



Position Paper on Forced Marriage Analysis of Arranged Marriage as Practiced in Jewish Communities

Forward

The *shidduch* system of arranged marriage as practised in the Charedi (also known as Ultra-Orthodox) part of the Jewish community has worked for many people in a range of Charedi communities. It has brought joy, satisfaction and belonging to many Jewish couples and enriched their lives.

This paper is written for people using the *shidduch* system of arranged marriage. This paper is also written for the Jewish community, including Jewish community organisations, and as well as those working in the wider VAWG sector. We seek to explain our concerns with some aspects of the *shidduch* system, and to demonstrate that elements of the *shidduch* system can create social pressure and coercion to marry, inhibiting a person’s capacity to consent to a marriage. We call on various agencies of the UK Government and other organisations to implement our recommendations.

We explore how social pressures can fit with the term “Forced Marriage” as defined in UK legislation. We write as observant Jews, and we have undertaken this work to reduce the harms inflicted on individuals in our community. We are confident that our community has the confidence to consider our recommendations with nuanced reflection.

Dozens of people have given freely of their time to help with the shaping and editing of this paper. Rabbis, academics, VAWG sector professionals, specialists in education, legal scholars, and advocates. We thank you all.

We are indebted to those who have trusted us with their stories, without which this paper would have no soul. We do not speak for you, we speak with you, and we continue to work towards a time when you can speak freely and without fear of repercussion.

[The National Commission on Forced Marriage UK](#), chaired by The Rt. Hon. Baroness Elizabeth Butler-Sloss GBE, have been incredible discussants throughout this project. We are proud to publish this paper in consultation with them. Their director, Dr Nasreen Rehman, has offered wisdom and guidance to us as we crafted the cornerstones of our arguments and we are lucky to have had the benefit of her expertise. Even before the publication of this paper, important work has been done and we are grateful to be part of the conversation. We stand together with those who have been doing this work for so long already.

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[Nahamu](#)

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Executive Summary

This paper examines the *shidduch* system of arranged marriages as practised in Charedi communities, in the context of the UK legislation and Government guidance on forced marriage. We conclude that some *shidduch* arrangements fall within the definition of forced marriage under UK law. This is largely due to the social coercion to marry, and the lack of personal autonomy that some Charedi young people have over their choice of marriage partner and circumstances of their marriage.

All forced marriages are by their nature also arranged marriages, however, not all arranged marriages are forced. We set out the context for forced marriage. Many Charedi young people are primed from childhood that they will marry someone chosen by their parents. Their outlook and education can be severely limited when Charedi schools redact material that is not consistent with a specific world view. When this occurs, it is compounded by the insular nature of the community, with many Charedi young people only engaging with peers within their community and of the same gender as themselves. Further, in the *shidduch* system key information about prospective spouses can be withheld, making an informed decision impossible. We are also concerned that stigma around broken engagements can lead to social pressure to go through with a marriage.

We set out what we consider to be five markers of forced marriage that occur within some Charedi communities. These markers demonstrate both social coercion to marry, and the removal of the young person's ability to give the free and full consent that the legislation requires. We are aware that in some Charedi communities all five markers are present in most marriages, but in other Charedi communities only one or two markers are present, and even then, only in some marriages. We consider it likely that an arranged marriage could be considered a forced marriage under UK law even with just one or two of these markers.

The markers we have identified are; firstly, **a limited ability to opt out** of the arranged marriage process. This can arise when a Charedi young person cannot easily decide to meet a potential spouse in another way. This marker would also be present where they cannot control the timing of the *shidduch* process, or they are unable to choose to not marry at all. Secondly, **a rushed engagement**, with the couple only meeting a few times (often only once) before the engagement being agreed. Thirdly, once engaged, the couple is **not allowed to meet again** (in some cases the parties are not allowed to speak on the telephone either) until the wedding, which is held several months later. Fourthly, there is **a binding engagement** ritual, whereby the parents sign a contract agreeing to bring their children to the wedding at a certain future date. Finally, there is no opportunity to provide full and free consent in a system where people are expected to rely on their parent's choice and **marry the person they are introduced to**.

We have set out our recommendations which are all in keeping with our motto of **engage, explain, educate and empower**. We call for engagement with Charedi community leaders and at grassroots level to explain the parameters and harms of forced marriage. We ask for education around forced marriage in Charedi schools, and within the Charedi community. We seek to empower Charedi parents to break the cycle of forced marriage when it comes to their children and use other models of the *shidduch* system where the young person can dictate the timing, can easily say no to any particular match, and can meet freely with the prospective spouse both before and after the engagement. Further, opting not to have an arranged marriage or breaking an engagement should carry no stigma.

Introduction

This is an updated version of our 2019 forced marriage position paper and is based on further discussions with the Forced Marriage Unit (FMU), the National Commission on Forced Marriage UK and further interviews with those who have experienced forced marriage in the Charedi community.

This paper examines whether and to what extent arranged marriage practises that occur in parts of the Jewish community fall under the UK Government's definition of forced marriage. We set out recommendations for Government departments, organisations in the Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG)¹ sector, Jewish community organisations² and the voluntary sector.

We understand that the process of arranged marriage as practised in various Charedi communities is considered by these communities to be a religious right or duty. Whilst in the United Kingdom there is freedom of thought, belief and religion, under Article 9(2)³ of the Human Rights Act, this right is not unconditional. Freedom of religion includes the right to put a person's religious thoughts and beliefs into action. As such, public authorities⁴ cannot stop individuals from practising their religion, without very good reason. However if the public authorities can show that its action is lawful, necessary and proportionate in order to protect the rights and freedoms of other people, it would be valid to stop individuals from manifesting their religious practice. Therefore, if the UK courts were to consider some of the practices associated with arranged marriages to be forced, the Human Rights Act would not protect the religious communities' or parents' rights to force the individual to get married.

We anticipate that highlighting the issue of forced marriage in some Charedi communities may lead to accusations of antisemitism, levelled either at Nahamu, or another organisation we work with. However, we have carefully analysed the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA) working definition of antisemitism⁵ and we conclude that highlighting the risks of forced marriage and educating our community about forced marriage would not constitute an act of antisemitism. This paper considers observed features of some Charedi marriages against well-established external criteria, based on first-hand experiences and testimonies.

Our motto is: engage, explain, educate and empower. We see little value in pursuing criminal prosecutions or engaging into a detailed legal analysis of the forced marriage legislation to find loopholes. As far as we are concerned this position paper follows the intention of Parliament when the 2014 Forced Marriage legislation came into force. We would like to see improved compliance with the law and the intention of Parliament. We believe that the best way to achieve this is via engagement with Charedi communities and improved education, particularly in schools.

We have written this paper for a UK based audience responding to UK legislation. However we are aware that forced marriage legislation is similar in other countries which have large Charedi communities⁶ and we call on others to continue the conversation abroad.

¹ Including the National Commission on Forced Marriage UK <https://forcedmarriagecommission.co.uk>

² Including the Board of Deputies <https://www.bod.org.uk/> and the Jewish Leadership Council <https://www.thejlc.org/>

³ <https://www.equalityhumanrights.com/en/human-rights-act/article-9-freedom-thought-belief-and-religion>

⁴ <https://justice.org.uk/public-authorities-human-rights-act-1998/>

⁵ <https://www.holocaustremembrance.com/resources/working-definitions-charters/working-definition-antisemitism>

⁶ USA Government Website: <https://www.uscis.gov/humanitarian/forced-marriage>

Forced Marriage is a Criminal Offence, set out in the The Anti-Social Behaviour, Crime and Policing Act 2014 (The 2014 Act)⁷:

s121 (1) A person commits an offence in England and Wales if he or she:

- (a) uses violence, threats or any other form of coercion for the purpose of causing another person to enter into the marriage, and
- (b) believes, or ought to reasonably believe, that the conduct may cause the other person to enter into the marriage without free and full consent

s121 (2) In relation to a victim who lacks capacity to consent to marriage, the offence under subs.(1) is capable of being committed by any conduct carried out for the purpose of causing the victim to enter into a marriage (whether or not the conduct amounts to violence, threats or any other form of coercion).

The UK government website clarifies what is meant by coercion:⁸

- You have the right to choose who you marry, when you marry or if you marry at all.
- Forced marriage is when you face physical pressure to marry (for example, threats, physical violence or sexual violence) or emotional and psychological pressure (e.g. if you're made to feel like you're bringing shame on your family).

Background

Many Charedi Jews arrange marriages for their children through an arranged marriage known as a *Shidduch*, using matchmakers (*Shadchanim*). The arrangements vary according to family customs, socio-economic status and influence in the Charedi community. The degree of autonomy that the young couple has over the arrangements varies considerably as well, depending on which section of the Charedi community the family belongs to. Lack of autonomy and the correlating coercion has been observed to be more likely in Chassidic⁹ Charedi communities than in other Charedi communities. This document therefore focuses on practices in the Chassidic community, but these practices are not exclusive to the Chassidic community and not every Chassidic marriage will be conducted in this way. As such, we encourage looking for markers for forced marriage, which we have outlined below, rather than focusing on the community, heritage and identity of the young people and the family involved.

Chassidic marriages are generally arranged when the young people are aged between 17-19¹⁰ years

⁷ <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2014/12/section/121/enacted> The Anti-Social Behaviour, Crime and Policing Act came into force on 16th June 2014. Under this legislation it is a criminal offence in England, Scotland and Wales to force someone to marry. The maximum penalty for the forced marriage offence is 7 years imprisonment.

⁸ <https://www.gov.uk/stop-forced-marriage>

⁹ Chassidic Jews are part of the Charedi community. They are distinct from the rest of the Charedi community in their belief in a mystical rather than text focused doctrine.

¹⁰ Very occasionally, Charedi marriages take place as early as 15 years old. Marriages at age 15 are very rare

old, and engagements typically last for up to a year. If a Chassidic man or woman remains single at 21 years old, the “quality” of matches offered to their parents may be reduced. Unlike other parts of the Jewish community, Chassidic marriages are often religious-only marriage ceremonies, with civil ceremonies taking place separately, if at all¹¹.

Although we consider that some practices of Chassidic arranged marriages fall within the definition of forced marriage under UK law¹², the context of how Chassidic young people are raised means that most comply, and go along with a marriage to a stranger they may have only met once or twice. Chassidic parents can use various ways of exerting influence, pressure, and coercion over the young couple getting married. There are numerous contributing factors, including that young people are primed from childhood for a marriage arranged by their parents and that Chassidic girls may be brought up to be deferential to male authority. Other considerations include the lack of relationship and sex education (RSE) in Charedi schools, and the isolated and segregated upbringing of Chassidic children. Because of this, Chassidic young people are unlikely to have had any meaningful contact with peers outside the Charedi community, nor have they met young people of the opposite gender. Further, parents may have a vested interest in withholding key critical information about their children.

It is also useful to reflect on the difficulties of leaving a Charedi marriage; including the stigma of divorce, and coercion, such as the husband threatening not to give his wife a religious divorce (*get*) if she leaves him. Whilst these difficulties do not directly contribute to our consideration of whether the marriage is forced at the outset, they have a significant impact on the lives of those affected when the two parties to the marriage are not compatible.

Context of Forced Marriage

A. Lack of Relationship and Sex Education (RSE)¹³ and understanding of consent

The lack of RSE in Charedi schools means that the young people getting married may not be prepared for sexual relations, often not being made aware until the run up to the wedding of the physical or sexual aspects of a marriage. As a result, Chassidic young people are unlikely to have any meaningful awareness of what it means to consent, both to the marriage itself and later to sexual intercourse. Similarly, they may not understand or recognise abusive behaviours such as coercive control, sexual abuse, marital rape, financial abuse, and domestic abuse. Due to their insular upbringing and the nature of the arranged marriage process, they may struggle to identify or articulate

and typically happen within the families of the heads of Chassidic dynasties (although this is anecdotal). Other reasons for child marriage (before the child’s 18th birthday) to occur is there is a “defect” or disability, so the parents are eager to marry the child off quickly. Additionally, early marriage (even at 15) can happen when a couple have started dating, particularly if they have become sexually active, especially if the girl is pregnant.

¹¹ [Anti-social Behaviour, Crime and Policing Act 2014](#) s121(4) “Marriage” means any religious or civil ceremony of marriage (whether or not legally binding).

¹² https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/322310/HMG_Statutory_Guidance_publication_180614_Final.pdf

See in particular: Page 7: “Perpetrators who force their children or other family members into marriage often justify their behaviour as protecting their children, building stronger families and preserving “so-called” cultural or religious beliefs. When challenged on this practice, they often do not see anything wrong in their approach. The act of forcing another person into marriage cannot be justified on religious grounds; every major faith condemns it and crucially, free consent is a prerequisite of all religions.” Also page 8: “Many young people will then be living through their entire childhoods with the expectation that they will marry someone of their parents or other family members choosing. What needs to be communicated to all of those at risk is that forced marriage is a crime and they have a fundamental human right to be able to choose their future spouse.”

¹³ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/relationships-education-relationships-and-sex-education-rse-and-health-education>

any red flags for abuse in their prospective partner's language or behaviour. They may also just go along with the process of their arranged marriage, rather actively indicating their consent.

B. Primed from Childhood

Whilst Charedi arranged marriages are rarely compelled through the threat of violence, survivors have reported a level of social coercion which arises from their insular upbringing. Children are primed from early childhood that all matches are arranged by parents. Both parents and Charedi schools play their part in redacting or limiting access to literature or media which portrays romance or dating, such that those who grow up in these insular communities are not fully aware of the other ways of meeting someone for the purposes of marriage. Even if they are aware of romance or dating, they may be taught that romance is for non-Jews (*goyim*¹⁴), and physical attraction at the outset is not required for a lasting marriage. The total exclusion of any reference to LGBTQ+ identity in both educational and social contexts means that LGBTQ+ Charedi young people face additional challenges and very serious issues of consent when presented with a universal expectation of early, heterosexual marriage as their only option.

C. Withholding Information

Survivors have reported that parents, *Shadchanim*, and Rabbis have been known to withhold key information from *Shadchanim* and the interested parties particularly around health conditions. Parents may avoid obtaining a diagnosis even when they suspect there is a problem, or omit to mention it to the *Shadchan* for fear of it resulting in an inferior match. Likewise, *Shadchanim* who are informed of a health condition may decide not to pass this information on. Associates of the family and the young person concerned may also be silent when asked for their opinion, for fear of backlash. This means that young men and women can find themselves married to unstable, ill, or violent partners without any indication or awareness before the wedding.

D. Difficulties in leaving an engagement (or marriage)

There is a considerable stigma in breaking off an engagement, with the belief that breaking an engagement will bring shame and disrepute on the individual and family, similar to honour based abuse (HBA) in other cultures. Engagements are very commonly marked with a binding legal document with both financial and religio-spiritual penalties if the match is broken. Particularly for women, leaving a marriage can be difficult, as her husband could refuse to grant a religious divorce (*get*), preventing the woman marrying again under Jewish law¹⁵. Moreover, once divorced, both parties would be considered inferior when it comes to having a second arranged marriage, and this will affect their standing and ability to provide for themselves and any children.

Markers of Forced Marriage

The presence of any of the following features in an arranged marriage may mean that the marriage is a forced marriage under UK law. All these factors make it difficult for the prospective bride or groom to say no to the person their parents have chosen for them, or for them to determine the timing of the *shidduch* process or whether they wish to get married altogether.

¹⁴ Pejorative term translates as "nations".

¹⁵ If she left the Charedi community and had further children without receiving a Jewish divorce (*get*) from her estranged husband, her subsequent children would be considered [mamzerim](#) and would be unable to marry other Orthodox Jews according to Jewish law (*halakha*).

1. There is limited **ability to opt out of the arranged marriage process**, such that the young people cannot easily choose to meet a potential spouse in another way. Additionally, parents may exert pressure on the young person to begin the *Shidduch* process.
2. The **engagement is rushed** with just a few meetings (often one or two meetings) so that the couple do not get to know each other before the engagement is agreed.
3. The couple are not **allowed to meet**, speak to or freely communicate with each other between the initial meeting and the wedding. This reduces the chances of either party deciding that the other is not a good match, and ensures they are dependent on their parents for further information about their fiancé/e.
4. The **binding engagement** (*tenayim*)¹⁶ (with a financial penalty for a breach written into a contract) serves as an extra layer of entrapment, as there are now religious law (*halakhic*) reasons as well as social reasons compelling the couple to go through with the wedding.
5. In contrast to an arranged introduction, the expectation on the young person **to marry the person they are introduced to**, along with the social stigma on romance, and the lack of awareness around other ways of meeting someone to marry makes it impossible to provide the full and free consent as required by the legislation. As a result there is a lack of agency in agreeing to marry that person, or agreeing to the timing of the *shidduch* process or agreeing whether to get married at all.

Separately, there is a lack of awareness around consent to sexual intercourse. In many cases the bride and groom are taught that they must consummate the marriage on the wedding night¹⁷ in what is presented as an absolute requirement of Jewish law (*halakha*). This means there is a lack of agency when it comes to consenting to sexual intercourse¹⁸. It also ensures that the couple have no possible opportunity to discuss family planning before consummating their marriage, which can result in wedding night pregnancy.

Recommendations

Our recommendations follow our motto of: **engage, explain, educate and empower.**

- **Education in Schools:** DFE¹⁹ to ensure that education around forced marriage is included in the mandatory RSE, especially when any of the pupils are at risk of forced marriage, including in all maintained and independent Charedi schools. Secondary school aged pupils should be taught the UK government position that they can “*choose who to marry, when to marry and whether to marry at all*”. [Ofsted](#) should ensure that there is education around forced marriage, in all Charedi schools, to children aged 14-16.
- **Guidance:**
 - Forced Marriage Unit to draft guidance for the Charedi community, translated into both

¹⁶ The text will vary slightly in different Chassidic communities. This is an example:

https://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/532558/jewish/Tenaim-Text.htm

¹⁷ The bride, groom or both may also be told that sexual intercourse is mandated at specific times, including immediately after the monthly visit to the ritual bath (*mikvah*). This raises questions about consent within a marriage and needs further analysis.

¹⁸ See Twitter thread: https://twitter.com/rayne_like_rain/status/1348883146285195264?s=20

¹⁹ [DFE](#) Department For Education

- Hebrew and Yiddish explaining the markers of forced marriage, and clearly specifying the limits of a legal arranged marriage versus an illegal forced one.
- Forced Marriage Unit to draft robust guidance for professionals including a section on informed consent to marriage.
 - Forced Marriage Unit to update the 2014 guidance document.²⁰
- **Community Engagement:** MHCLG²¹ to engage with Charedi organisations such as Interlink and Rabbinic leadership to discuss the parameters of a legal arranged marriage versus an illegal forced one.
 - **Government Funded Support Service:** Forced marriage support to be provided by the UK government with additional support from a Jewish community charity²² to empower those at risk of forced marriage, with the ability to provide practical support for those who need to leave the community as a result.
 - **Campaigns / Outreach:**
 - *Forced Marriage Unit:* The existing outreach poster campaign²³, currently available in English, Arabic, Somali, Urdu and Welsh should be updated to include Yiddish and Hebrew. The images should be updated to be representative of Charedi young people.
 - *Jewish Community Organisation:* Outreach to parents who perpetuate forced marriage, to empower and support them in breaking the cycle.
 - **Change in Law:** Government to outlaw child marriage in the UK²⁴. Criminal prosecutions for those conducting religious only ceremonies, particularly for children under 18 years old.
 - **Giving Notice:** Consideration given as to what role giving notice to marry can play in identifying and supporting those at risk of forced marriage.

Conclusion

We have sought to explain the social factors that underwrite forced marriage in some Charedi communities. We hope that the markers identified in this paper are useful in determining where in the Jewish community forced marriage is likely to occur and who is likely to be at risk of forced marriage.

We hope that the Jewish community will reflect the harm that forced marriage causes in our community, and accept that forced marriage occurs in the Jewish community just like it does in every other community.

We hope that this paper is useful for setting a new standard for good practise in analysing the markers of forced marriage, for Jewish communities and other communities, both in the UK and in other countries.

²⁰https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/322310/HMG_Statutory_Guidance_publication_180614_Final.pdf

²¹ MHCLG Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government

²² Consideration is needed on which communal charity would be best placed to support those at risk of forced marriage. Although Jewish Women's Aid may be able to help some women in limited circumstances, forced marriage equally affects men, and we consider that the support required is closer to Mavar's mission of helping those from the Charedi community lead fully autonomous lives. <https://mavar.org.uk/>

²³ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/forced-marriage-you-have-the-right-to-choose-posters>

²⁴ <https://www.girlsnotbrides.org/about-girls-not-brides/national-partnerships/united-kingdom/>

Appendix 1 – Examples of Markers of Forced Marriage

Note: These examples are based on real people that [Nahamu](#) has spoken to. Names have been changed and several stories amalgamated to illustrate each marker of forced marriage.

1. Ability to Opt Out of Process

Yoel is 19 years old and is investigating life outside the Charedi community. The full extent of this is unknown to his parents. He has a mobile phone with internet access and has met some young people outside his community. He has also visited a nightclub and the cinema. However, his parents are starting to become suspicious of his behaviour. Yoel's English is limited, as he attended an unregistered school, and he would like to go to college to catch up on the education he missed out on.

Yoel is the 3rd child in his family. His older brother and sister are already married. His next youngest sibling is a sister, Leah, who is 18. Yoel's parents tell him that he must get married in the next year, because otherwise he is delaying his sister Leah's marriage, and she is "ready". Yoel's parents also feel that he should get married now, before any rumours of his worrying behaviour become known in the close-knit Chassidic community.

Yoel tells his parents he would rather wait. He has been giving excuses for the past year, and he explains that he does not mind Leah getting married before him. He suggests that he could meet someone through dating in the future. However, this alarms his parents further and they make it clear that he cannot "allow" Leah to get married first. Yoel realises he can choose between getting married on their terms or being excluded from the family home, and left without communal and financial resources.

- *Is it a law or a custom for siblings to marry in age order?*

It is a custom based on the Biblical story of Leah and Rachel²⁵. It was not codified into Jewish law (*halakha*), and therefore is not binding. However, strong societal and familial pressures often exist to ensure that siblings are married in age order.

- *Why would Yoel be concerned about leaving the family home?*

Yoel barely speaks English and is working in the Charedi community for a family friend. He is expected to save his salary for marriage, and he is worried that if he spends it, this will be noticed. His father manages a portfolio of properties and is claiming housing benefit in Yoel's name, with the income being put to one side to pay for Yoel's wedding. This prevents Yoel from renting accommodation for himself. Yoel asks some of the people he has met outside the community if he can move into their homes, but no one is able to help. He fears that if he leaves the family home, he will not be able to find alternative employment, or somewhere suitable to live. Additionally, if he left the community, it is likely that he would be shunned, and it would be difficult later to change his mind and come back.

- *What other circumstances would push Charedi parents to hastily arrange an engagement?*

Parents may also be concerned about their child's reputation for other reasons; flouting community

²⁵ [Genesis 29:26](#) And Laban said, "It is not done so in our place to give the younger one before the firstborn."

dress code or other community religious norms, drug addiction, LGBTQ+ issues, mental illness, physical illnesses, learning difficulties, or word getting out that they have had a boyfriend / girlfriend (especially if the young people are sexually active).

2. Rushed Engagement

Suri's parents have arranged for her to meet Yoel, and they have done extensive research on his family. Likewise, Yoel's parents have done extensive research on Suri's family. After one heavily choreographed and awkward meeting, in Suri's parents' dining room, their parents encourage them to get engaged. Suri and Yoel expected this as they live in a community where all couples get engaged in this way. Suri has never questioned why the engagement celebration food was laid out before the introduction (*b'show*) took place.

However, immediately after the *b'show*, Suri tells her parents that she is not sure she wants to marry Yoel. He gave odd answers to a few questions, but her parents reassure her that he was probably nervous, and all his background checks were impressive. They have checked out the "market" and he is the best option. Suri has also absorbed messages from her teachers and role models that it would be immodest to meet multiple young men and that she would get a reputation for "being fussy". The engagement celebratory drinks and cakes are already prepared. She reluctantly agrees.

When Yoel reminds his parents, before the meeting, that he is not ready to get married, they remind him that he will delay his younger sister's marriage. He reluctantly agrees to proceed with the *b'show*, knowing it will inevitably lead to an engagement.

- *Why do Suri and Yoel agree to marry after one (or two) meeting/s?*

They have both been brought up in an insular community, where this model of arranged marriage is the norm. Suri has not had access to outside media, which portrays other ways of meeting someone such as in films or literature or the internet. She has no awareness of consent in relationships, or that she can decide whom or when to marry. Suri has not met anyone from outside her community, other than fleeting meetings (with her GP, and in shops etc). Both Yoel and Suri attended schools that did not teach RSE, and books were redacted.

Suri is the eldest of 9 siblings. She shares a bedroom with her 17-year-old sister who keeps reminding her that she is next to get married and Suri should not keep her "waiting". She works part time in a local shop. She enjoys spending time with her friends but longs for the space and independence she thinks marriage will give her, away from her childhood home. She enjoys cooking and cannot wait to have her own kitchen. She saw all the new clothes her older cousin was bought when she got engaged, and Suri is looking forward to her new wardrobe.

Yoel has begun to meet people his age outside the community. However, with his limited English and lack of cultural awareness, he has found interaction much more difficult than he expected. He assumed it would be easy to find a girlfriend outside the community but now he is aware that this is not the case. He is aware that the best match within the *shidduch* system is likely to be the first one. If he turns it down, any subsequent matches may be inferior. He realises that there is no reason to think that any subsequent match will be more suitable than Suri, and in any case, he has no way to determine how suitable Suri or any other match suggested for him would be.

3. Binding Engagement

At Yoel and Suri's engagement party, an engagement ritual is performed, and a *tenayim* contract is signed. This is an agreement between both families (usually the fathers) that they agree to bring their children to be married on a particular future date. The agreement incorporates financial penalties for a breach.

During the engagement party, Suri realises that she is not sure about marrying Yoel, but she knows it is not possible to break an engagement due to the contract, the consequent financial penalties, the stigma of breaching a commitment made in religious law, and the embarrassment to the family that a broken engagement would cause.

- *Why can't the engagement be broken off?*

There is significant social stigma for breaking an engagement, including superstitions about one's soul being cursed with bad luck. The binding nature of the *tenayim* engagement agreement is designed to limit the ability of the bride and groom to change their mind before the wedding, and to incentivise their parents to persuade them to go through with it.

4. Lack of Communication Before Wedding

Suri and Yoel are engaged after one meeting. They have engagement drinks with close family members that evening. After this evening, their parents insist that they are not allowed to communicate with each other at all, not even by telephone, other than (in public) at their formal engagement party (later that week) where the engagement is formalised. They will next see each other at the wedding ceremony several months later, and they are not allowed to speak to each other, even on the telephone until then.

- *Why are they not allowed to speak to each other after the initial meeting?*

This custom is based on a strict interpretation of the rules of modesty. However, it also prevents the couple from getting to know each other before the wedding and reduces the chances of the couple changing their minds about the match.

- *What are the options should Yoel want to meet Suri again?*

Yoel's options are limited, as his parents will not give him Suri's contact details, nor allow him another meeting. Any meeting will therefore have to take place without the knowledge of their parents. Furthermore, Suri is unlikely to have her own phone. Yoel knows Suri works in a local shop, but even if he can work out which one, he is concerned that if he tries to slip her a letter asking to meet, he would be humiliated if she did not feel the same way and told her parents, who will tell his parents that he had tried to get in touch.

5. Marrying the Person they Are Introduced to

Suri has attended Charedi schools since early childhood and has no other reference point for getting married. Literature was redacted if it contained romance, and she was taught that falling in love is for *goyim*. She has been brought up to understand that her parents will arrange her a marriage when they deem the time is right. Further, she understands that were she to say no to

this (first) match, the next match would likely not be as good. She intrinsically understands that were she to say no a few times, she would have a reputation for being fussy, and would no doubt be matched with someone inferior. In this regard she lacks the agency to consent to the marriage, as in practice she would not be able to say no to the marriage process without leaving her family home, and potentially her job.

Suri also is not aware of sexual intercourse, because she attended Charedi schools that do not teach SRE. In the run-up to their wedding, Suri and Yoel separately attend marriage preparation classes. In the last class, usually held within a week of the wedding, the teachers describe sexual intercourse, and they are both told that they are religiously mandated to consummate their marriage on their wedding night. The quality of the education will vary according to who is providing it, and it is very difficult for either the bride or groom to ask for more details if they are not clear on what is required.

Yoel's parents and Suri's parents have agreed together that Suri will wear a specific type of head-covering. They also agreed that Suri will shave her head monthly underneath the headcovering. Suri's mother shaves her head, so Suri never anticipated otherwise.

Yoel has discovered life beyond the Charedi community and is not sure if he wants to continue to be a Charedi Jew. He would like to delay having children until he is sure about his future but is unsure how to approach this with Suri.

- *Does Jewish law stipulate that the marriage must be consummated on the wedding night?*

No. It is a particular interpretation based upon the idea that the first act of sexual intercourse is a religious commandment (*mitzvah*), and the principle in Jewish law (*halakha*) that one should never delay a *mitzvah*. The pre-wedding preparation education raises concerns about consent both on the wedding night. As the couple are complete strangers to each other and have never had any sexual encounters, they need to be told sexual intercourse is a religious requirement or there is a risk they would not want to consummate their marriage immediately.

- *Can Suri or Yoel use contraception on the wedding night?*

Suri is not aware of any form of contraception, or indeed the concept of contraception, due to her insular upbringing and the lack of RSE in Charedi schools. Contraception in Charedi communities is used (if at all) to space births, and generally the couple would be expected to have both a son and a daughter, and ask a Rabbi for a dispensation (*heter*) before they were permitted to use it. Suri would not have received this information as part of the pre-marriage classes. Yoel briefly considered using a condom on the wedding night as he does not want Suri to get pregnant before he has had a chance to explain that he wants to live a more open-minded life but he quickly ruled it out as he is concerned that Suri would notice and question it. There are no other contraceptive options for men. He is concerned that if Suri gets pregnant quickly, he will be trapped in the marriage due to fatherhood.

The above examples are based on interviews with survivors of forced marriage from a range of Charedi communities. We thank them for trusting us with your stories.