

How I escaped my arranged marriage

Emily Green was ostracised by her ultra-orthodox Jewish family when she left her husband. Now she is helping others do it too. By Helen Rumbelow

You may have seen them while passing through Stamford Hill in north London or Prestwich in Manchester and wondered about their lives. I know I have.

Who were these men walking together with their elaborately large black fur hats, frock coats and two ringlets either side of their face? The women with their thick tights, long skirts and wigs? How did they manage life in modern Britain when so set apart?

And then you, like me, would move on and never know, because the Hasidic Jewish community is one of the most insular in Britain. That is what makes Emily Green so unusual. Not just that she left, but that she is willing to tell the world how hard it was. "I didn't think there was a way out."

When I meet Green (*not her real name*) it is difficult to understand the strangeness of her life, for a woman in her thirties, born and bred in north London. She is fiercely articulate, a working single mother in jeans, caring for her youngest child as we talk. She grew up just a few miles from where we sit, in her new home, but didn't watch TV until she was 24 (which she did illicitly, an episode of *Friends*).

Mobile phones and computers were banned. She put on her first pair of trousers when she left the group, but until then, from the age of three, she dressed year-round in thick tights, long skirts and, later, a wig. Wasn't she hot in summer? "There wasn't another option, so you just had to deal with it."

Yiddish was her first and, until she got out, main language, with many of her peers knowing only a smattering of English. There were no books in English in the house and "secular" literature was not allowed, the exception being Enid Blyton, for which her mother relented. Contact with anyone "outside" — whether Jewish or not — was rare and discouraged.

Hasidic Jews are one branch of what is more formally known as the Haredi community. They are sometimes referred to as "strictly" or "ultra" orthodox Jews, but the word orthodox is confusing. Nearly all the quarter of a million Jewish people in Britain practise their faith alongside modern lives just as people of other religions do, some choosing a more "orthodox" flavour. Yet the Hasidic Jews are to Judaism more what the Amish are to Christianity: wedded to a 19th-century style, inward-looking, deeply conservative life.

Some argue that they are not bothering anyone; at about 30,000 the British population is small and they should be left peacefully to their own devices. Yet "strictly orthodox" Jews are estimated to be on the rise: rocketing birth rates (an average of seven a woman) mean they will

make up half of Jewish children in the UK by 2030.

Green's attempt to divorce her husband to take her children to a life "outside" was met with fierce resistance. She had to battle against her husband's legal team, well funded by community backers, while she says she was disowned and vilified by her parents and everyone else in the only way of life she knew.

Green has since co-founded Geshet, the first organisation in the UK to support those contemplating defection. In response, some Hasidic community leaders in Stamford Hill began a campaign with the aim of raising £1 million to fight the attempt of anyone leaving to get custody of their children, as Green did. A rabbi wrote a letter backing the fund to rescue "our pure and holy children, where one of the parents has chased after a wicked culture and wants to drag their children after them". Are you public enemy number one, I ask her. "Yes, definitely. They see me as a threat."

Green's argument, and that of the others in Geshet whom she has

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supported to leave since it began two years ago, is that British social workers, school inspectors and family courts tiptoe around this community. She claims that they are too concerned with respecting cultural difference to challenge what would otherwise be considered unacceptable attitudes. "We end up being culturally sensitive — but to what? That is the problem of tolerating the intolerant. This is what we end up with."

We start by looking through her wedding album. It is a peculiar feeling, like looking at the photos of the wedding of an eastern European great-grandparent, even though it was just over a decade ago. Her face is covered by a thick veil. Seeing herself then is painful, she says. She was overwhelmed by doom. "Where was I going to go? I felt sad and trapped, but this was the only life I knew."

The marriage, as is obligatory, was arranged and no love grew between Green and her husband. He barely knew English and, as is customary, devoted his time to religious study.

Meanwhile, Hasidic women are often the breadwinners. They are not permitted to attend university, "that would mean mixing with men and that's terrible", but through the Open University Green got some qualifications. When her children



Emily Green on her wedding day

started school she saw the cycle of restrictive life beginning again. "All the books were censored. And I knew that the girls were going to get married young and have a lot of children: any jobs would be within a very narrow range of options inside the Haredi community."

This year a Hasidic school announced that since many rabbis frowned on women driving cars, any child who arrived at school driven by their mother would be turned away. That said, the "girls are relatively better off", says Green. The boys are expected to devote themselves to religious study in Yiddish. Ofsted inspections have singled out the poor secular education of boys.

These have been criticisms by Ofsted of Hasidic schools in London:

depictions of females blacked out in books; not learning English until year two; non-religious education amounting to just 1½ hours a day; boys forbidden to talk to female inspectors. An investigation by *The Jewish Chronicle* found that in London 1,000 Hasidic boys in their early teens were "missing" from school; it is rare for them to get any qualifications.

"Boys get a couple of hours a day of secular education up until the age of 11 or so, then it just stops," says Green. "A lot of the men helped by Geshet sound like foreigners; can't read or write properly. They really struggle."

One man who exited the sect with the help of Geshet is now, in his thirties, taking a primary level English and maths course to try to find employment. Does Green think



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British society is more confident in intervening in extremely Islamic schools? "Yes, because in those cases there is a threat of extremism, IS and so on. That's what the Haredi community say: 'We're not killing anyone.' I agree. Except that there are people living in there who want to leave and feel trapped."

Once Green started to read more widely she felt jealous as she glimpsed those on the outside, heading to university and a world of opportunity. She realised that although she could suffer a life of quiet desperation for herself, she couldn't allow her children to continue on the same path.

"I was coming up to being 30 with four children. I realised: this is my life. My children will not get an education. My son was eight; he couldn't write a sentence in English. I suddenly woke up to this: history is going to repeat itself. My daughters will have the same arranged marriage as me and I couldn't stop it. I thought: 'I've got to do something. I have to take destiny into my own hands.' It is the hardest thing I've ever had to do."

She knew that by risking everything for her children she could lose them. I say she must have been uniquely strong-minded. "It was desperation."

The next two years of her life she spent fighting for child residency, getting a job outside the Hasidic community and setting up on her own in a world she knew nothing of and where she knew nobody. "It was hell. Working full-time, a single mother, my family and friends all against me."

She had to get an injunction against both her parents and her husband whom she says were coming to her house to "scream at me". The Hasidic community, says Green, are adept at persuading social workers that this life is the one in which children feel culturally secure. She has seen this argument repeatedly used against divorcing parents trying to extricate their children. She managed to get her children out of Haredi school, a result she regards as miraculous. "That's when my life began again."

Her children began attending a normal Jewish state primary school, quite dazed at first by the levels of English and the openness to gender mixing. They still spend part of the week with their father, keeping a separate wardrobe of long skirts and coats to wear when they go back in. Her sons "won't have the side curls. They say they are not going to be bullied at school."

Geshet has had about fifty approaches from people wanting to get out. Many of them have battled hard, and often unsuccessfully, for child residency. One woman lost contact with her children. One father couldn't even speak English to his lawyer.

"It's not about Judaism, it's about control. They say you are free to choose to leave. Sure you can leave, but you'll have your family not talking to you, no basic language skills, can't use technology, no job, alone, not see your children. That's not choice. It's a system very effective in limiting choices. For them my story is inspiring because it shows it's possible. It was almost impossible, but I was lucky." geshereu.org.uk