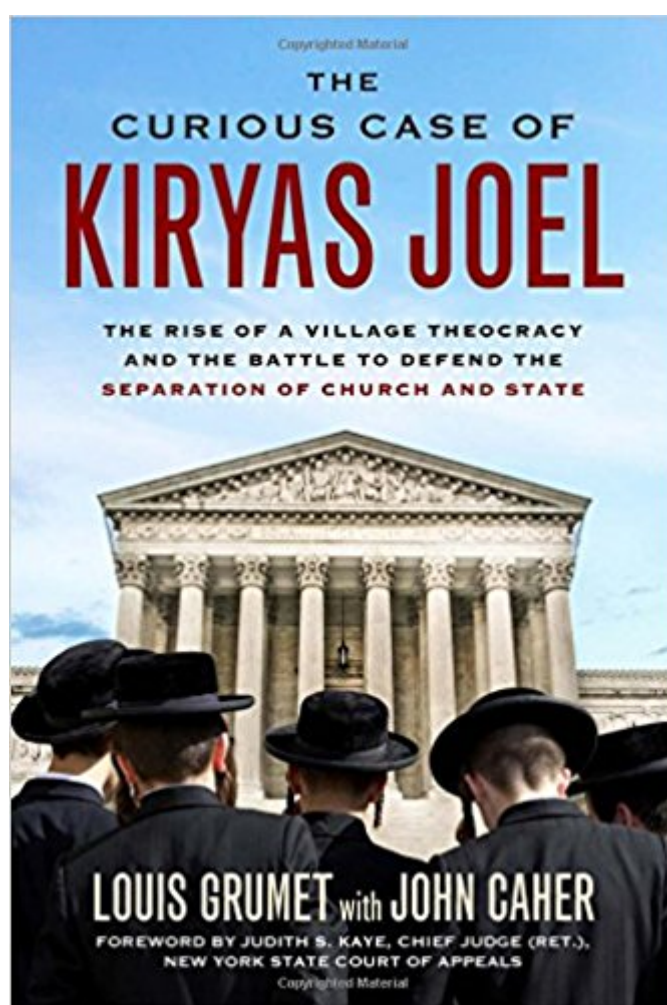


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# The Curious Case Of Kiryas Joel: The Rise Of A Village Theocracy And The Battle To Defend The Separation Of Church And State



## Synopsis

Twenty years ago, in the middle of the night and on the last day of the legislative session, the New York State Legislature created a publicly funded school district to cater to the interests of a religious sect called the Satmar, an insular group of Hasidic Jews that objects to, among other things, female school bus drivers. The rapidly growing sect had bought land in rural Upstate New York, populated it solely with members of its faction, and created a village called Kiryas Joel that exerted extraordinary political pressure over both political parties. Marking the first time in American history that a governmental unit was established for a religious group, the legislature's action prompted years of litigation that eventually went to the US Supreme Court. As today's Supreme Court signals its willingness to view a religious viewpoint like any other speech and accord it equal protection, the 1994 case, Board of Education of Kiryas Joel Village School District v. Grumet, stands as the most important legal precedent in the fight to uphold the separation of church and state. In *The Curious Case of Kiryas Joel*, plaintiff Louis Grumet opens a window onto the Satmar Hasidic community, where language, customs, and dress have led to estrangement from and clashes with neighboring communities, and details the inside story of his fight for the First Amendment and against New York's most powerful politicians. Informed by numerous interviews with key figures such as Governor George Pataki, media accounts, court transcripts, and more, *The Curious Case of Kiryas Joel* not only tantalizes with a peek at cynical power politics driven by votes and Supreme Court justice squabbling and negotiation; it also provides an important demonstration of how a small, insular, and politically savvy religious group can grasp legal and political power. This story is a blend of politics, religion, cultural clashes, and constitutional tension is an object lesson in the ongoing debate over freedom of versus freedom from religion.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

"The Curious Case of Kiryas Joel highlights the First Amendment's two, mutually reinforcing, religion clauses—the Establishment Clause and the Free Exercise Clause—and demonstrates the importance of both preserving religious liberty as well as freedom of conscience and equality for all of us, believers and non-believers alike. Lou Grumet exhibited great courage when he stood up for principle by persistently fighting against the most powerful politicians in New York State and for the First Amendment, all the way to the US Supreme Court. This book tells a fascinating story about why this struggle was so important for not only all freedom-loving individuals, but also our public school system, which plays such a key role in our democracy." —Nadine Strossen, John Marshall Harlan II Professor of Law at New York Law School and former president of the American Civil Liberties Union

"The Curious Case of Kiryas Joel is a fascinating insider account of a small religious group—Satmar Hasidic Jews—that had established a self-governed village in upstate New York, violated the principle of church/state separation, and ended up losing a major case at the United States Supreme Court. Grumet and Caher are sensitive to the anti-Semitism that drove this group to insulate itself, but acutely aware of the danger to our Constitutional system their tactics generated—sometimes with the help of powerful political forces that should have known better." —Barry Lynn, executive director, Americans United for the Separation of Church and State

In *The Curious Case of Kiryas Joel*, this extraordinarily interesting book by Lou Grumet and John Caher, we are given an insight, not only to the insular theocratic community of Kiryas Joel, but also to the judicial conundrum which it has presented to the high courts of New York State and the United States Supreme Court. We are also given a fascinating look at a politically powerful community in rural New York State populated by citizens of the Satmar Hasidic line where language, customs, and dress have led to a cultural estrangement from neighboring communities. Whether your passion is the First Amendment to the United States Constitution, the uniqueness of this Satmar Hasidic sect, or the power that can enable a community to work—political magic, I highly recommend your reading this book.

Sol Wachtler is a Distinguished Professor of Constitutional Law at Touro Law School, and a former Chief Judge of

New York State"Two hundred years after Jefferson and Madison engaged in an extraordinary debate over freedom OF religion vs. freedom FROM religion, The Curious Case of Kiryas Joel demonstrates how a small and insular religious group can grasp political power and perpetrate an outrageous end-run around the United States Constitution.Â Â  This story - a blend of politics, religion, cultural clashes and constitutional tension - is an object lesson in the Establishment Clause at work.Â Â 

- Eliot Spitzer, former attorney general and governor of New York State.Â Â
- "This is a rare and valuable history of one of the most important First Amendment decisions in recent history. Louis Grumet's engaging narrative takes readers behind the scenes to reveal the commitment, the tensions, the strategizing, and the judicial decision making that led to Supreme Court victory.Â Â
- Tony Mauro, Supreme Court correspondent for the National Law Journal.Â Â
- "The story of this epic court battle will fascinate those interested in the legal system as well as those intrigued by Albany politics . . . a readable look at the nitty-gritty of New York's political machine.Â Â
- Kirkus.Â Â
- "This is a stand-up-and-cheer kind of book."Â Â
- Voice of Reason" fascinating insights into raw politics and constitutional law."Â Â
- New York Times "...a fascinating look at the separation of church and state."Â Â
- JCC Association of North America

Louis Grumet is the former executive director of the New York State School Boards Association. He has previously held various positions including special assistant to then New York Secretary of State Mario Cuomo. John Caher, Senior Advisor for Strategic Communications with the New York State Unified Court System,Â Â  is a former senior reporter with the New York Law Journal,Â Â  State Editor of the Albany Times UnionÂ Â  and the author or coauthor of five books including King of the Mountain and A Time for Reflection. Judith S. Kaye wasÂ Â  the first woman to serve on New York's highest court, the state's chief judge for 15 years, and, at the time of her death in January 2016, of counsel to the Manhattan law firm of Skadden, Arps, Slate, Leagher and Flom

Powerful reporting from a first hand insider and adversary that treats with utmost respect his enemies. Gives them the first and more important opinion not being afraid of his own standing - at times you come around even to have sympathy for the subjects he so vehemently dedicated his life to fight. But in the end of the day you see both sides of this humanistic struggle that is affecting us more and more because the Satmar Hasidim are by the day getting bigger and more powerful and democracy which politicians are depended on the block vote cannot deal with it as we see in this

beautiful told story that the courts are serving the society not the other way around.

I used to work in this community in their health care center. How their community works and how they get so many perks from local politicians has always fascinated me. It's sad what is allowed to happen within our government for the sake of votes. This books shows an accurate picture of the local corruption in the New York government. The writers did a great job opening my eyes even more.

This is an excellent recounting of a particular case regarding special education services for children in the village of Kiryas Joel in New York State after the village won the legal right to be a separate school district. This right was challenged successfully as violating the US Constitution, and the book brilliantly explains the legal issues, the different legal, political and ideological principles involved, and the motivation of each of the players including the NYS Governor and assorted Supreme Court justices. It is sympathetic to all sides, clear in its writing and powerfully committed to the First Amendment.

This book combines the best of political writing and a cogent argument for separation of Church and State. Grumet and Caher catch the essence of the founding fathers' hopes and dreams for the new republic. I learned a great deal about some of the most famous (and infamous) New York politicians of the 20th century and even more about the New York political system. I am saddened by the fact that Governor Mario Cuomo failed to show leadership in Church State issue. I urge people to read the book and draw their own conclusions.

The Author provides illuminating revelations, insights and analysis regarding a village theocracy's political influence, contributions, and block voting; the support garnered from the from prominent New York elected officials; mock oral argument sessions for a non-profit attorney's first appearance before the US Supreme Court; the oral arguments and briefs, including those by religious organizations and other groups as friends of the court; the importance of press coverage for the litigation; relevant case law and precedents on the First Amendment Establishment Clause and Freedom of Religion, all the way back to the Letters of Jefferson and Madison; and, court decisions by Judges in the New York State Courts and the Opinions issued in by the US Supreme Court in this litigation spanning a period of 10 years. The background information on the litigation, and actual events that led up to it, are fascinating.

A great book detailing the people and proceedings behind this First Amendment case. I happened to have known and have met one of the attorneys for Kiryas Joel, Nat Lewin. Although I disagreed with his position in this case, he is a brilliant attorney and the book gave him his proper due. I also knew that Gov. Mario Cuomo and later GOP Governor George Pataki were working to aid Kiryas Joel for political reasons. The book is a very interesting read, and discusses the various ramifications of First Amendment Establishment and Free-Exercise law in religious cases.

This was a well written book describing what happens when the people we elect stop following the constitution and a group of people who don't believe in our government know how to game the system. Understand this is not about religion.

As a political junkie and someone who was working for the NYS Assembly while this was going on I found the book fascinating. Good reading and especially interesting for lawyers and those who are concerned about the separation of Church and State which should be all of us in my opinion!

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