Yehudis Fletcher campaigns against forced marriage
PAUL COOPER

I am not rebelling for fun

Growing up in an ultra-orthodox Jewish community, Yehudis Fletcher spoke to other mothers online and realised a different way of living was possible. That was just the start, she tells Deborah Linton

Deborah Linton

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It was spring 2015 and Yehudis Fletcher's knees buckled as she knelt on the dank, tiled floor of a toilet cubicle in Manchester Piccadilly station. A Charedi (ultra-orthodox) Jewish wife and young mother, she had walked the 20 minutes from the city's crown court, where she had given evidence that would, weeks later, jail the religious scholar who had sexually abused her the summer she turned 16.

In the solitude of the cubicle she pulled her wig — a marker of modesty for married Charedi women — back from her face and leant over the white porcelain bowl.

Yet that day, looking a jury of 12 strangers in the eye, she had found her voice. "After giving evidence, after being heard, I stood taller and spoke clearer," she says, now 33 and speaking to me over Zoom from the north Manchester home she shares with her three children. "I existed as a woman with a voice, with legal rights, with a sense of self. Those were not concepts I knew before."

Fletcher's early life in a religious household in Glasgow, then Manchester and Stamford Hill in London, is reminiscent of the Netflix mini-series *Unorthodox* — the true story of a young woman rejecting her Hasidic roots — although she says the show lacked the nuance and camaraderie found among women in her community. She was educated in a religious school in the Giffnock suburb of Glasgow where she was one of seven siblings. Her father was a rabbi and her mother tended to the religious needs of women in the community, which included teaching brides-to-be how to observe laws around marriage and purity. There was no mainstream education, TV or music and only Jewish texts, with the exception of Tintin and Asterix, which she loved and were considered harmless. "There was joy in my upbringing and frustration. I didn't fit the mould," she says.

At 15, while her parents spent time in Israel, she moved, temporarily, into the home of Todros Grynhaus, the son of a rabbinical judge who advertised for a lodger. He abused her over a period of four months. She remembers: "He was a father-figure, someone trusted." A more streetwise girl might have been groomed with alcohol; instead Grynhaus taught her to drink coffee, flavoured with cocoa, to make her feel sophisticated. "I had no sex education. It wasn't until I told a rabbi, much later, that I even knew the term abuse existed. From that day, I never shut up about it."

Yet when Fletcher looked to her community for help, she was branded rebellious, a temptress. As a woman, she would not have been able to give evidence in a Jewish court, a right only afforded to men. She was believed, but also blamed. She describes handing diary entries to the Manchester beth din — religious adjudicators — as well as evidence that might hold Grynhaus's DNA, none of which saw the light of day or were returned to her. The registrar who took them died a month after Grynhaus's trial and the beth din have since said that they cannot verify the claims.

When she reported her abuse to the police, at 18, no one followed it up either until another victim came forward years later, setting in motion the court case, in 2015, that would find Grynhaus, who was then 50, guilty of seven sex offences between 1996 and 2004. He was jailed for more than 13 years after the court heard evidence from both women in two trials. The first resulted in a hung jury.

In her years waiting for justice Fletcher had an arranged marriage, at 18. It went badly wrong and she ended it after nine months — an early demonstration of courage in a community where divorce rates are so low they are negligible. She felt pressure to re-marry, quickly, to retain respectability and at 19 was introduced to her second husband, a man ten years older. She was engaged, both times, at the same spot across her sister's dining room table, within days of meeting, and at 21 had her first child, living inside her community while navigating the multicultural cities around her with a curious naivety.

Amit Rahav and Shira Haas in Unorthodox
NETFLIX

When we speak now, the wig and long skirt are gone, and so is the second husband. “After the trial, our relationship shifted. I left in 2018. I was empowered,” she says. Her clothes are androgynous, her brown, wavy hair is pulled into a bun and she has a septum ring through her nose. Fletcher, who has established her own think tank, Nahamu (Hebrew for “be comforted”), is a social policy student and activist for the end of sexual abuse cover-ups and forced marriage within the Charedi community, and she shoots from the hip.

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She is disrupting the rules that conditioned her for marriage and religious servitude from childhood, which is rare enough, but she is doing it from the inside, still an observant Jew and still living, with her children, 12, ten and eight, in the densely religious Broughton Park area in Manchester. “When you become a disruptor, you can threaten to leave, but I threatened to stay,” she says. “When I started speaking up, people left dog shit on my doorstep.”

Fletcher became what she describes as “an accidental activist”, but her interest in the world beyond orthodoxy began when she was a child. “I would eavesdrop on my mother’s conversations with brides and sneak away with the books she gave them. I was curious — the answers I got to my questions worried me because they were incomplete.”

In 2010, living in Edgware, north London, pregnant and with a toddler, she discovered Mumsnet, where she received a brutal schooling in the real world. Online advice, from non-Jews, is also forbidden by Charedi codes.

“I used the internet in secret. I lurked for a long time, scrolling on the bus, in waiting rooms or while breastfeeding. I had thorny questions, but no framework in which to pose them, so I asked, ‘How do I politely ask for a white midwife?’ — a symptom of the ‘them and us’ mentality of my community — and ‘Does anyone feel a duty to have sex with their husband?’ I was criticised for taking my child on a bus with chicken pox because I had no education on diseases and had to explain that we didn’t believe in dinosaurs when someone suggested a toy one might soothe my son on a flight.

“I was both taken down and supported by these women. I learnt that the ‘othering’ I experienced in my community was a construct. I learnt I could change my mind, I learnt I could learn.” When testifying in court, Fletcher also had therapy. “That’s when I first learnt about a sense of self. All these things combined to a slow but steady forming of my identity.”

Fletcher stood out for speaking out. She began lobbying for safeguarding in orthodox schools — small, sometimes unregistered classrooms around kitchen tables or in synagogues. She spoke to the Department for Education and senior members of the British Jewish community about the cover-up of abuse and lack of sex and relationships education, and worked with academics, women’s rights organisations, the National Commission on Forced Marriage and campaigners in south Asian and black communities on tackling what emerged as the most urgent problem: forced marriage.

Today, a paper authored by Fletcher and her fellow campaigner, Eve Sacks, daughter-in-law of the former Chief Rabbi Lord Sacks, asks the government’s Forced Marriage Unit to address the problem with the same rigour that they have in south Asian communities, where campaigners have told Fletcher she is 20 years behind them in addressing this. It provides recommendations around education in schools, community guidance and a support service.

She says: “There is a nervousness around antisemitism among politicians, police, health workers, and so we consistently see a lower threshold for intervention. Signs that raise eyebrows in other communities do not here.

“Not all arranged marriages are forced, but all forced marriages are, by definition, arranged. Children are being groomed to marry at 18; we want to help people understand what drives the conditioning and educate them on the markers.”

Last month police raided an ultra-orthodox wedding in Stamford Hill, attended by 150 people during the pandemic. Similar illegal celebrations — condemned by senior members of the Jewish community and Fletcher who describes them as “tantamount to murder” — have also been exposed, alongside Covid infection rates nine times higher than the national average.

“Marriage is a sacramental act in this community. It is dressed up in a big party and gorgeous dress because how else do you convince an 18-year-old girl to sleep with a stranger and commit to a life with him?”

Fletcher will not be drawn on whether her marriages were forced, although they were arranged. “The work we’re doing is not about my story alone,” she says.

The handful of people who leave the Charedi community, estimated at more than 1.8 million people worldwide, are often ostracised by their families. Fletcher is still in touch with hers, including her parents, in Israel. “There’s been disapproval, but I’ve not experienced the rejection that others have because I’ve not left.” She says it was her mother who taught her never to subscribe to groupthink. “She showed me how to speak up, but I speak louder than many find acceptable now.”

Rabbis who publicly denounce secular life have privately told her that they support her work. People who tut-tutted as she took on religious institutions also look at her with quiet admiration. “I remember sitting by the Thames one night, with my friends and a bottle of wine, after I’d stopped wearing a wig, a few years ago. They ran their hands through my hair. Six months ago one of them left her husband too.”

Fletcher’s children still see their father and go to orthodox Jewish schools. Her religion is the same source of comfort to her that it always was — but she does faith her way. Each morning she recites a prayer, Elokai (meaning My Lord), which translates, from Hebrew, as: ‘The breath that you breathe into me is pure.”

“I am not rebelling for fun,” she says. “That prayer, to me, means that I’m existing with purpose.”