

KIRYAS JOEL:

A Chassidic Oasis in Upstate New York

A delegation of *Hamodia* representatives pays a visit to Kiryas Joel, the Satmar enclave in Monroe, on the occasion of the thirtieth *yahrtzeit* of its founder, the Satmar Rebbe, Harav Yoel Teitelbaum, *zy"ta*

It is an unwritten law in the world of journalism that anniversaries of momentous events marking a certain number of decades — the tenth, the twentieth, and so on — deserve more attention than the anniversaries in between. Naturally, the thirtieth *yahrtzeit* of an illustrious personality such as the Satmar Rebbe, *zy"ta*, calls for special coverage.

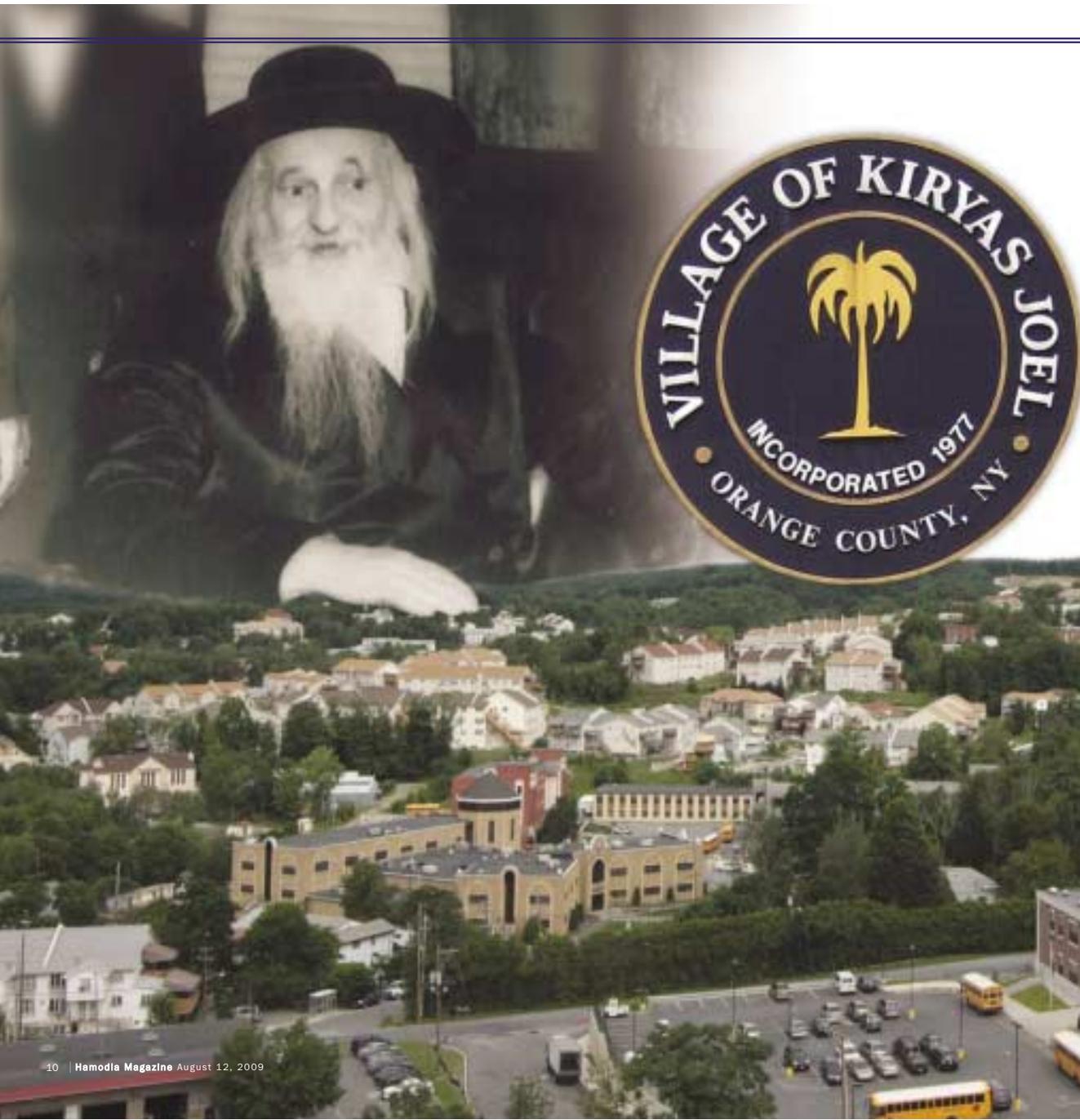
But special coverage on the Satmar Rebbe is something that is not really feasible. The countless articles that have been penned to describe this spiritual giant cannot do justice to the scope of his greatness. So instead of writing about the Rebbe himself, it was decided to focus on one of his extraordinary achievements — the establishment of the Satmar *shtetl* of Kiryas Joel in Monroe, New York.

Ever since the Rebbe set foot on American soil, he harbored a dream of building his own *shtetl* — a quiet, secluded enclave where his chassidim could lead their lives sheltered from the tumult of the city. For many years the Rebbe nurtured this dream, hoping that one day he would be *zocheh* to move into such a *shtetl* along with his chassidim. Finally, in 1974, his dream was realized, and he settled in Kiryas Joel.

The Rebbe, who did so much to advance *Yiddishkeit* in America, once said, "If not for my *shtetl*, Kiryas Joel, I would feel as if I achieved nothing in this world." He felt that founding this enclave would be a way of perpetuating his memory, for all his children passed away during his lifetime. He once said, "I believe that I survived the war to be able to build a *Yiddish shtetl*."

Building the *shtetl* was not easy. The establishment of Kiryas Joel came after several failed attempts to set up a Satmar enclave in Staten Island, Dover, Canarsie, Mount Kisco, Congress Lake and other locations. In all these places, especially in Congress Lake, hostile anti-Semitic opposition from residents hampered him.

The first resident in Kiryas Joel was a Jew from Washington Heights named Eli Birnbaum, *a"l*; he settled in the tract called Garden Homes. Although a member of the



Ashkenazic community in Washington Heights, he had been deeply impressed by the Satmar Rebbe's *sefer*, *Al Hageulah ve'al Hatenuvah*. Like many others, he had many questions on the often-debated topic of Zionism, so he wrote down a list of his questions and went personally to present them to the Rebbe. The Rebbe patiently listened to all his questions and clarified his stance against Zionism until Rabbi Birnbaum understood. Afterward, Rabbi Birnbaum would often come to the Rebbe; he also studied the Rebbe's *sefarim*. When he heard that a *shittel* was being planned, the idea of living there appealed to him, and he was among the first to register. Reb Eli lived in Kiryas Joel for many years.

A longtime Kiryas Joel dweller told me, "Kiryas Yoel is a *geshmakhe shittel*, both materially and spiritually, especially in the areas of *tzedakah* and *chesed*. There are facets of our lives that are somewhat limited, but in a positive sense. A person who doesn't have a car simply makes do with the local shopping center; it's similar to the *shittelach* of yesteryear. Kiryas Yoel is an excellent place to raise children since they're not exposed to the *nisyonos* that abound in the city streets. Especially now in the summer, the kids can run around and play freely outside without fear of spiritual storm-winds. In my opinion, it's much easier to raise children here, far away from the hullabaloo of the city."

Welcome to Kiryas Joel

On a sunny summer morning, a car carrying a delegation of *Hamodia* representatives drove slowly into Kiryas Joel, a village in the Town of Monroe. We pulled up in front of the main shopping center and proceeded to the village's administrative office, which is located on the upper level.

The receptionist, a *heimishe* resident of the village, ushered us into the office of the mayor, Abraham Wieder, a

Satmar chassid. The mayor was out of his office just then, so we were welcomed by Mr. Ari Felberman, the government relations coordinator, who graciously seated us and served us cold drinks.

The walls of the mayor's office are adorned with various pictures that give visitors a glimpse into the mayor's standing in the political world. Mayor Wieder has been photographed with presidents Reagan, Bush, and Clinton, New York governor Pataki, and other prominent political figures. A small model of Kiryas Joel's Ezras Cholim Medical Center graces a corner of his desk.

Mr. Felberman gave us a brief overview of the *shittel's* development. Kiryas Joel, he said, has a much higher population density than other villages in upstate New York. In other Orange County villages, a one-family house is built on one to three acres of land, whereas in Kiryas Joel up to fifteen apartments are built on one acre. The reason for this is, of course, financial, but there is also the issue of convenience. If the village were more spread out, the men would have to walk farther to go to shul, and the women to go shopping. The village is comprised of 860 acres, or 1.1 square miles, and another 1,000 acres are available for future construction.

Ari introduced us to Mr. Gedalye Szegegin, the Kiryas Joel village administrator. After shaking hands with each of us, he modestly asked that another chair be brought into the room for him since he did not want to sit in the mayor's chair.

Hamodia presented Administrator Szegegin with an enlarged, framed copy of an interview that the Satmar Rebbe, Harav Yoel Teitelbaum, had given the *Times Herald Record* on September 1, 1974, shortly after he moved into his newly established *shittel*. At that time the village was comprised of a mere handful of houses; today it is home to more than 22,000

Satmar chassidim, about 4,000 families.

Mr. Szegegin related that he had come to Kiryas Joel as a young child of seven. Even at such a young age, he absorbed the values of the *shittel* and understood that its purpose was to provide an unspoiled environment where

Chassidic Jews could raise their families at a safe distance from the teeming streets of New York City.

"Our mission," he said, "is to turn Kiryas Joel into a self-sufficient village enabling the community to secure for its residents everything they might require. Our aspiration is for Kiryas Joel to be a *shittel* where one can live his or her life peacefully from cradle to grave."

Regarding the village's rapid growth, Mr. Szegegin said that unless Moshiah comes soon, they will have a housing problem, because according to calculations, the Kiryas Joel



The main shul
t h e r a p y
s e r v i c e s .

population doubles every eleven years. This means that in a little over 22 years, the population will be close to 100,000.

When we invited him to come visit us in the city, he responded jovially, "If you can show me in the city what I am about to show you here in Kiryas Joel, then I'll come."

A Bustling Center of Commerce And Services

Our visit had begun a little earlier in the day when we *davened* at an early-morning *minyana* in Kiryas Joel's main shul. A unique feature of the shul is a special room called the Chok Shtiebel. Four separate *shiurim* in *Chok L'Yisrael* are given here in the early-morning hours, and throughout the rest of the day taped lectures of the popular speaker Rabbi Yosef Chaim Greenwald are played over a sound system — so anyone who comes to enjoy a snack in this room is instantly treated to words of inspiration.

On the same floor is Heichal Rosenberg, another beautiful section of the shul that is dedicated to learning and resonates constantly with *kol Torah*.

Following our meeting in the

administrative offices, we set out on a tour. We first passed through a bustling shopping center replete with a full variety of stores that furnish village residents with everything from take-out food — both dairy and meat — to fully stocked supermarket shelves, and a wide selection of toys, medications, household items and jewelry.

Not far from the shopping center is the Ezras Cholim Health Center, which provides quality health care to community residents. The center, which logs in about 80,000 patient visits each year, offers dental, pediatric, general medicine, physical therapy, and speech services.

Near the shopping center, we saw the beautiful new *simchah* hall Keren V'Yoel Moshe, which has motel rooms on the upper level so that guests from outside the village can share family celebrations in Kiryas Joel.

We drove along the hilly streets, many of which are named after European *shittelach* that were decimated in the Holocaust, such as Kozhnitz, Zenta, Satmar, Sighet, Kroli, Litzhensk, Uhel, Gorlitz, Krakow, Dinov and Nicholsburg. Some are even named after cities in Eretz Yisrael, such as Meron, Tzefas, and Chevron. Several streets are named after popular Satmar *roshei kehillah* and philanthropists, including Lipa Friedman and Mordechai Sher. Our guide remarked that the streets that were built before the establishment of Kiryas Joel bear secular names, and on one of them we watched a crew installing traffic lights at an intersection. This is only one of an array of federally funded projects geared toward upgrading safety services available to village residents.

We drove by the headquarters of Chevrah Hatzolah, the heroic group of dedicated volunteers who serve as first

responders to various emergency situations that crop up in a dense population of large families. Hatzolah's usual case load is greatly increased during the summer when residents of the many bungalow colonies surrounding Kiryas Joel utilize their services.

Next we passed by the Public Safety Department which, under the skillful direction of Mr. Moshe Witriol, dispatches the salaried guards who patrol the village during nighttime hours.

Our guide told us that the village's sanitation department is run by Mr. Yehoshua Blumenthal, and that many of the sanitation trucks, parked near the sewer plant, are driven by village residents.

As we drove through the streets of Kiryas Joel, we witnessed the incredible realization of the dream initiated by the Satmar Rebbe, who established the village with just a handful of families on Quickway Road. Today, countless new housing projects such as Shechunas Atzei Hatemariam, Shechunas Beirach Moshe, Lemberg and others, provide additional housing units to accommodate the young families who choose Kiryas Joel as their home. By local ordinance, each new housing development has its own small *beis medrash* so that fathers can easily walk to shul with their children who might find it difficult to walk all the way to the central *beis medrash*. An indirect outcome of the smaller shuls is the close-knit connection that forms among the *mispallelim*, who share in each other's *simchos* and are a strong support system for those facing sometimes overwhelming life challenges. This family-type relationship among neighbors would be more difficult if everyone *davened* in one central location.

Of the 22,000 residents of Kiryas Joel, only 1,500 are licensed drivers. Most of the population get around on foot, a fact that requires the village to maintain wide sidewalks in good condition. Mr. Szegegin mentioned that the village municipality is scheduled to begin construction of a park-and-ride project, enabling people to park their cars at the entrance of the village and take a bus into New York City. Two-hundred-fifty parking spaces are planned for this federally funded project.

Since the Satmar Rebbe strongly held that the women in his community should be given the opportunity to be full-time mothers to their children while *parnassah*



The kollel building



One of the yeshiva buildings



Keren V'Yoel Moshe *simchah* hall and motel



Above and below:
The Bais Rochel complex



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The Satmar Rebbe, Harav Yoel Teitelbaum, farthing talmidim in the early days of Kiryas Joel



The business center



The shopping center



The medical center



The fire department

should mainly be her spouse's responsibility, there are dozens of buses that shuttle the men to their workplaces in New York City. These buses are like shuls on wheels, with regularly held *minyanim* for *Shacharis*, *Minc'ah* and *Maariv*. A *hachmas* sefer Torah for the *sifrei Torah* used for *leining* on the buses was an unforgettable event.

One might think that commerce in a suburban enclave that is dedicated to serving G-d, such as Kiryas Joel, would take a back seat. The huge building housing the Kiryas Joel Business Center puts that notion to rest. The center, completed eight months ago, is a pulsating business hub, with the first floor housing shops and the upper levels filled with offices that provide residents with all types of services and employment opportunities.

From Satmar to Satmar

Elderly natives of the town of Satu-Mare, Hungary, colloquially called "Satmar," still fondly remember the charming look of the town's young boys, who sported suspenders, caps, and long curly *peyos*. They also recall the little girls with their trademark long braids and long-sleeved dresses. Hitler, *ym'sh*, in his lunatic brutality annihilated many tens of thousands of Hungary's innocent children. But lest anyone think he emerged victorious in his plan to wipe the image of Hungarian-Jewish children off the face of earth, let them visit Kiryas Joel and watch the thousands of adorable boys and girls playing on grassy lawns, riding "big wheels" down sloping streets, as well as learning and *davening* with enthusiasm — the boys in their *chedarim* under the tutelage of their devoted *melamidim* and the girls in their schools under the care of their dedicated teachers. When we visited it was summertime and a large number of the villages' children were away in summer camp. However, the numerous, huge school buildings attest to their presence during the school year.

Our guide next pointed out the new Eckstein Wedding Hall, in which the Satmar *chasunah takanos*, initiated and strongly encouraged by Harav Aharon Teitelbaum, *shlita*, Satmar Rebbe, have been implemented. The total cost of a wedding at this hall amounts to no more than \$6,000 for both sides combined; the price includes a festive catered meal, music, a *badchan*, and all the other amenities that make a *simchah*

complete.

The Satmar *chasunah takanos* have become a groundbreaking revolution in the Jewish world as families, rich and poor alike, now save thousands of dollars that were previously spent on superfluous luxuries. On high, the Rebbe must surely be deriving *nachas* from the fact that his chassidim's financial burdens are lightening, thereby enabling them a measure of *harchavas hadaas* while focusing on the spiritual aspects of their lives.

Bais Rochel Paradise wedding hall, another popular village venue that hosts weddings five nights a week, is located in one of the several girls' school buildings, all of which are beautiful edifices. Kiryas Joel schools put tremendous emphasis on *tznius*, modesty, a topic that the Rebbe found important enough to talk about during many of his *Kol Nidrei* addresses on the holiest night of the Jewish year, Yom Kippur.

On our tour, we passed several yellow buses, part of the fleet of forty-five that daily transport a total of 7,000 children to and from school and *cheder*. White village buses provide transportation to residents throughout Kiryas Joel.

Shaarei Chemlah

Kiryas Joel's municipal leaders take the slogan "No child left behind" very seriously. Just as they had made sure to provide top-quality *chinuch* and general education to the community's children, they were determined to do no less for children with special needs. A complex framework was built to accommodate these children, and to provide them with an environment of love and warmth where they can blossom to their maximum potential.

Emotions ran high during our visit to the state-of-the-art building that houses the Kiryas Joel school district, known to the locals as Shaarei Chemlah (which means Gates of Compassion), an institution that serves special-needs children.

Though we didn't photograph any of the children there in order to protect their privacy, their images will be forever embedded in our memories. One little boy wore a unique "cage" that protects his body from injury when he falls; another was

engaging in special exercises with a devoted therapist; and a third, who was injured in a car accident a few months ago, appeared to be receiving intensive rehabilitation therapy as he recuperated at Shaarei Chemlah.

The older children and *bachurim* served by this facility, who occupy an upper floor in the spacious building, greeted us with a genial *shalom aleichem*. One of them told us excitedly that his brother had just become a *chassan* and showed us a mazel tov sign he had created. One of us *farhered* a charming little boy suffering from injuries he sustained several years ago during a terrorist suicide attack on a Jerusalem bus in which his mother and younger brother were killed. The child displayed excellent knowledge of the *parashah*, and staff members showed us a special *Chumash* that facilitates the children's Torah learning. All of us enjoyed watching other children enjoy a swimming session at the indoor pool.

As we walked through this impressive building, its floors and walls gleaming with cleanliness, we learned that the 44,000 square-foot structure cost \$15 million and that the school district's annual budget is \$25 million. The institution serves 250 children, some full-time and some part-time, under the combined supervision of the school superintendent, Mr. Joel Petlin, administrator Joseph Hartman, and Rabbi Yediyda Fisher, who showers these special *neshamos* with warmth, love and a variety of services.

Rabbi Fisher explained that many of the children attend special education classes and receive necessary therapy for only part of the day, and that a transportation system shuttles them from *cheder* or school to Shaarei Chemlah, where they receive the extra help they need.

We were very moved when we witnessed the teachers' joyous reaction to a seven-year-old child who was singing, "Hamalach Hago'el." The teachers explained their unusual excitement: this was the first time in two years that the child had opened his mouth to utter a sound. Their "never give up" attitude had finally paid off.

The Fire Department

After our extended visit to Shaarei Chemlah, we continued our tour, admiring the well-maintained homes, most of which are surrounded by lawns and set apart by bushes, and the clean streets in both the old and new developments.

We reached Chevron Street, where the Kiryas Joel Fire Department, known as Matzlei Eish, is located. We met the fire chief, Mr. Yehoshua Blumenthal, and some of the firemen, all of them village residents. We enjoyed peeking into a fire truck and examining its sophisticated equipment. The fire department was established to fill an urgent need for a local fire squad, especially in this rural setting, where most of the homes are built from wood and present a grave danger in case of a fire.

The Eishes Chayil Kimpaturin Home

The beautifully appointed Eishes Chayil Women's Services Center welcomes mothers from all over New York State, who come to regain their health and strength after birth or illness in this luxurious establishment.

"It's called a *kimpaturin* home," says Mr. Szegedin, "but it's really much more than a facility catering to mothers' of newborns." The Eishes Chayil Center is the most comprehensive women's convalescent home in any Jewish community. Its services include pre- and post-natal care, health and hygiene courses, and a senior program where elderly women meet each day for lunch, *Tehillim*, lectures, and exercise. On the drawing board are plans to add the services of a nutritionist who will help women with weight control, and a special wing that will be reserved for a complete medical center dedicated to women's health needs. We were also shown the center's beautiful multipurpose hall, which is used for the *brissos* of newborn clients.

At the Rebbe's Kever

After an uplifting day of observing the fulfillment of the Rebbe's dream *shittel*, where even mundane, day-to-day routines are marked by an almost-tangible spirituality, we reached a climactic ending. We ascended

a steep hill known as the Yeshivah Mountain, at the top of which we entered the gated *beis hachaim* where the Satmar Rebbe, Harav Yoel Teitelbaum, his wife, Rebbeztin Alte Faiga, and the Satmar Rebbe, Harav Moshe Teitelbaum, *zy"o*, are interred.

Surrounding the Rebbe's *ohel*, like a circle of sentries, are the final resting places of individuals who were very close to the Rebbe, among them his longtime *gabai* Reb Yossel Ashkenazi, and the devoted *roshei kehillah* Reb Leibish Lefkowitz and Reb Sender Deutch.

A palpable aura of holiness enveloped us as we entered the resting place of the holy



Davening at the *tzyun* of the Satmar Rebbe, Harav Yoel Teitelbaum, *zy"o*.

founder of Kiryas Joel. We recited *Tehillim*, lit candles, and placed *kvittelach* on the impressive tombstone, asking that Hashem answer our prayers in the *zechus* of these *tzaddikim*. Leaving the *ohel*, we noticed the yeshivah building where hundreds of *bachurim* sit and learn Torah — a fulfillment of the Rebbe's wish to have a yeshivah right near his *kever*.

As we drove out of Kiryas Joel, we were filled with admiration, nostalgia, and perhaps even a drop of envy of these Yidden, who lead such peaceful lives in this idyllic haven.

Thirty years have elapsed since the Rebbe's *petirah*, but his sacred spirit continues to hover over his followers, and the seeds he planted are blossoming exponentially. The *shittel* that he founded with the purpose of eternalizing his religious principles bears his name and remains a glorious tribute to his saintly life. □