

JP UPDATES

JEWISH POLITICAL NEWS & UPDATES

Queens Residents Learn about the History of Kiryas Joel



What began as a “vampire bill” passed by Governor Mario Cuomo in 1989 erupted into a 10-year battle between the state of New York and a former Cuomo aide Louis Grumet. Grumet, a former director of the New York State School Boards Association, took a major issue with a school district for one specific group of people.

Grumet successfully sued New York three times between 1994 and 1999, challenging that the Village of Kiryas Joel (KJ) in Orange County violates the constitution, which bans government from passing any legislation that establishes a religion or prefers one to another. Kiryas Joel is comprised solely of Satmar Hasidic Jews.

The 1994 Board of Education of Kiryas Joel Village School District v. Grumet set the legal precedent in the fight to uphold separation of church and state.

“The law was wrong,” Grumet exclaimed. “It was only set up for one district.”

On Monday afternoon at the Central Queens Y in Forrest Hills, Grumet spoke about his new book, “The Curious Case of Kiryas Joel: The Rise of a Village Theocracy and the Battle to Defend the Separation of Church and State.” He discussed the Satmar Hasidic community, their clashes with neighboring towns and his fight over freedom of religion versus freedom from religion.

The history of KJ dates back to the 1940s when Rabbi Joel Teitelbaum, the rebbe of Satmar, settled with his followers in Williamsburg in 1947. However, by the 1970s, the rabbi decided life in Brooklyn was not sufficient for him and his people. According to Grumet, the rebbe didn’t want his people to be associated with sports, television or anything connected to modern society.

“It was never far enough away from the temptations of the rest of society to make Rabbi Teitelbaum happy,” he said to the audience. “It was a little hard to achieve that in Brooklyn.”

They purchased the land in 1977 and 14 families moved there. It was a very rural area and at first people were fine with the Satmar Hasidim, but as more came, unrest occurred.

“They were a little bit upset when this community came up from Brooklyn and began to build multi-family dwellings,” he told the audience.

Eventually, wanting to have their own laws and be separate from everyone else, the town filed a petition to become a village in 1979. A village is the only thing the state legislature cannot create and only requires 600 signatures on a petition.

Now it had its own taxes, building laws and school districts and it was everything the rebbe wanted, Grumet explained.

“They basically did this so they could live the way they wanted to,” Grumet remarked.

The children went to yeshiva, but there were several with special needs whose teachers came from the Monroe-Woodbury School District to KJ. However, the Supreme Court said this was unconstitutional and the kids were then to public school.

Things changed one late night in Albany in 1989 when the Senate and Assembly passed a “vampire bill,” meaning they thought it would never see the light of day. Grumet said people assumed Cuomo would veto it, but that did not happen.

Grumet met with Cuomo, his former boss, and asked him how he could sign such a bill, and Cuomo replied “These people don’t ask for much.” According to Grumet, the Hasidic Jews often all vote in high numbers, which benefited Cuomo during re-election. As a member of the state school board, this enraged Grumet, and he decided to take the state to court.

“The constitution doesn’t care what religion you are from,” he said. “It said you can’t do it. New York is supposed to be the most tolerant state in the union. It is supposed to protect minority rights.”

Grumet explained to the attendees that the constitution has a religion clause that has two parts. It says people have freedom to worship and the freedom from being forced to pay for others to worship.

He stressed that public funds should not be spent on religion and that there needs to be a separation between church and state.

“If the state doesn’t enforce its own laws, it doesn’t make any difference what the constitution says,” he commented.

Since Woodbury and Monroe are part of the school board, it could not participate in the lawsuit. Therefore, Grumet hired his friend Jay Worona, who took the case pro-bono.

After the first bill was defeated, Cuomo told Grumet he would continue to pass bills for KJ until they were uncontested. In 1994, George Pataki became governor and passed a third bill, which Grumet also defeated in court.

Eventually, Grumet had enough and stopped fighting. Shortly after, Pataki passed a fourth and final bill. Grumet explained this one was very vague and mentioned nothing about church and state.

“The issue here was not the Satmar asking for something; it is the state of New York giving it to them,” he said. “We said the law was unconstitutional, no matter how it was being implemented.”

Attendee Bell Parnes of Hillcrest was impressed with Grumet’s presentation. She said this case is reminiscent of what is going on with the presidential election.

“I’m just surprised how it was allowed,” Parnes said. “It’s very scary what happens if we don’t enforce the laws.”