

## Further written evidence submitted by the British Rabbinical Union (2nd further submission) (CWSB154)

Dear Members of the Public Bill Committee,

### **Children’s Wellbeing and Schools Bill: Call for Evidence Additional Supplementary Submission. The Linguistic and Cultural Threats Posed by the Schools Bill – 28 January 2025**

#### **Introduction**

This supplementary submission is presented in light of additional evidence provided by the UCL Department of Hebrew & Jewish Studies, led by distinguished experts in the field of endangered and minority Jewish languages. Professor Lily Kahn, Head of Department, and Dr. Sonya Yampolskaya, a leading researcher in Jewish languages, bring decades of scholarly expertise to this analysis. Their work underscores the critical importance of the Haredi educational system in preserving endangered languages such as Yiddish, Ashkenazic Hebrew, and Aramaic. The Schools Bill, as currently drafted, poses a direct threat to this unique and vital system. When read alongside our earlier submissions dated 20 and 27 January 2025, this submission consolidates the cultural and linguistic arguments to demonstrate that the provisions of the Bill would irreparably harm these endangered languages and undermine the UK’s obligations under international law.

#### **Linguistic and Cultural Evidence**

The UCL submission (see **Appendix A**) highlights the indispensable role of Haredi education in:

- **Preserving Yiddish:** The Haredi community’s use of Yiddish ensures intergenerational transmission, both orally and in writing. As noted by the UCL Department of Hebrew & Jewish Studies, “*Haredi Yiddish remains the main daily language of up to 750,000 speakers worldwide,*” with significant centres in Stamford Hill, Manchester, and Gateshead. The Haredi educational system provides extensive Yiddish-medium education, including dedicated grammatical and stylistic instruction, fostering fluency and literacy in Yiddish. Moreover, the thriving Haredi Yiddish publishing industry - the only global forum producing new Yiddish materials - is sustained entirely by the linguistic competence nurtured in Haredi schools.
- **Sustaining Ashkenazic Hebrew:** The UCL submission highlights that Ashkenazic Hebrew, with its distinct phonological and grammatical features, “*continues to thrive as a written language in contemporary Diaspora Haredi communities,*” thanks exclusively to the Haredi educational system. Unlike modern Israeli Hebrew, Ashkenazic Hebrew retains the unique linguistic characteristics developed over centuries in Central and Eastern Europe. The Haredi system ensures that graduates are proficient in composing highly complex written works, from community announcements to book-length texts, thereby safeguarding this unique linguistic tradition.
- **Maintaining Aramaic:** Through intensive Talmudic study, the Haredi yeshiva system preserves Aramaic as a living language of scholarship. According to UCL, students engage with the Talmud in its original Aramaic, “*interpreting it orally in Yiddish in pairs under the supervision of a specialised teacher.*” This rigorous study develops advanced linguistic and analytical skills, ensuring the continued transmission of Aramaic, a millennia-old language integral to Jewish scholarship and cultural identity.

The survival of these languages over centuries is a testament to the Haredi educational system's unique approach, which has remained entirely free from external interference. As the UCL submission states, *“Minoritised and endangered languages are highly vulnerable to decreased speaker transmission and ultimately death, yet Haredi Yiddish continues to thrive because the Haredi educational system acts as a lynchpin for the language’s formal instruction at all levels.”*

### **The Impact of External Interference on Endangered Languages**

The UCL report provides compelling evidence of how any deviation from the Haredi educational model - or external interference - can lead to the rapid decline of these languages. For example:

1. **Loss of Yiddish:** As detailed in the UCL submission, institutions that reduced their emphasis on Yiddish or adopted secular curricula found that Yiddish became alien to their students within a single generation. These students transitioned to the language of the land (e.g., English), relegating Yiddish to a ceremonial or historical context.
2. **Decline of Ashkenazic Hebrew:** Non-Haredi institutions that shifted to modern Israeli Hebrew for Jewish studies have effectively displaced Ashkenazic Hebrew, leading to its marginalisation and eventual disappearance in those communities.
3. **Erosion of Aramaic Proficiency:** Communities that abandoned the rigorous Talmudic study methods of Haredi yeshivas now rely on translations or simplified interpretations, causing a significant decline in Aramaic literacy and comprehension.

The proposed Schools Bill, by introducing state-defined educational standards and bureaucratic oversight, would create precisely the conditions that have historically led to the decline of these languages. Any external interference, even if well-intentioned, disrupts the delicate balance that has allowed these languages to thrive within Haredi communities.

### **Why the Haredi Model is Irreplaceable**

The Haredi educational system's success lies in its holistic, outcomes-driven approach that integrates language preservation with religious and moral education. This model:

- **Creates Immersive Environments:** Students are surrounded by Yiddish, Ashkenazic Hebrew, and Aramaic in both academic and social contexts, ensuring that these languages remain dynamic and relevant.
- **Prioritises Intergenerational Continuity:** By embedding these languages into daily life and religious practice, the Haredi system ensures seamless transmission from one generation to the next.
- **Resists Assimilation:** By maintaining autonomy and resisting external pressures, the Haredi model has shielded these languages from the homogenising forces of globalisation and secularisation.

The UCL submission notes that without such a system, Yiddish, Ashkenazic Hebrew, and Aramaic would likely face the same fate as many other minoritised languages, which *“are in danger of dying out by the end of the current century.”*

### **Cultural Genocide and Endangered Languages**

The UCL submission provides compelling evidence that the Haredi educational system is the sole mechanism ensuring the survival of Yiddish, Ashkenazic Hebrew, and Aramaic. These languages are integral to Jewish identity and culture, as recognised

under Article 13 of the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities (1995), to which the UK is a party. By disrupting the Haredi educational system, the Bill would:

- **Effectively “kill off” these languages:** Yiddish, Ashkenazic Hebrew, and Aramaic are already classified as endangered. The Bill’s provisions would dismantle the only system capable of preserving them, leaving no viable alternative for intergenerational transmission.
- **Breach the UK’s obligations to protect linguistic diversity:** Under the Framework Convention, the UK is committed to safeguarding the cultural and linguistic heritage of national minorities. The Bill’s failure to accommodate the unique needs of the Haredi community represents a dereliction of this responsibility.

### **Conclusion**

The Schools Bill, as currently drafted, poses an existential threat to the Haredi educational system and the endangered languages it preserves. The resulting loss of these languages would not only devastate Jewish cultural and linguistic heritage but also represent a significant failure by the UK to uphold its commitments to cultural and linguistic diversity under international law. The irreplaceable cultural value of Yiddish, Ashkenazic Hebrew, and Aramaic cannot be overstated, and their preservation is inextricably linked to the survival of the Haredi educational system.

We urge the Public Bill Committee to reconsider the impact of this legislation and take necessary steps to safeguard the unique role of the Haredi educational system in preserving these endangered languages. Failure to do so risks irreversible damage to a vital component of the UK’s cultural fabric.

Yours sincerely,

**Rabbi Asher Gratt**

President, British Rabbinical Union

*I fully endorse this supplementary submission.*

**Rabbi David Weis**

Chief Rabbi, British Rabbinical Union

*28 January 2025*

## APPENDIX A

### UCL - LONDON'S GLOBAL UNIVERSITY DEPARTMENT OF HEBREW AND JEWISH STUDIES

03 February 2025

#### **UCL Department of Hebrew & Jewish Studies statement on the importance of the Haredi educational system for the maintenance and preservation of endangered languages**

As linguists specialising in minority and endangered Jewish languages with an emphasis on Yiddish, Ashkenazic Hebrew, and Aramaic, we feel that it is important to highlight the invaluable role that Haredi educational establishments in Stamford Hill and elsewhere in the UK play in the maintenance and continued transmission of these languages from generation to generation. In the following statement we will elaborate on the centrality of Haredi educational systems. These include home schooling, girls' primary and secondary schools, boys' *cheyder* (primary schools), and yeshivas (boys' secondary schools and university equivalents). The maintenance of these languages provided by the Haredi educational system is of vital importance not only to the preservation of traditional Jewish culture, but also for the unique insights that they can provide to linguists and other scholars and for the contribution that they make to the diversity of human language, which is under threat around the world owing to linguistic oppression, homogenization, and globalization.

#### **Yiddish**

Yiddish has been the traditional everyday language of Ashkenazic (Central and Eastern European) Jewry for approximately the past millennium. It is a Germanic language that is written in the Hebrew alphabet and contains significant Semitic (Hebrew and Aramaic) and Slavic (Polish, Russian, Ukrainian) lexical components and contact features. Yiddish was the main language of most Ashkenazic Jews until the mid-20th century, having had over ten million speakers on the eve of World War II.

Traditionally Yiddish had several dialects corresponding to the main geographical areas of its population base (roughly equating to parts of present-day Lithuania/Belarus, Poland/Hungary, and Ukraine/Romania). In the 1920s and 1930s a standard variety of

Yiddish termed Standard Yiddish or YIVO Yiddish, largely based on the Lithuanian dialect, was developed. However, most Yiddish speakers continued to use their geographical dialects despite the spread of Standard Yiddish in certain educational contexts.

The world's Yiddish-speaking population was decimated in the Holocaust, as most of the six million Jews murdered by the Nazis were Yiddish speakers. In the post-War period, Yiddish became a highly endangered language outside of Haredi communities, where it continued to flourish. While Standard Yiddish now primarily exists within academic settings (e.g. taught in universities, further education colleges, and summer courses), Haredi Yiddish remains the main daily language of up to 750,000 speakers worldwide (Biale et al. 2018), with relatively large centers in the USA (the New York area), Israel (mainly in Jerusalem and Bnei Brak), the UK (London's Stamford Hill, Manchester, and Gateshead), Canada (in Montreal, Quebec) and Belgium (Antwerp).

While Yiddish is passed down orally within the home in many Haredi families, the role of Haredi educational system in maintaining and preserving the language in both its written and spoken forms is crucial to its continued survival. Minoritised and endangered languages are highly vulnerable to decreased speaker transmission and ultimately death, yet Haredi Yiddish continues to thrive because the Haredi educational system acts as a lynchpin for the language's formal instruction at all levels. Indeed, the Haredi educational system is a unique example of a highly successful grassroots language maintenance programme that ensures continued spoken fluency and literacy. This achievement is all the more remarkable given the lack of dedicated strategic support for Yiddish at the national level. The fact that Haredi families, plus both boys' and girls' schools in UK Haredi communities provide extensive Yiddish-medium education, in addition to dedicated grammatical and stylistic instruction in the language in a growing number of cases, means that the Haredi educational system is educating the next generation of highly skilled Yiddish speakers. There is an extremely high degree of continuity from one generation to the next within the Haredi educational system, ensuring a stable base not only of fluent Yiddish speakers, but also of individuals with an excellent command of literary Yiddish and the ability to contribute to the thriving Haredi Yiddish publishing industry, which includes a rich array of non-fiction, novels, children's books, and Jewish educational materials. The Haredi Yiddish publishing industry is the only forum in the world where new Yiddish written materials are regularly produced, thereby reinforcing the language's vitality to a considerable degree.

Without such continuity in place, Yiddish would be in an extremely precarious position and would likely succumb to the same fate as many other minoritized languages lacking institutional support. It is well known among linguists specializing in endangered languages that more than half of the world's 6,000 languages are in danger of dying out by the end of the current century. If Yiddish were to suffer this fate, it would be a devastating loss for Jewish culture (since, as mentioned above, Yiddish is the heritage language of most Ashkenazic Jews), as well as for linguists working on areas such as minoritized languages, language contact, diaspora languages, Germanic linguistics, and the intersection of language and religion.

### **Ashkenazic Hebrew**

Like Yiddish, Ashkenazic Hebrew is a unique language variety with a thousand-year history of written use among Central and Eastern European Jews. Hebrew has been the central Jewish language since the biblical period, but between ca. 200 CE and 1880 CE it was not used for everyday speech. Rather, it served as the main medium of written communication in Jewish communities throughout the world. Because it was used in so many different geographical locations, it developed in different ways over the centuries. Ashkenazic Hebrew thus has very distinct phonological and grammatical features in comparison to e.g. Biblical Hebrew, Rabbinic Hebrew, or the Hebrew used by Sephardi Jews in the medieval period and later. Historically, Ashkenazic Hebrew was primarily attested in texts composed by Jews living in Central and Eastern Europe prior to the 20th century. It is commonly believed (both by the general public and by linguists) to have been replaced by Israeli Hebrew in the 20th century and to have fallen completely out of use. However, like its spoken counterpart Yiddish, Ashkenazic Hebrew actually continues to thrive as a written language in contemporary Diaspora Haredi communities, with a large concentration in the UK (in Stamford Hill as well as in Manchester and Gateshead). This fascinating and completely understudied form of Hebrew is used widely and productively in the composition of a rich variety of original documents for a Haredi audience. Today's Ashkenazic Hebrew preserves not only the pronunciation of earlier Eastern European Hebrew, but also a long list of linguistic features which distinguish it significantly from Israeli Hebrew and indicate that it is a distinct variety of Diaspora Hebrew worthy of recognition in its own right.

It is no exaggeration to state that the Haredi educational system is entirely responsible for the continued existence of Ashkenazic Hebrew. It is acquired largely within the home, the *cheyder* and yeshiva context, and is taught so effectively that even though it is not a spoken language, graduates of the yeshiva system are able to compose

highly complex written pieces in it, ranging from letters and community announcements to book-length works. In contrast to Yiddish, which is also taught in university and other settings outside of the Haredi world (though, as mentioned above, to a much lesser degree), contemporary Ashkenazic Hebrew is not taught or studied **anywhere in the world** apart from the Haredi educational context. This means that the Haredi educational system is solely responsible for the continued transmission and use of Ashkenazic Hebrew. As such, its role in the preservation of this language cannot be overstated. As in the case of Yiddish, the maintenance of Ashkenazic Hebrew is of inestimable importance from several perspectives. First, it is a unique witness to a millennium of Ashkenazic history and an invaluable component of Jewish linguistic culture. Second, it is of great interest to linguists specialising in the history of the Hebrew language, the development of Semitic languages more broadly, the acquisition of unspoken languages, and the theoretical concept of diglossia, i.e. the use of two languages by the same community (in this case Yiddish and Ashkenazic Hebrew; broadly comparable to the use of Latin vs English in medieval Britain).

### **Aramaic**

Aramaic is a Semitic language related to Hebrew and, more distantly, to Arabic. It has been used in Jewish communities both in speech and writing since biblical times and was a *lingua franca* in the ancient Near East between for approximately a thousand years (ca. 700 BCE to 700 CE). When Jews stopped speaking Hebrew around 200 CE, they switched primarily to Aramaic and went on to compose a number of key Jewish texts in the language, most prominently the Jerusalem and Babylonian Talmuds, which serve as an essential source for interpreting the Bible and Jewish law and remain the central texts of study in the advanced levels of a traditional Jewish education (i.e. yeshiva).

As in the case of Yiddish and Ashkenazic Hebrew, the Haredi educational system plays a central role in the preservation of the Aramaic language through intensive study of the Talmud in the home and in yeshiva settings. Haredi students read and engage with the Talmud in the original Aramaic, interpreting it orally in Yiddish in pairs under the supervision of a specialised teacher. As such, graduates of the yeshiva system emerge with advanced knowledge of the Aramaic language as well as highly developed analytical and critical skills needed for understanding the Talmud's particular stylistic register and complex contents. Such specialist training in Aramaic is unparalleled outside of Orthodox contexts, and Haredi yeshivas offer some of the most prestigious education in this respect. Therefore, as in the case of Yiddish and Ashkenazic Hebrew, the Haredi educational bodies play a vital role in the continued transmission of this millennia-old

language, which is again a major Jewish cultural treasure as well as a fruitful subject of research for linguists specialising in Jewish and Semitic languages, historians, and scholars of religious studies.

**Professor Lily Kahn**, Head of Department, Hebrew & Jewish Studies, UCL

**Dr Sonya Yampolskaya**, Researcher in Jewish Languages, Freie Universität Berlin and UCL