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The UJA-Federation of New York cares for those in need, rescues those in harm's way and renews and strengthens the Jewish people in New York in Israel and around the world. **The Commission on the Jewish People** is dedicated to building connections among the diverse elements of the Jewish People and develops and supports efforts to forge linkages among Jews wherever they may live and support Israel as a vibrant, democratic and pluralistic Jewish state.

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המרכז לחינוך לעמיות יהודית
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The Collective Jewish Conversation:
Its Role, Purpose and Place
in the 21st Century

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The Collective Jewish Conversation: Its Role, Purpose and Place in the 21st Century

because of that nominal goal, free time is crunched and mixers are limited to the vermouth and OJ poured into the cocktails. The Israel Presidential Conference, for example, has now grown so successful and so large that it's almost impossible to meet anybody. This past June, I saw lots of folks who spent their time reading other people's nametags, and trying to suss out whether this was someone worth meeting or not. And I'm not picking on that conference; most BJTs are similar.

If we admit that BJTs are really about relationship building, we would craft them differently. We'd have affinity groups with facilitated meeting spaces, facilitated non-hokey mixer activities, and more opportunities to connect with people whose work intersects with our own. We'd let go of the notion of goals and grand statements, and focus instead of building deeper relationships between very different sorts of Jews. We could have deeper, facilitated conversations between Jews of different political persuasions, to help participants see the 'other side' more clearly. We'd create cohorts of diverse Jews, not to try and agree on anything, but to try to find a way to disagree in a more civilized way, to articulate where and why we disagree, and to build the kinds of personal relationships that transcend those differences.

Really, how many 'professional Jews' are there? I see the same people at BJTs, over and over again. What if we actually used proven technologies to try to communicate more effectively with one another? What if we exited our echo chambers and entered a carefully constructed space where real conversations are possible?

This may sound like a utopian proposal, but I've done it on a small scale now for eight years with my organization, Nehirim. It's not impossible, if relationship-building is a primary and not a secondary goal. Maybe then we could write a different, though less funny, punchline to that Jewish joke: "this is the shul I go to," the Jew could reply, "and that one, well, I can see where they're coming from."

Jay Michaelson is a writer, scholar, and activist whose work focuses on the intersections of religion, spirituality, sexuality, and law.



Limmud International – Contributing to the Global Jewish Conversation

Helena Miller

"It's a wonderful environment for feeling part of the larger Jewish people."

This was one of many comments articulated in response to a study that took place within the past year, to evaluate the outcome of Limmud on the individuals and local communities who are engaged in Limmud events.

Limmud is a Jewish learning initiative, begun in the UK in 1980 with a conference for 80 participants. In the years since, there has been steady growth and now it reaches around 2,500 participants at the annual Limmud Conference in the UK, as well as a further 5,000 attending events around the UK annually, from regional day events to Limmud fest, a summer festival.

The Limmud mission – emphasizing learning, diversity and community, empowerment, expanding Jewish horizons, creating opportunities to connect, and a commitment to respect each other – has proved to be a compelling set of values both beyond Limmud and beyond the UK. In 1988, a group of Israelis from the Galil attended Limmud Conference and were inspired to create their own Limmud Conference back in the Galil. The following year, Limmud Oz took place for the first time in Sydney. Limmud was beginning to inspire communities far and wide. Today, it is an international movement comprising annual events in more than 50 locations world-wide, reaching over 30,000 people per year.

Some attempts have been made over the years to evaluate aspects of Limmud, notably Koren and Samuel (2007), Cohen and Veinstein (2008), Aviv (2010), Caplan (2010) and Simonson (2011). Each of these gave perspectives on Limmud, but none looked specifically at the effects of Limmud as an international phenomenon.

In 2011, Steven M Cohen and Ezra Kopelowitz were commissioned by Limmud to work with researchers in the UK to collect and analyse data to explore the outcome of

Limmud world-wide. An internet survey, sent to around 20,000 individuals, asked for demographic and personal details; exposure to and engagement with Limmud; personal and community Jewish journeys. Data was collected from more than 3,000 Limmud participants from 49 Limmud groups around the world.

What follows will focus on the data that was obtained in relation to Limmud as a values-based global framework in an age of diversity.

We learnt that Limmud values are central to international groups: the uniqueness of a volunteer and participant culture is evident throughout the world. Limmud in Mexico has many elements that are recognisable in France and South Africa, for example. The Limmud values of pluralism and diversity are also universally shared throughout the Limmud International community: A participant could attend Limmud in Turkey, Argentina or Poland and find Jews of all denominations and none, who study and learn within and beyond their usual Jewish boundaries.

From the perspective of Limmud, this shows undoubted success. The Limmud values are successfully migrating around the world. It is a form of externally imposed success focusing on Limmud as an organisation, and is a form of global corporate identity. In the same way that a visitor to Starbucks instantly recognises where he or she is, whether the cafe happens to be located in London or Louisiana, so Limmud participants recognise the Limmud brand wherever they are in the world.

A second aspect of Limmud as a values based global framework focuses on the participants. Our study shows that one out of every six of Limmudniks world-wide have attended a Limmud event outside their home country. The Israelis are the most likely to have attended outside their home country, closely followed by Europeans. Australians are the least likely, which given their geographical location in relation to the rest of world Jewry is not surprising. When we further probed, Israelis are most likely to have attended as a presenter outside their home country and Europeans the most likely to have attended as participants. The perception of Israelis as uninterested in Diaspora Jewry is challenged by this finding; Israelis are strong bridge builders to the Diaspora. The European finding interests us as it indicates that Jews in their 20s and 30s (the European predominant demographic who engage with Limmud) do not see expression of Jewish life as something which is boundaried by geographical borders. This resonates with recent research on Jewish identity in five European countries (JDC 2011) which found that Jewish identity is not only a choice of culture and values, but that very few of the twelve hundred interviewees talked of *national* links to their Jewish identity. Young Europeans do indeed see themselves as members of *global* Jewry.

Thirdly, the Limmud International study gave us many examples of how Limmud groups and their participants recognise that they are part of a global community. They are able to articulate a sense of peoplehood, understanding that the global aspect connects to the personal: *"Limmud has been a way for me to explore and connect to my Judaism, with people from all over the world."* Renowned Jewish educator Avraham Infeld, speaking in London (5.7.12) acknowledges that Limmud is the fulfilment of the Jewish peoplehood dream. He suggests that Limmud deals *"head on"* with the question of how we can remain a unified people when we are a people who lack uniformity. Infeld calls this pluralism – *"the ability to live comfortably with different interpretations of a common memory."*

So Limmud enables people to feel part of an international community. But that is not enough. How can being a member of that community help us strengthen the Jewish people? This is where the core value of learning together is important. Mittelberg (2011) emphasizes the centrality of learning as a component of the individual's connection to the Jewish people. Limmud is not just about bringing people together, it is about opportunities to develop our Jewish values; deepen our Jewish knowledge. Data from the Limmud international study showed that, for the majority of country groupings, motivation to learn with others is cited as the primary reason for getting involved with Limmud. To come back to an aspect of the Starbucks analogy, you return time after time, and the coffee is always the same – in fact in every Starbucks everywhere, the coffee should *always* be the same. Limmud must ensure that in content it is *not* like Starbucks. Whilst the core values should be the same at every Limmud event, we must pay attention to what it means to be a learning people. The content of the learning at Limmud should continue to give opportunities for individuals to explore, struggle and debate, in different ways, and at different levels. Participants should also be able to return time after time to deepen that learning in meaningful ways. It should be possible to have a depth of developing experience as a participant goes from Limmud experience to Limmud experience, throughout the world.

Limmud certainly appears to achieve its aim of taking people one step further on their Jewish journey. The Limmud International Study has shown that the journey is undoubtedly contributing to the global Jewish conversation today.

Dr. Helena Miller is the Director of Research, Evaluation and Living Bridge programmes at UJIA London, and is the co-chair of Limmud International.