that region of shifting boundaries in East Central Europe (Hungary, Czechoslovakia, and Romania) in which *haredi* Judaism took rise. All shared an unceasing antipathy toward Zionism.²⁹ And all shook with rage at the prospect of a public school district that threatened to uproot “the foundation and pillar of our faith in God and His holy Torah and was a terrible desecration of Heaven” that would be evident to Jews and non-Jews alike. Accordingly, they issued a total ban on children being permitted to study in the new school (*Kunteres milhemet hovah* 1995: 12–13).

In framing the battle at hand, the unnamed editor of the volume began by invoking a well-trodden motif in rabbinic, and particularly *haredi*, literature: the theme of the “decline of the generations” (*yeridat ha-dorot*) (Kellner 1996). Thus, he declared: “Our generation is an orphaned generation, the orphans of orphans, a debased generation in the full sense of the word; difficult times are passing over *haredi* Judaism, for which, as a result of our many sins, the principles of our faith and the pillars of our religion are being loosened and forgotten.” He then went on to discuss the substantial power which the ruling faction in Kiryas Joel—those responsible for opening the “breach” (*pirtsah*), as the school district was frequently called—possessed: access to “large assembly halls, weekly newspapers, monthlies, open reserves of money” (*Kunteres milhemet hovah* 1995: 1). By contrast, the opponents were poor and few in number, akin to the three hundred Israelites who refused to bow down to the idol Ba’al and submit to the Midianites (Judg. 7:6).

What was required was a “battle for the soul of the child . . . a war of holiness against impurity based on the sense that the end is approaching, when the forces of impurity will be altogether eradicated” (*Kunteres milhemet hovah* 1995: 2–3). To prepare oneself for battle

²⁹It is worth adding a familial twist to the anti-Zionist story. The niece of the Vishnitzer Rebbe in Monsey (that is, the daughter of the Vishnitzer Rebbe in Bnai Brak, Israel), Sosha, is married to Rabbi Aaron Teitelbaum, eldest son of Moshe Teitelbaum. Rumors have abounded over the years that Sosha spoke modern Hebrew at home and harbored sympathy for Zionism, both of which are regarded as grave violations of core Satmar doctrine. Meanwhile, for a searing critique of the public school from an unrelentingly fervent anti-Zionist, see the detailed account produced by Moshe Dov Beck, a Neturei Karta leader in Monsey, New York. See Beck (1994).

required recalling the example of “our forebears and teachers (who) gave their lives so as not to change even one iota of the old path.” We notice in the language of *Milhemet hovah* not only a call to battle, but the articulated need to engage in acts of self-sacrifice, exemplified by the Talmudic principle of “*yehareg ve-lo ya’avov*”—that is, that one should accept death rather than commit a grave transgression (typically understood to be idol worship, murder, or forbidden sexual acts) (*Kunteres milhemet hovah* 1995: 4). To be sure, modern rabbinic polemics often resort to an exaggerated sense of crisis. Nevertheless, the various Hasidic opponents of the Kiryas Joel public school clearly felt that a dangerous red-line had been crossed.

We gain a clearer sense of the stakes involved in the pamphlets written by members of Kiryas Joel’s dissident “Bnai Joel” group that were included in *Milhemet hovah*. In one of them, the case is made against the school by employing the words of the school’s own superintendent, Dr. Steven Benardo, a nonobservant Jew who is described as “one who transgresses against the essence of Judaism” (*kofer be-’ikar*) (*Kunteres milhemet hovah* 1995: 259).³⁰ The pamphlet offers a Yiddish summation of a deposition given by Benardo in the run-up to one of the cases over the legality of the Kiryas Joel school district. Benardo’s enumeration of the secular features of the school becomes the grounds for vehement opposition to it by the Bnai Joel. Thus, we read that the school:

- (1) does not have a mezuzah on any of its doors;
- (2) has a curriculum similar to other public schools in New York state;
- (3) has both men and women teachers, and does not segregate male and female students;
- (4) does not have a dress code, and both students and faculty dress in a secular mode;
- (5) commemorates non-Jewish holidays such as Thanksgiving and Martin Luther King Day (*Kunteres al tig’u bi-meshihi* 1994; *Kunteres milhemet hovah* 1995: 260).

The effects of such practices were devastating. “The school district,” the Bnai Joel pamphlet declared, “is a calamity for pure education,” “a devastating blow to God’s war against Amalek” (*Kunteres al tig’u bi-meshihi* 1994; *Kunteres milhemet hovah* 1995: 263). As a result, it was

³⁰In an earlier summary of events at the beginning of the book, the mention of Dr. Benardo’s name is followed by the acronym for “May his name be blotted out,” an epithet reserved for the most egregious enemies of the Jews. *Milhemet hovah*, 11.

necessary to mount relentless opposition to the school and its supporters.

In fact, the formal legal struggle against the Kiryas Joel public school would continue for more than a decade.³¹ Already in 1994, the battle reached the U.S. Supreme Court, which issued an opinion invalidating the 1989 New York state statute (Chapter 748) that created the district but gave ample latitude and guidance to the New York State Legislature to re-write it in a way that would pass constitutional muster. Subsequent attempts to re-draft it led to new waves of litigation that were finally settled in favor of the school district in 2002. Although many non-Satmar and non-Jewish groups participated in this legal action, the fight over the school district, as we have just seen, pitted supporters and opponents from within Kiryas Joel. Significantly, the stark internal divisions were on full display in non-Jewish courts—that is, in “*arka’ot shel goyim*,” Gentile jurisdictions—in which *haredi* Jews traditionally did not air their legal grievances against one another.

The culture of contentiousness within the Satmar world—and, symptomatically, the appeal to “Gentile courts”—continue unabated to this day. One of the earliest and most persistent dissidents, Joseph Waldman, has sought on a number of occasions to have the village of Kiryas Joel dissolved, most recently in a case that was decided against him in Federal District Court in 2011.³² Meanwhile, two sons of Moshe Teitelbaum, Aaron in Kiryas Joel and Zalman Leib in Williamsburg, have been engaged in a bitter and ongoing succession battle in the courts following their father’s decision to divide the Satmar empire into two in 1999—and with even more pitched intensity after their father’s death in 2006.

The dividing line between the two rabbis and their camps has assumed significant institutional form both in Kiryas Joel and Williamsburg; the two sides have their own synagogues, yeshivahs, day schools, ritual baths, and newspapers. At times, the tension between them has boiled over into violence. In the early 1990s, tempers flared between the mainstream faction associated with Rabbis Moshe and Aaron Teitelbaum, on the one hand, and the dissidents associated with Alta Feiga and the Bnai Joel, on the other, spilling over into physical

³¹After four attempts (1989, 1994, 1997, and 1999) by the New York State Assembly and Senate to craft a statute that would withstand intense legal scrutiny, the Kiryas Joel school district was deemed valid after a final ruling by Orange County John K. McGuirk on November 13, 2002. This brought to an end thirteen years of legal struggle conducted in both state and federal jurisdictions.

³²The suit, *Kiryas Joel Alliance, et al. v. Village of Kiryas Joel*, was thrown out by Federal District Court Judge Jed Rakoff on November 11, 2011.

altercations, vandalism, and even allegations of arson (Mintz 1992: 321).³³ At various points, violence has also broken out between the two groups at large religious assemblies, as occurred at the Simhat Torah celebration in Williamsburg in 2005 (“Satmar Factions Rumble in Williamsburg” 2005). More recently, in June 2010, dissidents seeking to lay claim to a portion of the main Kiryas Joel synagogue were forcibly removed by state police called in by the mainstream faction (“Arrests Lead to Protests in Ongoing Kiryas Joel Dispute” 2010).

Although not directly related to the struggle between the competing rabbis, it is worth mentioning here another widely reported event from Kiryas Joel in 2007. In that year, village resident Toby Greenberg was subjected to abuse and harassment for perceived violations of the strict code of modesty for women by wearing a denim skirt and a wig made of human hair. After threatening phone calls, derogatory leaflets, and the slashing of her family car’s tires, Ms. Greenberg decided to leave Kiryas Joel rather than heed the demands of the community’s unofficial “modesty committee” (*va’ad ha-tseniyes*) (“A Display of Disapproval Turned Menacing” December 16, 2007).³⁴ This episode, along with the others, suggests that the militancy of Satmar is hardly restricted to verbal pronouncements; it could and does assume the form of physical intimidation and violence. Furthermore, it is abundantly clear that the martial tendencies of Satmar are not only directed against those outside of the communal boundaries. In today’s world, they are directed chiefly at those *within* the Satmar fold, as both sides seek to delineate borders in order to assure purity and order within their respective realms.

CONCLUSION

This article has highlighted three chapters in the “military history” of Satmar Hasidism, as exemplified by three volumes published over the course of a century under the title “Commanded War” or “Obligatory War.” Each of the books took shape in the midst of a pointed conflict among Jews—in the first two cases, between traditionalist and nontraditionalist Jews in the main, and, in the final case, at least partly within the Satmar community itself. Admittedly, the use of the term “military history” is figurative, since Satmar Hasidim mounted no army of their own in the conventional sense. And the contexts in

³³On the allegations of arson in which a maternal convalescent home in Kiryas Joel was destroyed in 1996, see “In the Ashes of Arson, Tensions of Bitter Factionalism” 1996.

³⁴For a fuller and controversial account of a woman who fled the strict confines of the Satmar world, see the recent memoir by Feldman (2012).



FIGURE 5. *ISH MILHAMOT* (MAN OF WAR) PUBLISHED ON THE THIRTY-FIRST ANNIVERSARY OF RABBI JOEL TEITELBAUM’S DEATH (2010).

which each of the three volumes appeared were distinct in time and conditions. Nevertheless, the three titles make manifest a powerful tendency within the Teitelbaums of Hungary and the Satmar Hasidic movement founded by Joel Teitelbaum to engage in various kinds of spiritual warfare in order to safeguard “the path of the Elder Israel.” This impulse was deeply rooted in the culture of the Hungarian Unterland, the laboratory of conservative religious innovation into which Rabbi Joel Teitelbaum was born, raised, and first waged battle against the forces of impurity surrounding him—secularism, religious reform, and, above all, Zionism.

It is necessary to add that Rabbi Teitelbaum was also known and revered for his acts of charity and loving kindness toward others. Inspired by his example, the Satmar community in both Williamsburg and Kiryas Joel has developed an extensive network of health and social services to serve its own members. Moreover, the international Satmar organization Rav Tov declares that its mission is to act as “the protective shield for the global Jewish community living in tyrannical regimes”; its most well-known, though also controversial, activity has been to salvage the last remaining Jews of Yemen.³⁵

³⁵See <http://www.unitedjewish.org/who.html> (n.d.). The efforts of Satmar Hasidim in rescuing Jews from Yemen have been both lauded and criticized. In fact, a documentary film that appeared in 2003, “In Satmar Custody,” suggested that the Satmar community acted coercively toward

But none of that commitment to good works mitigates the combative quality of Satmar. It was deeply imprinted in the movement's DNA from its inception and has remained potent to the present. An interesting final illustration of this quality can be seen in a sixty-page pamphlet issued on the thirty-first anniversary of the death of the Satmar Rebbe. The pamphlet sought to encapsulate the essence of the sage in the title "*Ish milhamot*," Man of War³⁶ (Figure 5). It contained excerpts from Rabbi Teitelbaum's teachings, culled to provide clear answers to questions posed by the editors. The recurrent subject of the questions and responses was Zionism, cast as the source of gravest danger in the world.

It is telling that, on the anniversary of his death, it was Rabbi Teitelbaum's martial spirit that was deemed so worthy of commemoration. This spirit animated his sense of mission in struggling against enemies throughout his life. Likewise, it has animated the sense of mission of his followers—to the point that struggle has become both a constitutive and celebrated feature of Satmar life. As we noted at the outset, Satmar Hasidim are not alone among Jews, nor surely among people of faith, in placing spiritual war as a pillar of their worldview. But they have now entered a period in which that deeply ingrained imperative has been turned inward, as one Satmar Hasid faces off against another. The collateral damage has been substantial already, and the toll will likely rise, especially if one or both sides continue to cloak themselves in the redemptive language of a "commanded war."

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Yemenite Jews whom it brought to America (in part to spare them the "sin" of immigrating to Israel). See the review by Anita Gates of "In Satmar Custody" Gates (2006).

³⁶The entire title "*ish milhamot yadav lo rav*"—a man of war whose powers are many—comes from the eleventh verse of "*An'im zemirot*," the medieval liturgical poem chanted responsively at the end of morning services on Shabbat and holidays. A slightly inverted version, "*yadav rav lo*"—"his hands shall contend for him"—appears earlier in Deuteronomy 33:7. See *Ish milhamot yadav lo rav* (2010).

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