BRILL

EUROPEAN JOURNAL OF
JEWISH STUDIES 19 (2025) 124–144

European Journal of
JEWISH STUDIES

brill.com/ejjs

'A Taste of the World to Come'

Time, Timelessness, and Community at Limmud Festival

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Received 20 August 2024 | Revised 26 February 2025 | Accepted 1 May 2025 |
Published online 26 May 2025

Abstract

This paper explores the use of utopian language by interviewees talking about their experiences at Limmud Festival, an annual residential conference focused on a wide variety of Jewish learning, held over Christmas, and run by volunteers. Such language is closely linked to Limmud's role as an experimental, cross-denominational 'counter-community' that plays a central role in the Jewish identity and practice of many participants, serving as a laboratory, showcase, and refuge.

Keywords

Limmud – Jewish education – utopia – community – Jewish identity – messianic

1 Introduction

> Limmud is like the community incubator. It's the community retreat. It's the community cross-communal. It's the community where reality is suspended and we can do all sorts of things that we might not be able to do in our home communities in front of the rabbi. […] The taste of the world to come stuff, absolutely. In the world to come we would be of course doing lots of this together, without the boundaries and the angst and all the stuff that gets in the way. Including with our friends in the haredi world.[1]

These might seem striking, even exaggerated words with which to describe an annual residential conference focused on a wide variety of Jewish learning, held over Christmas, and run by volunteers. In this article I examine these and similar emotive descriptions that compare Limmud Festival to the afterlife and other times of 'suspended reality,' together with participants' understanding of time and space at Limmud, in order to explore the deeper significance of Limmud in the lives of the participants and in the wider Jewish community in the UK.[2]

Limmud began as an annual conference for Jewish educators in the UK, but over the last 40 years has been transformed into a vigorous and creative movement throughout the Jewish world. The annual conference (rebranded as 'Festival' in 2017), which had about 70 to 80 attendees at its first event in 1980, now attracts over 2,300 participants (pre-pandemic).[3] Using semi-structured interviews,[4] documentary material such as conference programmes, internal documents, and emails, and some internally commissioned reports, I am gradually

1 This and the quotations throughout the paper come from the 153 interviews I have conducted with Limmud organization and conference chairs, volunteers, and a range of participants. I am currently preparing a monograph on the history and development of Limmud (to be published by the Littman Library of Jewish Civilization), which will include full discussion of many aspects that cannot be discussed in the context of this short and focused article, such as the underlying tensions and problems encountered by Limmud, its international spread, interfaith encounter at Limmud, and so on.

2 In this paper I use the term 'Jewish community' in the general sense of the loose group of all Jews who identify as Jews and participate to some extent in Jewish activities—cultural, social, or religious. In this sense, community membership is not the result of ethnic origin but is conferred by active involvement and self-identification.

3 There are several day Limmuds around the UK, as well as about 90 Limmud groups and events (not all of them currently active) in more than 40 countries worldwide, from the USA to Argentina, China, and Australia, including sixteen in Europe; these will not be discussed in this paper, which focuses on the annual Limmud Festival (previously Conference) in the UK.

4 See above, n. 1.

building a picture of how and why Limmud was founded, how it has changed over time, and how it has created a unique cross-denominational community that has had a major impact on Jewish (and indeed non-Jewish) communities in the UK and elsewhere.[5] Naturally the story is not always upbeat and positive, and I have uncovered persistent tensions and problems, particularly in the fraught relationship between the UK 'mothership' and Limmud groups abroad, as well as frequent instances of volunteer burnout that sit uneasily with the organization's volunteer-centred values.[6]

Here, however, I will explore a rather unexpected finding that has emerged from the interviews: just over a third of interviewees spoke of Limmud as an event outside normal time and space, often using religious terms.[7] The striking expressions they used to describe their experience there included 'a different time zone,' 'holy space,' 'bubble,' 'magical world,' 'heaven,' 'epiphany,' 'Narnia,' 'oasis,' or even, as seen above, 'a taste of the world to come.' None of these would be the obvious descriptors used for an academic, business, or special interest conference—so why are they so frequently used of Limmud? The paradox becomes even greater when it is noted that Limmud is a secular organization that resolutely refuses to take any position on religious issues.[8] Nevertheless, it became evident from interviewees' comments that Limmud has become a special, or indeed 'sacred,' space and time for many British Jews, creating a novel site of Jewish meaning-making. Its full role in the Jewish community cannot be understood without evaluating the attribution of sacredness, otherworldliness, or timelessness to the event that is so common among participants.

5 Of course it is not the only sub-community with the UK Jewish community; a comparison with others, such as Jewish student societies, would be interesting (especially since so many Limmud activists had experience from such societies and from the Union of Jewish Students), and academic study of such organizations remains a desideratum. Another interesting group of events that might offer useful comparisons with Limmud would be faith-based festivals such as Greenbelt Festival, a Christian 'festival of arts, faith and justice' (https://www.greenbelt.org.uk/), or the British Islam Conference (2016–2020), itself inspired by Limmud, as its founder told me. I hope to offer discussion of these in the planned monograph (see above, n. 1). For comparison with cultural events such as Jewish Book Week and the Jewish Film Festival, see below, n. 34.

6 These aspects will be fully explored in the forthcoming monograph (see above, n. 1).

7 Fifty-two (34%) of the 153 interviewees used phrases of this type.

8 The "Limmud Mission Statement and Values" note that "We do not participate in legitimising or de-legitimising any religious or political position found in the worldwide Jewish community" (*Limmud Festival 2017* (programme book), 182). Sabbath restrictions and dietary laws are observed in all public spaces, but religious services are arranged by individuals who want to hold them, not by Limmud as an organization.

The emotive and Jewishly resonant terms used by participants to describe Limmud are all the more significant since the organization was not designed or founded for any openly utopian or spiritual purpose, but, more prosaically, as a conference for Jewish educators, principally those working with children.[9] Over the first decade and a half of its activity, however, the fundamental character and popular understanding of its role changed dramatically, to one far more community- and identity-centred, attracting an ever-increasing range of attendees. In order to evaluate the significance of the set of spatial and temporal similes common among the interviewees, this rapid and decisive change in the nature of the organization and the factors behind it must be examined.

2 Foundation and Change (1980–Late 1990s)

In 1979 Michael May, a Jewish communal official of German-Israeli background, was working for the World Jewish Congress Institute of Jewish Affairs in London. He was offered a free trip to CAJE (Conference for Alternatives in Jewish Education), the big American Jewish educators' conference, founded in 1976 and held annually till 2009, which has been described as 'the Jewish Woodstock.'[10] May was asked to take along two British Jewish educators, and recruited Alastair Falk, an English teacher at Carmel College, a small and innovative Jewish boarding school near Oxford. He also invited Rabbi Mickey Rosen (d. 2008), who had founded the Jewish adult education centre Yakar in 1978 and was the brother of Rabbi Jeremy Rosen, the headmaster of Carmel. All three were very impressed by the creativity and cross-denominational nature of the CAJE conference, and felt that something similar should be set up in the UK. Rosen dropped out as he was too busy with Yakar, but Falk and May decided to organize a similar conference on a smaller scale, adapted to local conditions. They recruited Clive Lawton, then education director of the Board of Deputies of British Jews, and Jonathan Benjamin (d. 2020), another English teacher. After some delays the first conference took place in December 1980, at Carmel College. Estimates vary between 70 and 80 for the number of participants at the first Limmud, but they were mostly educators,[11] in the widest sense possible,

9 Though of course it could be claimed that the purpose of all education intended to be transformative is *ipso facto* utopian in some sense.

10 Rosie Rosenzweig, "CAJE," in Jewish Women's Archive, *The Shalvi/Hyman Encyclopedia of Jewish Women*, https://jwa.org/encyclopedia/article/caje, accessed 15 August 2024.

11 The term 'educators' as used by Limmud was not restricted to professionals: "We utilised the term 'educator,' which was not current at that time, in order to try and broaden the

including cheder teachers, teachers in non-Jewish schools, and youth workers. There were 49 sessions, presented by 34 presenters, and participants came from both Orthodox and non-Orthodox denominations.[12]

As the conference was held over Christmas, several participants brought their families along: there was childcare for the 2–5s, and a programme for 5–8 and 8–12-year-olds. In the evenings there was a film, or a table quiz, or home-made entertainment around the piano. The main points that all the attendees whom I interviewed remember are: (a) the novel fact that there was a choice of sessions (there were three to four sessions in each of the five daily slots),[13] and (b) the sheer excitement of meeting people from other denominations—at the time this was almost unheard of in the UK, where official boundaries between Jewish denominations were very rigid.[14] Most of the sessions seem rather earnest from today's viewpoint,[15] and were principally focussed on pedagogy, as can be seen from a sample:

> "Whose Needs—Theirs or Yours? A look at how different age levels absorb information differently"
> "Teaching about Israel"
> "Jewish Roots—How to run a local history project in your community"
> "Family Education—An American approach"

Much the same recipe was followed in the next few years,[16] and numbers began to rise. International presenters and participants were there from the start—

sense that we weren't just talking about teachers. And we said that that educator included anybody who felt they had any responsibility to pass on anything Jewish to anyone else." Clive Lawton, interview, 25 August 2020.

12 A very rough estimation of participants' denominational affiliation from 1980 to 1985, based on 35 interviewees, suggests that there was a balance between Orthodox and non-Orthodox attendees (Orthodox: 14; non-Orthodox: 17; secular or unaffiliated: 4).

13 While novel to UK attendees, this was one of the features deliberately adopted from the CAJE conference.

14 For discussion of these divisions, see Keith Kahn-Harris and Ben Gidley, *Turbulent Times: The British Jewish Community Today* (London: Continuum, 2010), esp. the section on "The Problem of Pluralism," 76–80; and Meir Persoff, *Closed Doors, Open Minds: British Jewry's Secret Disputations* (Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2018), esp. ch. 4, "1980–1990: Dissent and Disunity."

15 In the last two decades Limmud sessions have developed into a very varied mix including academic, political, environmental, and other serious topics, comedy, musical and dramatic entertainment, family-oriented activities, and many imaginative and unusual offerings.

16 Though new techniques of self-advertising had to be learnt rather rapidly, which themselves began to change the nature of the event. Clive Lawton remembered: "[An American

there were attendees from the Netherlands, Switzerland, Italy, and the USA at the 1980 conference.

As Limmud continued to grow, however, things began to change and the focus slowly moved away from children's education. By 1986 there was a beit midrash track for classical text study, and a women's group which also ran a women-only prayer service.[17] The first Young Limmud programme for children at the conference started the same year. By 1992, about 350 people took part in Limmud, by then located at Oxford Polytechnic, and new topics unrelated to pedagogy began to appear, such as AIDS, Jews and the media, calligraphy, modern Israeli literature, Jewish folklore, the history of the Jews of Prague, antisemitism, and women's Torah study. By 1994, with about 450 participants, of the 26 session tracks only four (family education, informal education, pedagogic, special needs) were concerned with pedagogy, and barely a quarter (23.7%) of sessions was related to such topics. The other tracks ranged over a huge variety of subjects: arts and crafts; a beit midrash; community; ethics; entertainment; drama and stories; literature and poetry; music, dance and song; religion and prayer; science and ethics; and *torah lishma* (Torah study). By 1996, when Limmud was held in Worcester, over a thousand people attended, with more than 200 presenters; by this time, only three of the 26 tracks were pedagogic, and only a tenth (10.6%) of the sessions was on educational topics.

Not everyone was happy about the change in direction to an event that appealed to a wider audience than educators, which seems to have been due to a number of factors. Many interviewees mentioned the decisive role of Andrew Gilbert, Chair of Limmud from 1990–1997,[18] who unlike earlier leaders was not himself an educator. When he first went to Limmud, in 1987, he immediately noticed that however it was described, it certainly was not exclusively for educators:

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presenter] gave one session—"Talmud is like a Warm Coat." And that was our discovery, our rude discovery, that putting sessions on in Limmud required marketing. Because we were all putting on sessions called "The Close Study of Genesis Chapter 3, Verses 4–6" or something, and of course everybody wanted to go to her stuff. […] And that became my mental image about what you need to do at Limmud, you need to sell this, you're in a competition. Nobody had ever been in a competition before."

17 This was eight years before the first and very controversial women's prayer service in Stanmore; see Lindsey Taylor-Guthartz, *Challenge and Conformity: The Religious Lives of Orthodox Jewish Women* (Liverpool: Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2021), 124–138.

18 Gilbert was Chair both of the organization as a whole and of the conference from 1990 to 1994, and then organization chair alone from 1995 to 1997.

> Over half were families. And it was multigenerational. But they were claiming it was professional educators. And then it was supplementary educators. It was a little bit confused about what it was. And much less professionals. And there weren't that many teachers in the community that they would be able to get anyway. That was the myth.[19]

He was correct—compared to the USA, the number of Jewish educators working in Jewish contexts in the UK was very small, and the majority of new attendees in the 1990s were not involved in Jewish education, whether formal or informal. Gilbert sought out and recruited volunteers who had been active in the Jewish youth movements,[20] considerably lowering the average age of those who actually ran the event,[21] and encouraged a wider range of programming. During his period as Chair of Limmud, a Family Education programme was introduced (1991); scholarships for Jewish students were set up (1992); an exchange programme with the CAJE conference was initiated (1995); fundraising was ramped up to a much higher level; and the constitution, structure, and mission statement of Limmud were overhauled. It is possible that if Limmud had remained a conference exclusively for educators, it would have peaked in the early 1990s; as it was, growth continued at a rapid rate, changing the original format even more. Those who had attended the first conferences regretted the loss of intimacy as well as the focus on pedagogy:

> In the early days it was more intimate, and you felt like you were part of something. And when we went back it was just like—well, it was mind-blowing. You didn't know where to be because there were clashing things that you wanted to go to and everybody was rushing with their cups of coffee.

19 Andrew Gilbert, interview, 7 September 2020.

20 Unlike most American youth movements, where activities were run by adult professionals, the UK's Jewish youth movements were mostly run for the younger members by the older teenagers, who thus acquired high levels of organizational and logistic skills. A very high proportion of Limmud chairs, team members, and activists 'came up' from these movements, which also created social networks that undergirded Limmud. Some had also gained experience in organization from participation in the Union of Jewish Students (UJS).

21 This has largely continued till the present, with the typical conference team member being in their mid to late 20s, either single or not yet involved in child-rearing. The earliest conference teams included a higher proportion of young marrieds, some with small children, and more likely to be in their 30s.

In addition to the larger, more impersonal nature of the conference, the wider Jewish community was changing, with a new sense that adult education on Jewish topics was urgently needed. Limmud participants were actively aware of this:

> [At an AGM] Alastair [Falk] said "This should be an educators' retreat." No more no less. And Andrew Gilbert said "This should be a [...] a Festival of Learning." [...] We discussed it and we may have voted on it. [...] We said—the assembled multitudes said—things have moved on, we actually don't need an educators' retreat any more because the Jewish community has changed. In those ten-odd years or more the Jewish community has changed radically.[22] The institutions have changed radically. We don't need an educators' retreat as such. But we do need a festival of Jewish learning.

The 'assembled multitudes' (at this stage, probably a couple of hundred at most) felt that Limmud should respond to what they perceived as an urgent need for stimulating Jewish education for adults, as well as for children.[23] At this period synagogues did not generally run learning programmes, and almost no other community institutions were filling the gap;[24] no wonder, then, that the opportunity offered by Limmud was eagerly seized by those hungry to learn. Another major factor that mandated expansion of the programme was that from the beginning, some educators had brought along their families, and something had to be provided for them. As a consequence, the variety and range of sessions expanded even further beyond the purely pedagogical:

> I would say it was already built in from the outset, because of our determination to include every adult who attended. So even if Janet Cohen who is a cheder teacher decided to come, she would bring Haimie Cohen with her, let alone her two children. And Haimie Cohen, once there, is going to

22 Changes in the UK Jewish community in the 1990s, including a process of institutional renewal, are surveyed in Kahn-Harris and Gidley, *Turbulent Times*, ch. 9: "From Renewal to Renaissance."

23 This was just at the beginning of a period of huge growth in Jewish schools; see L. Daniel Staetsky and Jonathan Boyd, *The Rise and Rise of Jewish Schools in the United Kingdom* (London: Institute for Jewish Policy Research, 2016).

24 Yakar, mentioned above, was the pioneer in this regard, running well-attended lectures and debates with prominent speakers from 1978 till 2002, and (along with Limmud) providing inspiration for the Jewish community centres and synagogue educational programmes that developed in the 2000s.

want to attend sessions. This is not how to be a good educator. Secondly, all the presenters, even though nominally in the first years, they were doing pedagogical 'how to' sessions, of course they were doing masses of content stuff. It was just a front.

3 The 'New' Limmud

As a result of this change, characterized by both the expansion of participants beyond the original remit of 'educators' and the consequent expansion of programming to include non-pedagogic topics, not only did the nature and scale of the event change, but the way in which people increasingly thought and felt about Limmud and the role it played in their Jewish lives changed too. The features that seemed most significant and meaningful to the interviewees, when they looked back at their experiences over the years at Limmud, could be loosely grouped under three headings: (a) the intensely social nature of the event and its creation of a genuine community, temporary though it might be; (b) the excitement and sense of discovery associated with meeting new people, especially from different, 'forbidden' parts of the very divided UK Jewish community;[25] and (c) the appreciation of the enormous creativity on display and the chance to sample new ideas and learn about new things (in both pedagogical and other spheres), which, for some people, had a direct impact on their personal Jewish identity and the ways in which they lived this in practice.

3.1 *The Creation of Community*

For most participants, the crucial part of Limmud was, and still is, its creation of an ideal community where Jewish life can be lived more intensely, and where the usual divisions and feuds of the UK Jewish community, particularly those between denominations, can be ignored or even challenged for a few precious days. Here Jewish identity and hopes can be nurtured and recharged in order to cope with the cold world outside, particularly for those marginalized in mainstream communities, or for those who live far from organized Jewish communities; as one interviewee observed, Limmud is "the space you can go where you might not have a place otherwise in the community." Many interviewees described it as a 'safe' space, particularly if they themselves did not always feel safe in their home communities, while for some with no link to any Jewish community at all, Limmud represented a 'home':

25 See above, n. 14.

> I've never lived a Jewish life. To decide to be with Jews, to make an active decision [to be there]. And as hard as that sometimes was, to really acknowledge just how Jewish I am. Oh, I felt like I was home.

In the late 1990s, for instance, the first sessions on LGBTQ issues appeared, increasing from one or two in 1996 and the following years to eight in 2004, the first "Queer Limmud" social space in 2006, and over twenty sessions in 2015. Discussion of disability followed a similar pattern, starting with a single session in 1998, expanding to an 'extensive' (series) of six sessions on the topic in 2004, and culminating in "Limmud L'Am," a programme that "enable[d] adults with additional learning needs to access a day of Limmud Conference" in 2011.[26]

To those used to the divided nature of the wider UK Jewish community and the difficulties of single, divorced, widowed, disabled, and queer Jews in finding a place within local synagogues (particularly in Orthodox ones, which are the majority in the UK),[27] "going to Limmud is like going to Narnia"—a phrase from a former Limmud conference chair that captures the otherworldly and idealized community created above all by personal encounter with others. For most of the interviewees this sense of an open and welcoming community lies at the heart of a good Limmud. Many of them emphasized that it is not just—or even principally—the sessions that 'make' Limmud: the essence of the event lies in the open encounters with other people, the chance chats over a cup of coffee, the intense conversation with a presenter, the friends made in the dinner queue. Several leading Limmud organizers admitted that they rarely, if ever, went to sessions while they were serving on the conference team, instead developing close ties with other team members and gaining satisfaction from producing an event enjoyed by so many people. Social networks formed at Limmud are sometimes continued when participants return home,[28] but also persist even if restricted to the annual conference; one interviewee noted, "I feel very close to my Limmud friends, even though I may not see them out of Limmud. It's a relationship with people through a shared experience." Though the community created at Limmud is physically temporary, it continues beyond

26 *Limmud Conference 2011 Handbook*, 7.

27 A 2016 survey of synagogue affiliation in the UK found that 53% of affiliated Jews belonged to 'Central Orthodox' synagogues; Donatella Casale Mashiah and Jonathan Boyd, *Synagogue Membership in the United Kingdom in 2016* (London: Institute for Jewish Policy Research, 2017), available on the JPR website. Non-Orthodox figures were: Masorti 3%, Reform 19%, Liberal 8%, and 'Strictly Orthodox' accounted for 13%.

28 About one fifth of the interviewees met their spouse at Limmud.

the week of the event, across both time and space; many participants have 'Limmud friends' around the world.

The term 'Limmudnik' as a name for participants evolved in the early 1980s, and still serves as an identity marker that bears witness to the sense of belonging experienced by many attendees, as does the 'Limmud language' that has evolved over time, reflecting the egalitarian ethos: 'participants,' rather than 'audience' or 'attendees,' 'sessions' rather than 'lectures,' and 'presenters,' rather than 'lecturers.'[29] Even the unsophisticated décor plays a role in establishing the community:

> The interesting thing about the site is it's always felt like Limmud wherever we've been, because we go in and we take something that looks really nice, and then we tackify it with somebody's home-made bunting or something. I mean as crap as that is, it is Limmud. That's the look.

The online versions of Limmud improvised during the pandemic made the community aspect of Limmud even more obvious:[30] though interviewees appreciated the efforts made to make Limmud happen, they almost all observed that "it wasn't the same," and spoke with palpable sadness about the impossibility of reproducing online these intimate, chance encounters and the busy atmosphere of excitement at pre-pandemic Limmud events. For the most recent online Limmud Festival, in December 2021, about 30 veteran Limmud participants created a Facebook group, "Limmudniks Anonymous," on which they jokily posted virtual recreations of their usual, pre-pandemic experiences at the annual event: standing in the dining room queue and getting their hands sanitized by enthusiastic volunteers, eating jacket potatoes at (every) lunch, arranging to 'meet' at the 'bar.'[31] This 'virtual Limmud,' constructed of allusions to and jokes about shared experience, proved so popular that the group orga-

29 In the 2000s, Limmud organizers even coined the unwieldy term 'volunticipation' to express the ideal of all participants volunteering to help with the event in some way.

30 Four principal Limmud events were organized by Limmud UK: Limmud Together (May 2020), with over 3,500 participants from all around the world; a summer event in 2020, with about 2,000 participants; Limmud Festival 2020 (December), with about 5,000 participants; and Limmud Festival 2021 (December), with about 2,000 participants. Interview with Ezra Margulies, a member of the Limmud Executive, 8 March 2022.

31 The Limmud bar performs many connective and community-building functions; as well as providing the usual sociability associated with bars, it serves as a hunting ground for recruitment for the next year's conference team; a 'marriage market' for those in their 20s and 30s (see above, n. 28); and one of the principal locations for meeting new people or chatting to presenters.

nized a Zoom session on the day after the actual Festival, with a couple of more or less serious sessions and plenty of time for chat and socializing.

Community-making is also reinforced by classic rites of passage at beginning and end of events, marking Limmud off as 'liminal time,' with its attendant suspension of reality. Participants spoke of the excitement of arrival, greeting friends and performing the familiar rituals of joining the conference:

> Oh, just the excitement for me is just incredible. You get in the car and you're on your way and yes, you've got your water bottles and you've got your re-usable cups and you've got everything—you think you've got everything you need. Your phone charger and your notepaper, and you've looked at the Limmud programme online beforehand, because you have to because it's so enormous compared to the way it used to be. And then you're on. And you're looking for people who you know. And just all the reunions and the being back with this huge family again. And the even bigger community. […] But it's just this feeling of going somewhere *incredibly* special and wonderful and life-enhancing. And fabulous.

The physical journey to a new space and the preparations for attendance take on a ritual quality here, serving as a transition to the moment that 'you're on,' a phrase that evokes a performance, in this case of the 'imagined community' of Limmud.[32]

The registration process itself constitutes a rite of passage marking entry to Limmud's liminal space/time; it is manned by a small team of volunteers, many of whom have done this job year after year, greeting their many acquaintances as they arrive and handing out the all-important name badges. The moment of receiving one's badge was often mentioned as an important marker of entry into Limmud; the badges epitomize the egalitarian and grassroots nature of the event, since no titles are included on them, and symbolically convey membership of the community.[33] One participant spoke of the feeling of nakedness and loss of identity when she removed the badge at the end of the event, and others described the shock of returning to the everyday world outside after the conference:

32 Though this term was first coined by Benedict Anderson in a landmark study of modern nationalism (*Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* [London: Verso, 1983]), it seems appropriate for Limmud, another community that is "thought into being."

33 Some participants save their name badges every year and treasure them as mementos.

> On the way home from Limmud, we would always have to stop at a service station to have hot chocolate and something, just to sort of—not decompress, but to learn how to be in the world again. Because [Limmud]'s a world of its own [...] And it's very odd to see people not wearing *kipot*. And what's that they're eating?! It's really really really weird.

In contrast to this spatial aspect of Limmud, with its entry and departure rituals framing an 'otherworldly' place where a utopian Jewish community exists, Alastair Falk emphasized the quasi-sacred temporal aspect of Limmud, equating it with more traditional Jewish festivals:

> I would describe [Limmud] as being a contemporary Jewish festival. So I think what's happening in Anglo-Jewish life is [...] a parallel series of secular Jewish festivals. So there's Jewish Book Week and there's Jewish Film Week and there's Limmud. So you could have a Jewish life which was secular that is punctuated with the same regular intervals as festivals. [...] And I think the [term] festival is right. So I always describe it as being like a [Passover] seder. You come every year. It's pretty much the same. You'll pretty much meet the same people. You only meet them once a year. And you do all the Jewish stuff. [...] And I think that's really powerful [...] its regularity. And you become something, you become a Limmudnik. It kind of creates an identity. But you only need to be it for that period of time [...] I think it really is a festival in the sense of the way in which Jews have adapted the kind of cycle of the Jewish year, both in terms of secular but also in terms of how people 'do' Hanukah and Pesah.

In this reading, Limmud parallels other Jewish festivals, both sacred and secular, which punctuate the year and create Jewish identity in terms of time.[34]

The palpable sense of disconnection from the outside world and its time while at Limmud, necessitating a conscious effort to return to everyday reality,

34 Events such as the Jewish Film Festival or Jewish Book Week are quite different in nature and tone, however; rather than being residential events organized by volunteers with a clearly enunciated ethos of learning, mutual respect, and the empowerment of all participants, these principally cultural events are much more like similar annual celebrations in the UK, such as the Native Spirit Film Festival, Children's Book Week, French Film Festival UK, and so on; while highlighting a particular group, such celebrations are open to all and are programmed by means of invitation by a professional organizational team, rather than being based primarily on unsolicited participant contribution to the programme and organization. Personal observation suggests that the 'utopian' language used about Limmud, examined in this article, is not used in connection with these events.

underscores the intensity of the 'otherworldly' experience, and exemplifies the way in which this community "exists in the mind of its members," as Antony P. Cohen phrases it.[35]

3.2 *Exploring the Unknown Parts of the Jewish Community*

Set in a British Jewish landscape that is still deeply divided along denominational lines, many attendees use Limmud to explore other, 'forbidden' parts of the community that differ from their own—with the notable exception of the haredi sector and right-wing mainstream Orthodoxy, who fear precisely this mutual exploration and do not attend.[36] Participants spoke of 'trying out' other denominations' services, or of the impact on them made by their first experience of meeting and learning from people who did not belong to their own corner of the community; as Alastair Falk put it, "For me the great beauty of it was it was a place where you didn't need to be sectarian." One Reform rabbi, recalling his first Limmud in the late 1980s, noted that "this intermingling of the community really didn't occur anywhere else," and another, Orthodox, participant told me wistfully, "I wish my community was like Limmud," implying that Limmud was a model or utopian ideal. Yet another attendee recalled that Limmud had taught her that "it was fine to live in many different worlds," an acceptance of diversity and multiple possible ways of being Jewish that was clearly not the norm for her. Another remarked that

35 Antony P. Cohen, *The Symbolic Construction of Community* (London: Routledge, 1985), 98: "The distinctiveness of communities, and, thus, the reality of their boundaries, similarly lies in the mind, in the meanings which people attach to them, not in their structural forms."

36 Some haredim, particularly Lubavitch hasidim, did attend in the earliest years. In 1995 Dayan Chanoch Ehrentreu (1932–2022), head of the London Beth Din, instituted an unofficial ban on Orthodox rabbis attending Limmud. Several, including one interviewee, were phoned and told they should be 'diplomatically ill.' Rabbi Jonathan Sacks (1948–2020) never attended after assuming the post of Chief Rabbi in 1991, though he had attended and presented sessions at two Limmud conferences in the 1980s, and unofficially often encouraged people to go. Eventually, Chief Rabbi Ephraim Mirvis attended the conference in 2013, giving the United Synagogue's official seal of approval to those of its members who wish to attend (though large numbers of them had already been coming for years, and they probably constituted the majority of attendees). The proportion of United Synagogue members attending Limmud does not seem to have changed significantly after this approval, suggesting that any previous 'unofficial' ban had had little effect on either those who chose to attend in earlier years in spite of the ban, or on those who did not find Limmud attractive before the ban was lifted.

> [because of] the porousness of Limmud, which I think is slightly different to normalisation, people heard things they wouldn't have heard—so exposure maybe. So something like normalisation—this is just how the world could look. There's something about exposure, because people can cross boundaries more easily at Limmud.

For some, there was a real sense of building a new model of Jewish community that ignored denominational difference: "It was working on the ground, people were building relationships, people were learning from each other, people were not just tolerating but respecting each other in a really fundamental way." These participants' experience at Limmud confirmed that such utopian visions of a united and harmonious community could be realized.

For others, the transformative experience at Limmud was not just discovering other denominations' ways of being Jewish, but learning from others of the possibility of a new level of Jewish experience as individuals: "I felt like I was joining a spiritual community," said one Reform woman, and another woman told me:

> Whereas we in the Orthodox community had to be coaxed to enjoy our Judaism, here I saw for the first time people for whom Judaism didn't get in their way, but gave them something much richer. They wanted to do good in the world through it, which was not a concept that had ever entered my mind.

New ideas about spiritual satisfaction and the positive and enjoyable aspects of religion were encountered for the first time. One interviewee spoke of Limmud "open[ing] a window to another kind of Judaism. A more multicoloured, interesting kind of Judaism." Several others described Limmud as a safe, creative space which offered them rare opportunities: "I'm able to express my own religious identity in a safe environment where I know no-one's going to judge me," said one woman, and another remarked that "Limmud has made me braver," implying a lack of confidence in her usual experience of the Jewish community.

3.3 *Creativity and Expansion of Horizons*

In addition to offering a safe place for many of those who feel excluded, marginalized, or simply invisible in their local Jewish communities (such as LGBTQ individuals and single parents), Limmud provides a platform for the introduction and expansion of discussion of new issues and topics, especially those attracting increased attention in general British society; as one intervie-

wee noted, "Where Limmud leads, the rest of the community follows." General topical subjects such as interfaith encounter and environmentalism saw some of their first discussions in the UK Jewish community at Limmud, as well as more Jewishly-oriented novelties such as new ways of teaching Talmud, or new interpretative approaches to classical texts. The sheer range of options, of new ways of thinking, of new areas within Judaism as a whole that could be explored continues to be particularly important to many people who cannot find similar opportunities at home, especially in the provincial Jewish communities outside London and Manchester, which have been declining in size for some decades. A participant from Brighton remembered that in the 1980s, "being exposed to American presenters and American rabbis was just such a revelation. [...] It was just so different, I can't tell you the impact it had on us." Another interviewee, from Leeds, reflected on the opportunities for discovery:

> Every year there were surprises and new ways of doing things, which made it really exciting. You looked at the programme and said, "Oh, I've never been to anything about that before," which I think is one of the great joys of Limmud, that you end up going to things that you never even thought about, never mind read about or listened about or watched on telly, whatever. You go to it not knowing what you're going to be in for, apart from the short description and some stuff about the presenter. Like well, if I don't like it, it's only an hour, it doesn't matter, you know, it's fine. And that opens your thoughts to all kinds of things.

Here Limmud is seen not only as providing new fields to be explored, but as doing so in a low-risk, easily accessible environment. This theme of discovery of unknown aspects of Judaism—cultural, religious, and social—was particularly strong in accounts of the early years of Limmud, and tended to tail off in descriptions of more recent experiences, presumably as a result of the gradual expansion of cultural, religious, and social opportunities in the general Jewish community, some of which were themselves due to the catalyst provided by Limmud.

For several participants, the ethos and values of Limmud served as a model that could be used for creating new Jewish enterprises elsewhere. A former conference chair noted that she and another Limmud activist had recently been discussing

> Limmud as a model, not just for what it does. But if Limmud was doing a school, what would it look like? If Limmud was doing a party, what would it look like? If Limmud was doing a—I don't know what—a social welfare

> charity, what would it look like? And it's kind of almost like a shorthand then. You don't need to think it all from first principles, because Limmud's done all that work for you. […] All the values, which I'm kind of assuming are baked in. So the idea that everybody is welcome. The idea of respecting each person. And that no-one is more special than anybody else. And that things need to be accessible for everybody. And that we are together.

Here, in addition to providing new ideas, new horizons, new educational techniques, the basic ideals of Limmud are seen as providing a template, or 'shorthand,' that can be applied in the 'real world' to creating new institutions and experiences.[37] Even though such lofty ideals may not always work out in practice, many participants' experiences at Limmud have had a transformative effect on their lives and careers.[38]

4 The Multiple Roles of the Utopian Community in the Real World: Laboratory, Showcase, and Refuge

After examining the development of Limmud and its heightened significance for many participants, we can now understand the use of emotive terms described at the beginning of this paper (including several phrases with rich Jewish associations of the utopian and ideal) as another way of both marking and intensifying the interviewees' sense of the sacred and utopian nature of the conference. Here, the associations of the sabbath, the messianic age, and the afterlife (often linked to each other),[39] are repurposed and applied to Limmud,

37 Lack of space precludes a full discussion of the impact of Limmud on the wider UK Jewish community here, but it is clear from the interview evidence that the conference played a crucial role in the founding and development of several institutions and programmes in the wider community, by means of inspiring participants to set up new enterprises of different kinds, enabling them to find kindred spirits with whom to partner, and providing them with leadership and organizational training that enabled these individuals to realize their projects. For instance, Limmudniks who were involved in setting up and running the community centre JW3, the occasional prayer congregation Grassroots Jews, and the cross-denominational school JCoSS cited both the direct and indirect influence of Limmud on the setting up and development of these institutions.

38 Sixteen of the interviewees explicitly traced the evolution of their careers back to their experiences at Limmud; seven of this group became rabbis.

39 The rabbinic sages of the first few centuries CE characterized the sabbath as "an earthly version [*novelet*] of the world to come" (Bereshit Rabba 17:5). The same idea appears in the popular Ashkenazic sabbath table-song, *Mah yedidut*, where it is immediately followed by mention of the messianic age. Abraham Joshua Heschel (1907–1972) described

as they have been repurposed and applied to other modern phenomena.[40] The way in which the interviewees use these classical concepts is loose and symbolic, and does not necessarily correspond to the complex formulations and ideas articulated in Jewish literature, though points of similarity can sometimes be seen.[41]

Having examined the ways in which participants constitute Limmud as a community—the social networks established there, the inclusion of the marginalized, the development of boundaries constituted by identity-endowing rituals and traditions, and the application of traditional and non-traditional utopian terms—I now turn to the function of this community within a community. What 'work' does it do in the context of the wider UK Jewish community? Or in non-Jewish society?

In 1998 the sociologist Keith Kahn-Harris described Limmud as "a fictional, delusionary space," which he viewed as an escapist attempt by British Jewry to "wish away difficult [...] and intractable problems."[42] While some of his analysis still rings true,[43] I would argue that Limmud supplies an essential, rather than

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the sabbath as "a palace in time" (*The Sabbath* [New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1951], ch. 1), and a day uttered by eternity (ibid., 101). Some descriptions of the messianic age see it as a time where the 'natural' is reversed—old age, famine, war, and even death itself will disappear as the dead will be resurrected (i.e., it will be equivalent to the afterlife), in a close parallel to the lack of "boundaries and the angst and all the stuff that gets in the way" envisioned in the interview quotation presented at the beginning of this paper. In 2014 the prominent American historian and diplomat Professor Deborah Lipstadt, an enthusiastic Limmudnik, described Limmud as "a communal *mashiaḥ* [messiah] site"; see "Festival of Learning: JNTV at Limmud Conference 2014," https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UsRUP5XumnE, accessed 15 August 2024.

40 E.g., the messianic ideas associated with Zionism and the foundation of the state of Israel. For a detailed discussion of Jewish messianism and its modern forms and uses, see Aviezer Ravitsky, *Messianism, Zionism, and Religious Radicalism*, trans. Michael Swirsky and Jonathan Chipman (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993).

41 Kenneth Seeskin, in his *Jewish Messianic Thoughts in an Age of Despair* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), identifies several (potentially overlapping) varieties of messianic thought: inflationary, deflatory, marginalizing, internalized, and deferring (19–22). The interviewees' descriptions of Limmud align most closely with the 'internalized' approach, in which the messianic era is understood as an allegory of a moral transformation of humans that is also expressed in the public sphere. This dovetails with the modern interpretation of the rabbinic term *tiqun ʿolam* ('repair of the world') as social justice—a term often heard at Limmud, though not cited often by the interviewees; see Levi Cooper, "The Assimilation of Tikkun Olam," *Jewish Political Studies Review* 25 (2013): 10–42.

42 Keith Kahn-Harris, "Exploring Jewish Space: A Critique of Limmud," in *New Voices in Jewish Thought*, ed. R. Rabinowitz (London: Limmud Publications, 1998), 39–54.

43 Notably his definition of Limmud as "a space that exists as a nodal point on an extremely

delusionary, space, in which those who are conscious of the shortcomings of the everyday community can reimagine what an ideal Jewish community might look like, and create a unique, 'otherworldly' laboratory in which to explore new ways of 'doing' community. For many participants, Limmud represents the possibility of fulfilling (or at least exploring) their yearnings and aspirations for their personal Jewish identity and their own Jewish spaces. Kahn-Harris claimed that "Jewish spaces exist constantly in tension—sometimes antagonistic but always creative—with modernity and the non-Jewish world";[44] to this I would add that Limmud is also a Jewish space that exists in creative tension with the wider Jewish community, and that this is the major source of its importance for many participants, especially those who feel some degree of alienation from or dissatisfaction with their local communities. For these people, Limmud's role as an 'incubator' and 'laboratory,' a safe place to explore alternative models of learning, religious practice, and community, is central. In several cases, contacts made at Limmud, organizational training received there, and values and ideas encountered during the event have led to change and innovation in the wider Jewish community, whether in the foundation of new groups and events, the integration and application of novel pedagogies and practices, or the adoption of Limmud policies and models for managing cross-denominational events.[45] Indeed, Raymond Simonson, a former Executive Director of Limmud, saw community-building as the prime purpose of Limmud: "It is community building, it is community work, it is youth work—it's all of that. It's as much about that, if not more, than it is about Jewish education, without any question."

Limmud's role vis-à-vis the wider Jewish community, as a liminal space and time that offers the opportunity of experimentation and exploration, is the core element of its success, but it also constitutes a subset of the UK Jewish community, facing outwards to the majority, non-Jewish culture and community of the UK, as noted by Kahn-Harris. Here too, Limmud plays an important part in the complex negotiation of the boundary between these two spheres: on the one hand, it reaches across that boundary to present liberal, exciting, and creative aspects of the Jewish community to the wider world, while on the other it reinscribes the boundary between Jewish and non-Jewish space and time. As Antony Cohen has noted, "The symbolic expression and affirmation of bound-

diverse set of [individuals'] trajectories" and "a major node in a wide-ranging set of networks of Jewish intercultural communication"; ibid., 43.

44 Kahn-Harris, "Exploring Jewish Space," 41.

45 See above, n. 34.

ary heightens people's awareness of and sensitivity to their community."[46] In the case of Limmud, time and space modulate this boundary in a unique way.

In the first, outward-facing role, Limmud has often been presented as a showcase of Jewish creativity in the UK national press; politicians have chosen to visit Limmud in order to engage (and be seen to engage) with the Jewish community; and there is a regular presence of Muslims and Christians, coming to promote interfaith encounter.[47] Here Limmud opens up and shares its time and space with the wider, non-Jewish world, encouraging figures from the outside to enter its charmed circle. On the other hand, however, the boundary is deliberately preserved, and even emphasized in some ways. Many interviewees spoke of Limmud as "an escape from Christmas," a refuge from the saturation of the public sphere with a Christian festival, however secularized, that hammers home the otherness of being Jewish. Overly intense non-Jewish time and space can be avoided by moving to the Jewish 'bubble' of Limmud. This boundary, however, was not maintained by all interviewees, encapsulating the complex and often ambiguous relationship between Jewish and non-Jewish worlds:

> One of the unwritten rules of Limmud was "We're all here because we hate Christmas and we're all getting away from Christmas and we want to be as far away from the world as possible." And no-one should dare leave [...] the frontier of Limmud on Christmas Day. And frankly that was not a view I shared. I actually love Christmas. So there was a time when we were secretly leaving Limmud and going off to have Christmas dinner, and that became a tradition in my family and circle of friends and we do that to this day [...] It definitely was a very strong unwritten rule amongst some of the puritans, if I may say, our Jewish puritans, to really consider this the pure getaway from Christmas and the opportunity to be together.

Though this interviewee recognized the 'unwritten rule,' he did not assent to it and happily crossed the 'frontier' between Limmud time and space and the Christmas-soaked non-Jewish world outside. In spite of being a utopian community for many of its participants, Limmud's own boundaries and engage-

46 Cohen, *Symbolic Construction of Community*, 50.

47 It is worth noting that the event is actually much more accessible to Muslims, since Christians are celebrating Christmas (the quintessential non-Jewish time) during 'Limmud time.' Perhaps this is another (unconscious) factor in Limmud's maintenance of the boundary between Jewish and non-Jewish spheres. Interfaith encounter will be discussed in depth in my forthcoming monograph (see above, n. 1).

ments are as contested as those of the wider Jewish community; like all utopian visions, it reflects the original social context of those who have created it.

Limmud is thus a site of multiple meanings, a constantly self-making community, an 'imagined community' that also (for at least some participants) constitutes an 'anti-community'—a reaction to and critique of the wider UK Jewish community in which it is embedded. This is reinforced by the event's location in the 'non-space' of a rented university campus or a conference centre, away from Jewish community institutions, and even more so by its 'timeless' quality. Temporally situated at Christmas, the most non-Jewish time of the year, but running on an intensely Jewish schedule of its own, it serves as a public showcase of Jewish creativity while simultaneously providing a refuge from the non-Jewish world, like Jewish messianic visions throughout history. Regardless of how utopian the event is or is not in reality, the myth of the ideal Jewish community that it provides for many of its participants plays a vital and inspirational role, not only in the UK but for Limmudniks worldwide. The roots of Limmud's utopian myth and their relationship to classic Jewish concepts of sacredness and significance can be exemplified by a midrash-like image used by a former chair:

> Limmud is like the words and the space in between the words. I'm sure it's in the Torah somewhere.[48] It's like the words don't make sense without the spaces in between the words. […] It's all very well having the programming, but unless you have the space around the programming that can create community, the whole doesn't make as much sense.

Acknowledgments

I would like to take this opportunity to thank the Rothschild Foundation Hanadiv Europe, who funded my post-doctoral fellowship at the Centre for Jewish Studies, University of Manchester.

48 Though this image does not appear in the Torah, it is related to a comment by Naḥmanides (1190–1270), who suggests that the Torah was originally written without spaces between the words, constituting a single name of God; the introduction of spaces revealed the 'human' aspect of the Torah that is concerned with the commandments. It is also related to the midrashic characterization of the Torah as written in letters of "black fire written on white fire" (y. Sheqal. 6:1, 25b), and subsequent commentary on the significance of the 'white fire,' or spaces, between the letters; see Naḥmanides, *Commentary on Genesis*, introduction.