

BRITISH RABBINICAL UNION

Principal Rabbinic Authority for
DEFENDING TRADITIONAL EDUCATION

Advancing the right to authentic Torah education for over 10,000 children

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5th November 2024

Dear Minister,

Ref: 2023-0020754DBPO

A Response To Nahamu's "Education Policy Position Paper": Defending the Rights and Values of the Orthodox Jewish Community

I am writing in my capacity as a member of the Orthodox Jewish community of the United Kingdom and as President of the **British Rabbinical Union**, regarding the government's policy on education within Orthodox Jewish communities.

On 1 September 2024 the non-governmental organisation 'Nahamu' (nahamu.org), published an extensive document titled '**Education Policy Position Paper**' ('the Paper'). It consists of 7 pages of text and 19 pages of 'Appendices' and 'Addendums'.

This paper purports to present an account of education within the Haredi community. It **reports false claims** of significant failings and potentially unlawful practices and proposes a series of concrete, sweeping measures aimed at restricting the freedom of Haredi parents to choose the education provided to their children.

The paper includes an introductory 'Foreword' by Baroness Blackstone and Baroness Morris who praise the report and assert that the government's policy and the King's Speech has '*already set out solutions to some of the issues raised in the paper, and includes a commitment to improve compliance around homeschooling by **operating a register of children not in school***'.

Chief Rabbi

Rabbi David Weis

Judge and Prominent Authority on Jewish Law

Head: Beis Din Le'inyonei Mumones (Bournemouth)

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Lifelong Advocate for Religious and Educational Causes

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Beth Medrash Ohel Yakov Pshevorsk

These statements, given by two persons of great experience and authority, give the impression that the Paper is aligned with government policy and could potentially assist in its implementation. We believe that such an impression would be entirely incorrect. **The Paper contradicts the government's policies and principles** and should not be taken seriously by your Department.

This is because:

- a) it is informed throughout by **false and misleading accounts of the facts**,
- b) it is animated by **prejudice towards any religious education** and
- c) exhibits clear and unjustified **hostility to the Orthodox Jewish life** as a whole.

We expand on all these points in detail below (in parts (a) to (c) of this letter).

In our view, a closer examination of Nahamu's analysis and proposals reveals that this 'Position Paper' is not only inconsistent with government policy but also **presents recommendations that are effectively discriminatory and potentially unlawful**. As an organisation, Nahamu lacks an understanding of Haredi life and the unique value our educational system provides. In fact, Nahamu's approach reflects a clear hostility toward the Haredi community and religious education more broadly. Such views should not be given serious consideration by any responsible policymaker, let alone by the Department for Education.

We believe that educational policy in the United Kingdom has been tolerant and inclusive. We also believe and expect that your government will continue to be tolerant and inclusive. We cannot imagine a British government that, like Nahamu, might make its aim to **indoctrinate children into a humanist lifestyle**.

We set out these points in the following three parts: (a) **Factual Inaccuracies**, (b) **Prejudice toward Religious Education** and (c) **Hostility towards the Orthodox Jewish Life**.

Exposing Misrepresentations: Challenging Misleading Claims About Haredi Education Standards

(a) Factual Inaccuracies

The Paper makes various claims about the supposedly unacceptably low standard of Haredi education. We believe that **all of these claims are misleading**.

The most striking claim made by Nahamu's Paper is that

*'Many Chasidic boys are illiterate in English and are **unable to express themselves in writing in any language**' (at p. 4)*

This claim is **not only exaggerated but also misleading**. Those actively involved in Charedi education know that this portrayal does not align with reality.

Contrary to Nahamu's assertion, literacy rates in our schools do not fall below national standards, including in English. While English may not be the first language for many Chasidic children, they achieve a strong working knowledge of it alongside two or three additional languages - a **multilingual ability far exceeding the national average**. This level of linguistic literacy, including English, ensures that Haredi students are well-prepared for practical and professional life, as evidenced by the thriving careers and businesses established by Haredi graduates.

Nahamu offers **no credible evidence to substantiate the claim of illiterate boys**, nor does it draw on any reliable sources. The few media reports that echo this narrative are either simply false or lack any verifiable support. Nahamu's sweeping generalisation is, quite simply, without foundation.

The most significant other negative claims made by the Paper about Charedi education are the following:

1. *'some elements of the charedi leadership' are 'determined' to ensure that their children, particularly boys, 'do not receive a level of education that would enable them to engage fully in wider UK society, including access to tertiary education and participation in the wider workforce' (p. 2)*
2. *'even when charedi boys' secondary schools are registered (with the DfE) and do provide secular education, the time set for secular education can be very limited, and **most charedi boys leave during, or at the end of year 10**, even though compulsory education continues until the end of year 11'. (p. 2, repeated at p. 4)*
3. *'Secular education [for girls] is generally adequate to KS3, but access to externally recognised qualifications may be restricted in order that [sic] **girls have limited options after finishing school**. Even when charedi girls can access KS4 qualifications, access to KS5 qualifications is often limited as a way of restricting access to tertiary education'. (p. 3, repeated at p. 4)*
4. *There are '**unregistered schools**' that provide no secular education to boys after the age of 13, because the yeshivas are unregistered and provide no 'secular education in English, maths, science or any other secular subject beyond the age of 13' (p. 4)*
5. ***Hasidic schools make 'dishonest representations' to Ofsted inspectors (p. 4).***

Rebutting Misconceptions About Haredi Education: A Comprehensive and Proven Model

It is very difficult to know where to begin refuting these claims, since they are so broad and so imprecise.

For example, the allegation that Haredi schools make dishonest representations does not refer to any particular school or to any concrete evidence about when something like that happened.

Haredi education is a holistic approach that nurtures intellectual and personal growth, blending traditional teachings with essential life skills and character development. Our curriculum extends beyond academics to instil diligence, humility, and resilience, fostering a strong work ethic and balanced well-being. Graduates emerge with confidence, motivation, and a commitment to good citizenship.

Our comprehensive curriculum provides students with advanced knowledge in ethics, law, history, science, and other core subjects, all integrated within essential Jewish studies to create a well-rounded educational experience. In addition to English, Haredi students acquire advanced language skills in Yiddish, Classical Hebrew, and Aramaic, enabling them to quickly attain proficiency in other languages and skills as needed.

Supported by a close-knit community, **Haredi education is personalised to meet each child's needs**,

preparing them to thrive as responsible, ethical members of society. Our educational model emphasises public speaking, intellectual rigor, and readiness for modern challenges, producing adaptable, capable individuals equipped to excel in diverse fields while staying rooted in tradition.

The paper does not cite any facts or figures about literacy rates within the Hasidic community, nor does it provide data on the number of Haredi individuals who successfully pursue careers as adults. However, such evidence is readily available to anyone interested. For example, our local community's *Shomer Shabbos* directory lists over 800 businesses owned by community members, alongside hundreds of charitable organisations. These facts underscore the strength, productivity, and positive contributions of our community.

The Haredi education system stands as a distinctive, highly effective model with strengths evidenced by successful outcomes across generations, leading to measurable achievements in various sectors. **There is no credible evidence to suggest that Haredi education fails to meet its objectives**; rather, it provides a unique, comprehensive education that serves its community well and has proven itself as a viable, respected approach within the broader landscape of educational models.

Significant Growth in Jewish Education: A Reflection of Parental Demand and Community Strength

The most significant piece of information regarding Jewish education is that **the number of Jewish pupils enrolled in Jewish schools in the United Kingdom has grown considerably over the past five decades**. Clearly, parents consider these schools to be highly desirable places to educate their children, leading to substantial growth in the sector over time.

A 2016 Report, written by L. Daniel Staetsky and Jonathn Body, *The Rise and Rise of Jewish Schools in the United Kingdom: Numbers, Trends and Policy Issues* (London: Institute for Jewish Policy Research, 2016), ('Staetsky and Body') found that **the number of parents choosing Jewish schools, including haredi schools, was rising at a rate higher than the rise of population**.

Staetsky and Body found that the number of Jewish pupils in Jewish schools had risen dramatically (about 500% since 1950s). They also reported that **the number of pupils attending strictly Orthodox schools increased by 134%** between the mid-1990s and mid-2010s. In London the rate of increase was 118%; in Manchester it was 231%; and in Gateshead it was 63%. They concluded that these schools were very important for Jewish identity:

'Clearly a growing proportion of British Jews regard Jewish schools as their preferred option for their children, a situation which increases opportunities for young people to learn about Judaism and their Jewishness, to develop a strong Jewish social circle, and be actively socialised into Jewish communal life. The Jewish school has become one of the most important institutional frameworks within the British Jewish community, and the importance of supporting its development – in terms of educational quality, the recruitment, training and retention of teaching staff, and facilities – cannot be understated' (p. 29).

Staetsky and Body report that **many Haredi children are home educated after a certain age. Their Report does not consider this an educational problem or a social crisis**, as the Nahamu report does. They instead note that any further assessment of the matter should take place with the cooperation of the strictly Orthodox community:

We found evidence of the limited uptake of secondary schooling by the strictly Orthodox. Indeed, about half of strictly Orthodox boys aged 11-15 years do not appear in the strictly Orthodox

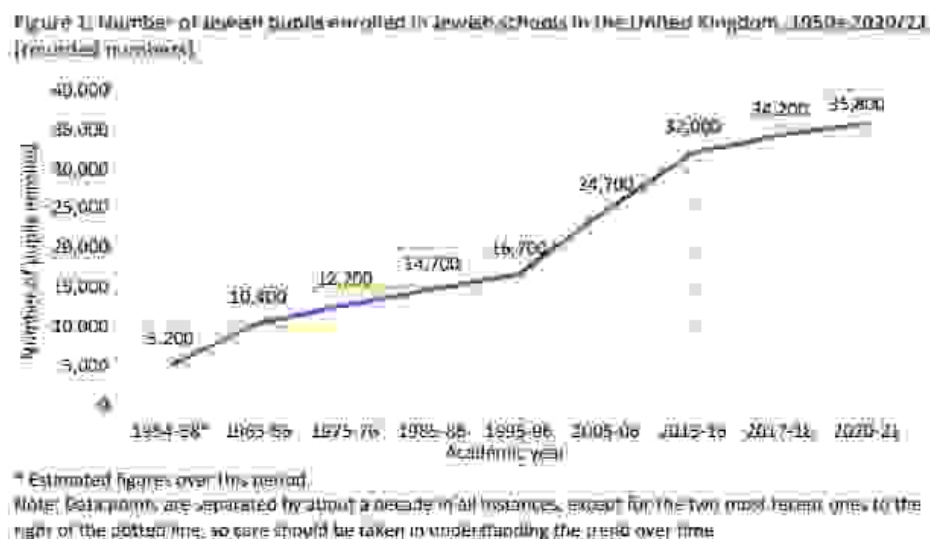
*school system (schools registered by the School Census 2015). The issue is not as extreme, but still exists, at the younger ages within this range: about one-third of the boys aged 11-13 are not found in the data on strictly Orthodox schools. We are not the first to identify this issue; indeed, the Department for Education is aware of it, and it has been covered by the national press. In seeking to address it, we would recommend that any investigation in this domain **seeks the full cooperation of the strictly Orthodox community**, and that the solutions offered take into account the desires and wishes of members of this community, as well as the best interests of strictly Orthodox children. In looking for policy responses, solutions which integrate adherence to a strictly Orthodox lifestyle and successful functioning in the modern labour market - not least for the sake of the continuity of the strictly Orthodox lifestyle - should be explored (p. 31).*

This Report is not alarmed by the finding that boys study at yeshivas. One assumes that the authors are aware that many of these boys will be appropriately educated both in Yeshivas and by way of home-based education.

These findings were confirmed five years later. A 2021 study by Institute for Jewish Policy Research (Brigitta Horup, Carli Lessof and Jonathan Boyd, 'Numbers of Jewish Children in Jewish Schools - Statistical Bulletin for 2018/19 to 2020/2021) reported again that **the numbers of pupils has increased dramatically.**

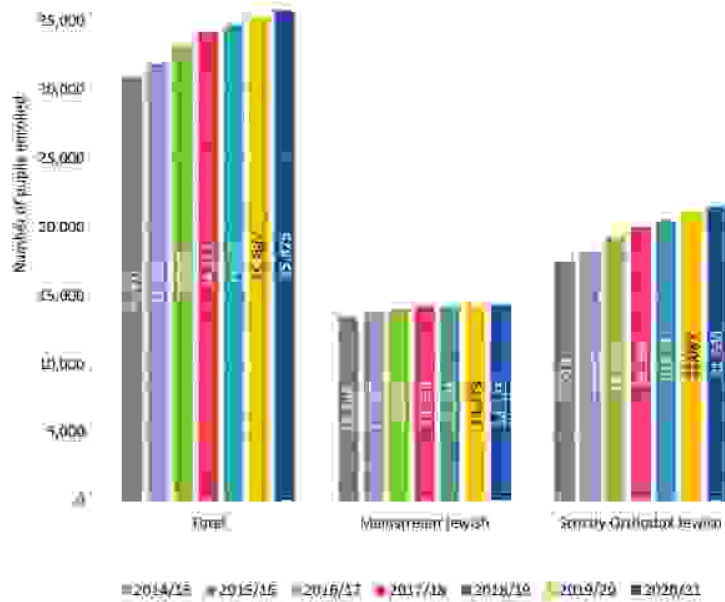
<https://www.jpr.org.uk/reports/numbers-jewish-children-jewish-schools-201819-202021>

In the academic year 2020/2021 **there were 35,825 Jewish pupils studying in 133 Jewish schools.** The number in 1954 was just 5,200, as shown in the chart below:



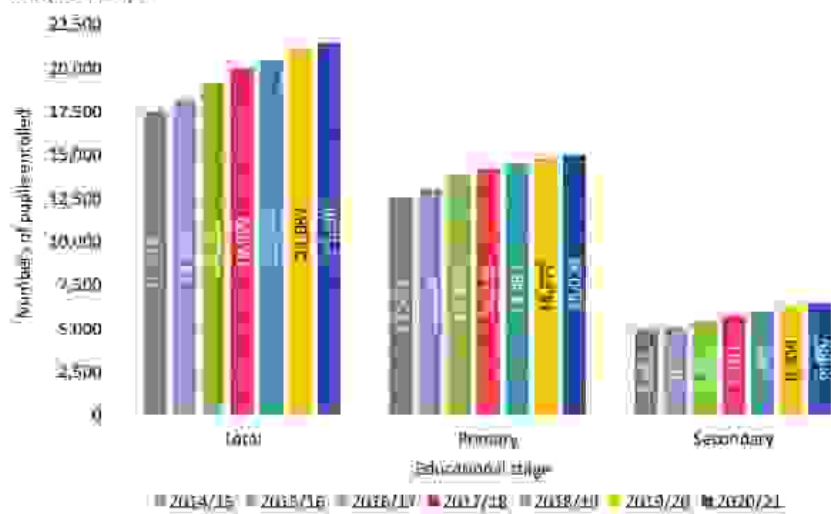
The 2021 study reports that **the increase has occurred both within the strictly Orthodox and the mainstream Jewish sectors.** The following chart shows the allocation between mainstream and Orthodox Jewish pupils:

Figure 3: Number of Jewish pupils in Jewish schools in the UK, by sector, 2014/15-2020/21



This study also shows that a large proportion of Orthodox Jewish children **do not pursue secondary education at Jewish schools, but instead by way of home-based education** and by attending part time Yeshivas. The 2021 study describes this by way of this chart:

Figure 13: Number of Jewish pupils in strictly Orthodox Jewish schools, by educational stage, 2018/19-2020/21



The practice of **strictly Orthodox Jewish boys attending part time Yeshivas** is well known and well-studied.

Evidence of Haredi Education's Success: Effective Policy Should Be Based on Facts, Not Anecdotes

The Nahamu Paper accepts that it is based on 'anecdotal evidence' (p. 3) and some, indeterminate 'press coverage' (p. 3) and '**whistle-blowers from within the charedi community**' whose names are **not revealed in the report**. The only concrete piece of evidence is a social media post on Twitter, by an account named '@Posenlzy' which is set out at length at page 25 of the Paper (as 'Appendix 4).

We believe government policy should not be based on anecdotal evidence or on a Twitter post.

We do not consider vague personal impressions to be reliable evidence for understanding the realities within a sector encompassing tens of thousands of children and over a hundred schools. While isolated issues may arise, they do not represent the broader system or indicate systemic shortcomings. Furthermore, a reported incident from the past does not necessarily suggest a broader or ongoing trend.

Comprehensive studies of Haredi education, including those by Hackney Council and Ofsted, **consistently demonstrate overall success**, with pupils thriving in a respectful, supportive, and well-structured environment. These reports highlight high levels of academic progress, exemplary behaviour, and a strong sense of community among students. Such findings align with the firsthand experiences of community members and are further supported by the visible accomplishments and lived experiences of our graduates, as well as the tangible success and stability within the community as a whole.

Our schools and methods of education are very successful. This is why they are so popular. The parents that send their children to our schools are not doing so out of ignorance or lack of concern for the welfare of their children. The opposite is the case. They know that our educational practices are very successful. Our communities are thriving, partly as a result of our educational system.

The post-Holocaust Haredi community in the UK, now in its fifth generation, sees **more than 90% of its members continuing to choose the same educational practices they themselves received**. This high rate of continuity is evidence of the overwhelming satisfaction and effectiveness of its educational model.

When viewed objectively, the concrete evidence shows that Haredi education has been and continues to be a significant success, incorporating many subjects taught in general education while remaining rooted in religious teaching. **This approach prepares students for practical engagement with broader society.** The Haredi community's educational system has consistently produced individuals who are socially responsible, honest, and law-abiding, making substantial contributions to British life across various sectors, including business, charity, and civic life.

Haredi Education's Positive Social Impact: Low Crime, Strong Values. Addressing Biases in Misleading Allegations

The community's low crime rates and strong family values further demonstrate that our educational system fosters well-rounded individuals who contribute meaningfully to British society while preserving their distinct way of life. A clear example of this is the stark difference in incarceration rates between the general UK population and the devout Haredi community. While the UK prison system reports nearly 16 prisoners per 10,000 individuals in the general population, the Haredi community records just over 1 prisoner per 10,000.

This extreme disparity, supported by publicly available data and corroborated by reports from authoritative prison chaplains, highlights the exceptionally low crime incidence within the Haredi community. Furthermore, **it is virtually unheard of for Haredi schools to require police intervention for violent incidents**, emphasising the peaceful environment nurtured by our educational values.

The allegation that Haredi education is failing is entirely unfounded and unsupported by the facts. While it is true that the vast majority of Haredi pupils do not pursue mainstream lifestyles and often build careers within the community, many also choose to establish professional careers and

businesses outside the community - and they do so successfully. This reflects the strength, not a weakness, of the Haredi educational system.

Finally, the Paper makes some other **claims that are factually misleading**.

The statements are both misleading and inaccurate. Yeshivas, as part-time institutions, are not required to be registered, and **students generally receive home-based education in a range of general subjects, including English and maths**, ensuring a well-rounded education that serves them well in diverse contexts and produces capable, well-informed individuals without compromising religious values. Furthermore, the assertion that students do not typically sit GCSEs is inconsequential, as sitting for GCSEs is neither a legal requirement nor a policy standard in the UK. What the Paper reports as a 'finding' is simply the proper operation of the educational system of the United Kingdom.

(b) Prejudice Against Religious Education

We believe that the Paper's negative depiction of Haredi education is not a result of the evidence but a result of a **particular prejudice against religious education** in general.

The Paper's position is stated quite candidly that **the only significant education is secular education**. Addendum A (at p. 9 of the Report) states that charedi education is a 'denial of education', because it leads to:

*'lack of access to recognised qualifications **resulting in exclusion from further education, and subsequent career opportunities**'.*

The unstated claim is that **all education must lead to a 'career' in the secular world**. It is obvious, and we happily admit, that some Haredi education is not aimed at 'recognised qualification' or to 'career opportunities' in the secular world. But why should it?

Nahamu fails to take into account that the Charedi education is the result of a very long tradition, which is chosen freely by parents for their children on grounds of faith. There is a paternalistic assumption throughout Nahamu's Paper that **the parents, presumably because of their religious faith, are incapable of choosing the right education for their children**.

The paper, along with the organisation behind it, appears to **overlook the essential value of religious education**, which instils something far more profound than a mere career path or academic qualification. Our educational philosophy is rooted in the Torah and the *Talmud*, which contain the Creator's wisdom. This foundation shapes the values, principles, and daily lives of our community, guiding us unwaveringly for thousands of years.

The success of this education is evident not only in the moral and ethical strength of our graduates but also in their accomplishments across all areas of life, including business and self-sufficiency. The Torah's teachings have consistently produced individuals who are not only committed, principled, and community-oriented but also capable and successful in building careers, running businesses, and earning a living. To undermine or attempt to reshape this educational system is to infringe upon a tradition of divine wisdom that has reliably fostered generations of productive, upright, and dedicated contributors to society.

The Haredi education system, centred around *Talmud* study, cultivates a breadth of advanced skills, preparing students for real-world success across diverse fields. *Talmudic* study fosters analytical thinking, deep memory retention, and an appreciation for nuanced language and logic. **Students engage with topics spanning ethics, history, law, business, architecture, and science, gaining sophisticated perspectives typically encountered at advanced levels in mainstream education.** Far from being insular, this education system equips graduates with intellectual agility, moral grounding, and practical wisdom, evidenced by the accomplishments of many in professional and entrepreneurial sectors.

Talmud study also places a strong emphasis on cultivating a lifelong dedication to learning and intellectual engagement. From an early age, Haredi students immerse themselves in rigorous textual study, developing patience, focus, and refined analytical skills. This commitment to reading and textual analysis **fosters a lasting literacy culture and hones advanced abilities in logical thinking and interpretive reasoning** - qualities essential to forming well-rounded, thoughtful individuals. Through this approach, Haredi students develop sustained attention spans, strengthening their capacity for deep concentration and meaningful engagement.

Is Nahamu suggesting that we abandon our centuries-old tradition to pursue “recognised qualifications” or “career opportunities”? Such a shift would be unacceptable. Nahamu overlooks the inherent value of the in-depth study of the Torah and *Talmud*, along with the engagement with life’s profound questions - core elements of our traditional education. **Our education system provides a substantial breadth of general knowledge within its religious studies curriculum.**

The Core Mission of Yeshivas: How Secular Demands Compromise Religious Education

The role of yeshivas is to provide an education deeply rooted in Torah study and religious observance - a purpose incompatible with secular studies. Just as one wouldn’t impose secular functions on a synagogue, **altering yeshivas with external academic demands would compromise their core religious mission.** For Orthodox Jews, Torah education is a sacred duty that has proven its worth over generations, developing ethical, capable individuals who contribute meaningfully to society.

Secular studies, though valuable in other contexts, cannot coexist within the unique framework of yeshivas without eroding their essence. This education is complete in itself and has guided our community for thousands of years. Preserving the yeshiva’s focused mission is essential for safeguarding the integrity and continuity of our faith.

We believe that Nahamu’s negative views are rooted in prejudice. The Paper, which does not cite any reliable sources from within the Orthodox Jewish community, fails to recognise that religious education is true education or that Charedi life is valuable. **The Charedi community is characterised by happy family life, stable marriages, law-abiding citizens, dedicated teachers, successful businesspeople,** and a strong commitment to charitable work, all of which are direct results of its educational practices.

Nahamu’s narrow view **is not the view of the government or of the Labour Party.**

Most people in Britain recognise that religious education is a valid form of education and that the country’s educational system must accommodate it. This is why there are state-supported faith schools. Historically, education in England was primarily provided by faith schools for centuries, and this legacy continues to be reflected in today’s more secular society. Throughout its discussion, the

Nahamu Paper assumes that the Charedi educational system is inferior to secular education or is not education at all. This is a profoundly misguided starting point.

Revealing Antagonism: Nahamu's Deep-Seated Prejudice Against the Charedi Way of Life

(c) Hostility towards the Orthodox Jewish Life.

We do not make this final point lightly. We have read Nahamu's paper very carefully. We acknowledge that at the start of the Paper the authors write: *'It is important to state at the outset that Nahamu is not seeking to prevent or inhibit the charedi community from providing a religious based education to their children.'*

However, the Paper shows **evident hostility for the Charedi way of life.**

Nahamu's advocacy is stated (at Addendum A, at p. 9) to be this, among others:

*'Denial of education. Issues of concern include **Lack of access to recognised qualifications** resulting in exclusion from further education, and subsequent limited career opportunities.*

...

*Denial of autonomy: Overlapping with spiritual and honour-based abuses, this includes enforcement of women's draconian dress code, women's forced head shaving and the prohibition of women driving. For both genders, **there is a lack of choice or access to hobbies, careers, friendship groups, literature, entertainment, and mainstream media.** The concern that any behavioural breaches in community expectations will impact one's children's marriage prospects keeps most charedi parents in line'*

These observations are not about education. **They are about our way of life.**

These sweeping negative claims about Charedi life, show that the authors of the report are not only oblivious to the facts (as we showed in part (a) of this letter) but also **hostile to Haredi traditions in their entirety.**

They lead to the conclusion, not clearly expressed but certainly implied, that the continued **presence of Charedi communities in the United Kingdom would be something unwelcome and undesirable** or indeed harmful for young children growing up in that community. We find this deeply offensive and disappointing.

Nahamu interprets our commitment to preserving our way of life for our children as having an improper motive, labeling it as a *"fear of integration into wider UK society"* (p. 2) and suggesting this is an underlying reason for the education we provide. However, our focus is on a commitment to protecting our community from influences that could lead to moral compromise. **Our motivation is rooted in a dedication to safeguarding our cultural integrity,** allowing our community to engage with broader society while preserving our distinct identity and values. This approach ensures a harmonious balance between tradition and interaction.

While our students receive both religious and general education, a few have, unfortunately, chosen to step away from the Charedi way of life. Some parents set certain boundaries to prevent undue influence on family members; however, no one is compelled to remain within the community.

Nonetheless, the vast majority find profound fulfillment in preserving the traditions of their forefathers and living in harmony with their faith. **Any suggestion that individuals are forced into a particular lifestyle or faith is simply unfounded.**

The statement at page 3 (Section 3.3) in the Nahamu's paper that "*Charedi girls are expected to marry young and children soon follow*" is notably concerning. **This assertion is irrelevant to educational policy** and serves no purpose other than to cast a negative light on the Charedi community's values and way of life.

Such remarks highlight Nahamu's underlying prejudice and agenda to undermine the very existence of the Charedi community. By focusing on matters unrelated to educational quality, **this statement strays into an attack on the community's cultural and religious practices**, revealing a bias that detracts from any genuine educational critique.

The unstated **hostility to our way of life** makes it much easier to understand Nahamu's reasoning for adopting the deeply coercive measures proposed at Addendum E (pp 15-18). These are coercive measures which would eliminate much of the traditions of the Charedi community.

The ultimate aim of Nahamu appears to be to use state coercion under the guise of 'educational policy' to make Charedi pupils embrace secular British life, thereby achieving what Nahamu views as true 'autonomy,' along with 'hobbies' and 'careers.' What this amounts to is **the active secular indoctrination of the children so that they turn against their parents.**

In our view, this is an oppressive and deeply offensive policy aim. It **cannot be the basis of educational policy in a free country.**

Given the current climate of heightened antisemitism in Britain, it is deeply troubling to see reports that serve only to fuel prejudice rather than foster understanding. This is a time when the Jewish community needs allies, not divisive rhetoric. Propagating narratives that misrepresent and undermine the Charedi community only serves to exacerbate existing tensions, making it more challenging for Jewish communities to feel secure and supported. **We urge those in positions of influence to act with sensitivity and responsibility**, avoiding the spread of misinformation that could further marginalise or endanger our community.

Finally, the Nahamu paper's inclusion of a section on "extremism" in relation to Haredi education is not only baseless but absurd, given the values upon which our educational system is founded. Haredi education emphasises kindness, ethical conduct, and moral integrity - principles that actively discourage extremism. Considering these foundational values, **it is both perplexing and offensive that Nahamu would imply a connection to extremism.** Such allegations would be better directed at institutions across the UK where there is documented evidence of violence, extremism, and bullying.

Rather than serving as a target of unwarranted criticism, **the Haredi educational model should be recognised as a constructive example**, fostering peaceful, law-abiding, and well-rounded individuals who contribute positively to society.

We do not need to remind you of the United Kingdom's obligations under Article 9 of the ECHR, and of Article 2 of the First Protocol to the ECHR. **These are obligations that Nahamu's proposal clearly ignores.** If implemented, Nahamu's policy recommendations would manifestly and unlawfully

impede these religious freedoms by limiting the Charedi community's ability to practice religious-based education without undue interference.

For all these reasons **we urge you to reject Nahamu's paper in its entirety.**

Yours sincerely,



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