

Jerusalem Or/And Rome: On Satmar Chasidism, Reform Judaism, and the Challenge of Modernity

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Rabbi A. Brian Stoller

A couple weeks ago, my family and I went out to visit a friend in Williamsburg, Brooklyn.

Now, as I'm coming to learn about the area, I figured out that we were in the hipster part of Williamsburg: tons of restaurants and bars and stores, crowded streets, people walking their dogs, music playing, and no parking anywhere.

It was my first and only time in Brooklyn. All I really knew about it was what I saw on *Welcome Back Kotter* reruns when I was a kid, and that it's the hot new place to live. Someone told me recently: "If you can't afford to live in Brooklyn, you live in Manhattan."

I also knew that Williamsburg is home to the Satmar Chasidic community. That's the community from the hit Netflix series *Unorthodox*. They're also the ones who built their own town in upstate New York called Kiryas Joel, named for their founding rebbe, Joel Teitelbaum.

Our friend told us that we were only a few blocks away from the Satmar section of Williamsburg, and I decided we needed to check it out before heading back to Great Neck.

It was early evening on a Saturday and, as we crossed into the neighborhood, we saw the men walking to or from shul in their black robes and high white stockings and towering fur hats (which are called *shtrimeles*), and the girls wearing high-necked formal dresses and long braided hair.

The girls looked to be about Lindsay's age. My daughter, who is completely obsessed with Lululemon everything, wasn't sure what to make of them. "You mean, that's how they really dress? They look like they're from, like, the 1900s or something!" (Hey, she was born in 2009!)

Of course, the distinctive dress makes the Chasidim unmistakable; there is absolutely no question that they are Jewish. And to many people in this world, the Satmar Chasidim *are* what authentic Jews look like.

And that's precisely the point.

My teacher Rabbi David Ellenson has explained that, broadly speaking, there are two ways in which a religious community might respond to social and cultural change in the world around it.¹

One response is what sociologists call "accommodation." That's when the community adapts its norms and values and practices to accommodate the changing reality and keep people inside the tent.

The other possible response is what they call "resistance." That's when the community decides it's more important to hold to its established values and customs than it is to keep people in the tent.

"Better to stay rooted in who we are, even if it means being smaller, than to accommodate change and lose our identity."

The Satmar Chasidim of Williamsburg are a prominent example of a community that has chosen *resistance* in response to the ever-changing cultural, religious, and moral landscape of modernity.

And that's not a negative judgment against them: Resistance is a legitimate response to change, and the Satmar very proudly and explicitly stand apart from the secular world that surrounds them.

Hipster Williamsburg, with all its bustle and in-your-face secularity, is only a few blocks away, but when you cross whatever street or avenue it is that is the invisible Maginot Line separating Hipsterland from Satmarland, the feeling is unmistakable: You have clearly entered into a different world.

And that is very intentional and core to their existence.

The Satmar sect was founded by Rabbi Joel Teitelbaum in the early 1900s in the town of Satu Mare, in what was then part of Hungary. But the Satmar are, in some ways, the spiritual descendants of the famous Hungarian rabbi, Moses Sofer—known as Chatam Sofer—who I talked about a couple weeks ago.

You may remember: Chatam Sofer's motto was "*chadash asur min ha-Torah*"—meaning: "innovation is forbidden by the Torah."

He was the rabbi who crusaded against the early Reform movement and went so far as to forbid his followers to marry Reform Jews.

But it wasn't only *Reform* Judaism that he opposed. He fought ardently against the Enlightenment culture of his time, which brought in new ways of thinking about individuality, freedom, religion, morality, science, and traditional hierarchies.

Chatam Sofer saw the Enlightenment as a dangerous foreign force that threatened to destroy Judaism and the Jewish people.

So, he warned his community against the Enlightened *Orthodox* of his time, too.

"Do not live in their vicinity and do not associate with them at all," he wrote, "and never occupy yourself with the writings of R.M.D."—referring to Moses Mendelssohn, who as an Orthodox Jew, was a leader of the *Haskalah* (the Jewish Enlightenment movement).²

In the words of Jacob Katz, the preeminent scholar of the period, Chatam Sofer believed that "Jewish tradition had to be preserved *in its totality*," and he *knew* that "this could only be done at the price of continued social and cultural isolation. ..."³

This is what he wrote in his Last Will and Testament:

"Have strength and courage through assiduousness and great learning in God's Torah. Gather, disseminate, and act for the sake of Torah in public. ... Be careful not to change your Jewish name, [your Jewish] language, [or your traditional Jewish] dress, heaven forbid. ..."⁴

These three things—names, language, and dress—were critical to Rabbi Sofer's program of resistance to modernity and preservation of his community—because he believed that what you do and represent outwardly impacts your inner commitments and values, and tells others—and tells *you*, yourself—who you are and what you stand for.

It's for the same reason that, in our modern society, police officers and soldiers, and even some schoolchildren, wear uniforms: Because wearing the uniform not only lets other people know who they are, but it also gives the person wearing the uniform a sense of identity and communal belonging.

Chatam Sofer believed these things would keep the Jewish people Jewish.

And he was on firm ground in believing this, because the Torah itself uses the same strategy.

This week's portion, Parashat Re'eh, outlines a long list of mitzvot which, among other things, have the effect of forbidding Jews from eating with non-Jews, intermingling with non-Jews, imitating the practices of non-Jews, and so on. ...

They're what Jacob Katz calls "barriers against the outside"⁵—designed to make the Jewish people an *am kadosh*, a holy people. The Hebrew word "*kadosh*" not only means "holy"; it also means "separate." So, being an *am kadosh* literally means "a separate people."

Communities like the Satmar in Williamsburg have held to that way.

And as the world has continued to change, they've put up even more barriers against the outside.

Frieda Vize, a Brooklyn tour guide who grew up in the Satmar community, explains in her blogs and video tour of Satmar Williamsburg that not only does the community maintain its own educational system, of course, but it also requires its members to use "kosher" cell phones and technologies that bar access to secular-culture outlets like Netflix, news sites, and many other sectors of the Internet.

Satmar homes do not have televisions or screens in them.

Toy stores in the community sell only "kosher" toys, like slip-and-slides that use censor stickers to cover up the pictures on the box of frolicking children dressed in immodest swimsuits.

And rather than offering superhero or princess costumes for kids, they sell child-size robes, stockings, and *shtreimels* so kids can dress up like their parents and play Shabbat.

From where we sit, it's tempting to snicker at this. But we shouldn't.

This community is very clear about who it is and what it wants to be—and all these things serve to reinforce the values they hold dear—such as family, Shabbat, prayer, mitzvah, observance, respect for parents, and deference to authority.

I feel like my own kids could use some of that.

When I think about it, it makes me embarrassed that the videos we let them watch on TikTok and YouTube reinforce other values—namely: materialism, violence, disrespect, body shaming, ridiculing people, you name it.

Are *these* the values we who live outside the bubble of Satmar Williamsburg want to live by and reinforce with our children? I don't think so.

But that's what we do.

Why?

There's a midrash about this which I find to be thought-provoking. It says:

"If someone tells you Jerusalem is thriving and Rome is thriving, don't believe them. If they tell you Jerusalem is in ruins and Rome is in ruins, don't believe them. But if they tell you Jerusalem is thriving and Rome is in ruins, or the opposite—that Rome is thriving and Jerusalem is in ruins—believe them."

Jerusalem here stands for Jewish culture, of course, and Rome stands for secular culture.

Like Chatam Sofer, the authors of this midrash saw these two cultures not only as opposites, but as *mutually exclusive* opposites—meaning: Judaism and secularism cannot coexist in the same community of people. It's either Jerusalem or Rome—and we have to choose.

That's why the Haredim, from Chatam Sofer to Satmar, choose resistance: Because, in their view, that's the only way to sustain Jerusalem against the destructive force of Rome.

We Reform Jews obviously see it differently.

And that has led us to attempt something very difficult—something countless generations of our ancestors thought impossible:

And that is, to *integrate* Jerusalem and Rome into one coherent way of life. To be both religious and secular at the same time.

If we take it seriously, this can be a source of tremendous tension in our lives.

We admire the values Judaism teaches us—values like humility, loving your neighbor as yourself, honoring your parents, taking time out of each week to rest and learn and pray, giving *tz'dakah* enough that you feel it in your pocketbook, modesty, respect for human dignity.

And not only do we admire them; we *believe* in them. They're in our bones.

And yet.

The allure of secular culture is so strong. Much of what it's about, we believe in, too: like personal autonomy, science, inclusion, progress, humanism, feminism, pluralism, equality, and just being *good people*.

But, of course, it comes with other things we don't like as much—like the pressure to compete, and make more and more money, and do a hundred thousand activities so you can get into a good college, and buy all the latest stuff, and take all the best vacations; and violent video games, and overpriced sneakers, and iPads for 2-year-olds.

The pull of Rome is so strong. And, unfortunately, I think a lot of us find that the pull of Jerusalem is, well, maybe a little less so.

I think we have to find ways to change that. I don't know what they are, but we have to find them.

Otherwise, I fear that Chatam Sofer's prophecy might come true, and we will find that the power of Rome has slowly but surely eroded our Jewish commitments and left our Jerusalem in ruins.

That would be very sad—and tragic, I think.

Driving through Williamsburg, we watched the Satmar families go by and thought: *We couldn't live that way. We don't want to live that way.*

We know closing ourselves off from the secular world that way would mean giving up way too many things we believe in and hold dear.

That's why we—and all of you—choose Reform Judaism.

We choose not to resist secular culture but to *accommodate* it and integrate it with our Judaism, because we believe *both* bring great benefit and richness to our lives.

But the path of accommodation is not an easy one.

It's actually ridiculously hard to integrate Jerusalem and Rome into one coherent way of life. It's an ongoing struggle to balance Judaism and secularism in a way that takes both seriously.

Having chosen to try it, I hope that we can arrive at a point someday where if someone says to us "Jerusalem and Rome are both thriving," we will be able to answer without hesitation: I believe them.

1. David Ellenson, *Tradition in Transition*, 123
2. Hatam Sofer, "Last Will and Testament," as quoted in Mendes-Flohr and Reinhartz, eds., *The Jew in the Modern World: A Documentary History*, Third Edition, 196, https://www.academia.edu/1050112/Hatam_Sofers_Last_Will_and_Testament
3. Jacob Katz, *Out of the Ghetto*, 158
4. As quoted in Mendes-Flohr and Reinhartz, 196
5. Jacob Katz, *Tradition and Crisis*, 17