

IN SEARCH OF UNDERLYING PRINCIPLES:

THE CASE OF LIMMUD

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Executive Summary

The Limmud conference, held in Britain every December, is widely regarded as one of the most interesting, vibrant and successful examples of Jewish education in the contemporary world. This paper attempts to analyze why this is the case, how the organization functions, and what principles it is driven by, both in order to shed light on what it is doing, and to serve as a guide to others who wish to develop similar initiatives in their own communities.

The first key claim is that Limmud manages the tension between individual needs and community obligations with remarkable adeptness. It recognizes that Jewish adults need to be sufficiently respected and trusted to design and manage their own learning, and allows them to do this in their own way and on their own terms. At the same time, it creates a value-based culture, which genuinely reflects the organisation's leadership and management, and which makes it clear in a natural rather than authoritarian way, which behaviours are prescribed, preferred, permitted and prohibited.

The second key claim is that it is led by volunteers who are driven both by the desire to create something of substance and difference for the community, and by their commitment to, and caring for one another. In Britain, this volunteer culture was carefully and painstakingly constructed and modeled by passionate and highly

competent lay leaders, who, in order to succeed, drew on existing structures, dynamics and sources of energy within the local and national community.

The third key claim is that Limmud regards human beings as contributors and givers over and above recipients and takers. There is a highly fluid conception of the ideal Limmud "product"; rather than being defined in a fixed, pre-determined way, the individual is allowed to partake of the event on his or her own terms, whilst being simultaneously encouraged to give of him or herself. The principle is that everyone has something to contribute, everyone is valued for what they are willing and able to bring, and everyone is entitled to pursue their own interests. This approach is not preached, but is rather lived out both in the very ways in which time and space are constructed at Limmud, and the hopeful and optimistic tone that permeates the event.

The fourth key claim is that Limmud is principally about Jewish Peoplehood, rather than one specific conception of Judaism. It includes within its programme people, activities and issues that are of interest or concern to Jews as a whole, regardless of their particular ideological or religious affiliations. The boundaries around the programme are drawn widely but carefully, including anything and everything that is considered appropriate by the voluntary leadership, even if controversial. This approach is not necessarily driven by a deep commitment to pluralism, but rather by a desire to enhance, expand and deepen Jewish life and thought.

The paper concludes with a list of eleven points that are specifically designed to offer guidance to anyone thinking about developing a Limmud-type initiative in their community. Chief among these is the principal that people sit at the heart of the endeavour, and that paying careful attention to their views, values, talents and interests, as well as the dynamics, spirit, and tensions that exist between them, is absolutely critical.

In Search of Underlying Principles:

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This paper is designed to take a multi-faceted look at the British-based organization Limmud, principally because it is an intriguing example of an approach to Jewish education that is widely admired, and perhaps more importantly because it is increasingly being replicated throughout the world. My interest here is to explore and uncover its various contours in order to better understand it, and hopefully to help those involved in developing Limmud initiatives throughout the world to do so with optimum effectiveness.

Limmud has become something of a phenomenon in the Jewish world in recent years. Established in 1980 as a conference that was designed to build links between Jewish educators and bridges across Jewish religious difference, it has grown from a small event for eighty people from Britain to a major landmark in the annual Jewish educational calendar attracting renowned educators, performers, thinkers, and activists, not to mention over two thousand people, from all over the world. Over the years, it has been variously described by journalists as a "*kiddush Hashem*," a "miracle that's become a *yom tov* in its own right," "a focus of emulation throughout the Jewish world," and "astoundingly sexy." When one considers how certain types

of Jewish education are described elsewhere, anyone who cares about the future of the Jewish People has to sit up and take notice. So what exactly is Limmud doing, and why does it appear to be working so well?

To begin to understand it, it is helpful to look at the organization from four different perspectives, each of which shed light on different aspects of its work, and each of which interact with and embolden one another in synergistic ways. These four perspectives are (i) sociological – i.e. what forces are at play in the wider world which Limmud either works with or responds to; (ii) social – what forces and dynamics exist within the Limmud "community" that serve to inform and influence the culture and values of the events; (iii) educational – what are some of the core educational ideas that are actualized by the organization; and (iv) ideological – what is the explicit and implicit vision of the Jewish and wider worlds that Limmud is seeking to build, what is the critique that is inherently implied, and what political difficulties has the organization encountered because of these? My analysis will look through each of these four lenses in turn.

The Sociological Perspective

To understand the dynamics of a particular initiative, it is always valuable to consider the broader sociological context within which it is functioning. The sociological discipline seeks in part to uncover the hidden trends that serve to inform

our behaviour, the societal and global forces that impact the ways in which we relate to the world. As Anthony Giddens writes: "Sociology demonstrates the need to take a much broader view of why we are as we are, and why we act as we do. It teaches us that what we regard as natural or inevitable, good or true, may not be such, and that the 'givens' of our life are strongly influenced by historical and social forces."¹ So what are the forces that are of relevance when thinking about Limmud, and what role do they play amongst those who choose to engage – or not – in the endeavour?

Two of the most dominant watchwords in contemporary sociological literature are 'individuality' and 'community.' If it is possible to capture an overarching thesis around these terms, it might be this: the solid, bounded communal structures of pre-modern times and the individual obligations and commitments they engendered have become increasingly porous, flexible, fluid and open to external influence, thereby resulting in dramatic shifts both in how we understand notions of the self and the collective. Whereas in previous eras the individual was tightly bound by the received ideas and opinions of the community, today that binding has come loose, allowing the individual greater and greater freedom to explore other ideas and opinions, which, in turn, has caused many of the ties that formally held the collective together to unravel. Those who mourn the loss of bound community today do so because within it "we all understand each other well, we may trust what we hear, we are safe most of the time and hardly ever puzzled or taken aback. We are never strangers to each other. We may quarrel – but these are friendly quarrels, it is just that we are all trying to make our togetherness even better and more enjoyable than it has been so far... But we never wish each other bad luck, and we may be sure that

all the others around us wish us good."² However, those who celebrate its unraveling do so because "there is a price to be paid for the privilege of 'being in a community'... The price is paid in the currency of freedom, variously called 'autonomy,' 'right to self-assertion,' 'right to be yourself.' Whatever you choose, you gain some and lose some. Missing community means missing security; gaining community, if it happens, would soon mean missing freedom."³ In short, community demands that the individual must give up some of his or her freedom; individuality demands that the community must give up some of its authority.

We are extremely familiar with this tension in the Jewish community. It is played out in the context of the teenager who wants to go out on a Friday night against the wishes of her parents who are planning a family Shabbat meal, or the parent who wants his synagogue to adapt its communal policy in order to accommodate his particular wishes for his son's *bar mitzvah*. We see it when an individual decides to establish an alternative minyan because the existing model is not fulfilling his religious or spiritual needs, or when an entrepreneur sets up a new communal organization because the existing ones fail to represent her particular perspective or interests. In all cases the individual and collective desires come into conflict, and the victory of either side inevitably comes at a loss to the other.

Part of why Limmud has been as successful as it has is because it has managed this dynamic between individual and community with remarkable adeptness. It has highlighted both the right of the individual to seek out his or her own path, and the right of the collective to make certain demands on the whole. Concerning

individuality, programmatically the watchword is 'choice': at any particular moment of any particular day of the annual Limmud conference, there are numerous sessions going on, each exploring different elements of Judaism and Jewishness, each employing different modes of learning, and each offering unique experiences of Jewish culture and tradition. The individual is able to be him or herself at Limmud, to select from a broad range of options what s/he wants to think about, learn or experience, without any overarching body imposing its ideological agenda on him/her. It is probably correct to suggest that no single person's Limmud is ever identical to another's – everyone is free to choose his or her learning path, and because of the wide range of options, no one path looks like another.

This notion of paths in some way mirrors a concept Bethamie Horowitz highlights in her research about New York Jews, *Connections and Journeys*. She expresses a key part of her thesis as follows: "Jewish identity is not something static that a person either has or does not have. Rather, identity can evolve and change, ebb and flow, in relation to all sorts of influences, internal and external. A person may be much less connected to Judaism at one point during his/her lifetime and more deeply identified at another..."⁴ The idea that identity shifts over time is a common theme in the sociological literature; some even take the claim further noting that in fact we are capable of demonstrating entirely different elements of our identity within a single twenty-four hour period. The Jewish teenager who is variously a synagogue-attender on Shabbat morning, a football fan on Saturday afternoon, a marijuana-smoker on Saturday evening, and a *cheder* teacher on Sunday morning is probably familiar to all of us. Commenting on Hillel's recent research on the 'millennials' in

the United States, Graham Hoffman employs a technological metaphor to describe the same phenomenon, noting that this generation sees its identity "as a set of windows on a computer screen, and any number of screens can be open simultaneously. For them, it's not just a question of am I a Jewish American or an American Jew. They see themselves as American, Jewish, heterosexual and a volleyball player all at once. They don't feel the need for one of those windows to take over the whole desktop."⁵ Most of us, perhaps particularly the younger generations, live with the idea that we are able to be different people in different contexts, and that we shift who we are over time. By providing numerous options, Limmud allows participants to be multiple selves; the individual can experiment with different parts of his or her Jewish self, try on different Jewish identities, without ever necessarily feeling compelled to commit to any one of them. As Zygmunt Bauman writes: "Everything, so to speak, is now down to the individual. It is up to the individual to find out what she or he is capable of doing, to stretch that capacity to the utmost, and to pick the ends to which that capacity could be applied best – that is, to the greatest conceivable satisfaction... Living in a world full of opportunities – each one more appetizing and alluring than the previous one, each 'compensating for the last, and providing grounds for shifting towards the next' – is an exhilarating experience."⁶ This is indeed, part of the exhilaration of Limmud. It is an example of, in Bauman's words, "a buffet table set with mouth-watering dishes, too numerous for the keenest of eaters to hope to taste them all."⁷

Part of the critique of this kind of approach is that it doesn't differentiate between right and wrong choices, or good or bad ones. Bauman points out that "if there are

no wrong moves, there is nothing to distinguish a move as a better one, and so nothing to recognize the right move among its many alternatives – neither before nor after the move has been made."⁸ Whilst Limmud certainly does have a sense that it exists to help people to go "one step further on your Jewish journey"⁹ thereby implying that the direction is towards deeper Jewish enrichment and engagement, it doesn't identify a singular or 'right' desirable destination. One's Jewish journey might be from apostasy to traditionalism, but it could equally be from traditionalism to liberalism, from ideological hawk to dove, from community conservative to political activist. At Limmud, not only are all of these journeys possible, they are also all legitimate.

This point should be heavily underscored because it represents a critical and sociologically fascinating component of Limmud. Most Jewish educational organizations have an explicit or implicit conception of the 'product' of their system – they have, to varying degrees, a picture in their mind's eye of who the individual ought to be as a result of the educational intervention. There are certain Jewish behaviours, outlooks, ideological positions, and values that are upheld as core and exemplary. Limmud doesn't maintain such a picture of the future, of what one ought to be. Instead, it focuses on the present – on who one can be in the here and now – and works on the assumption that the present, if it is sufficiently varied, compelling and engaging, will motivate and inspire the individual to continue his or her journey. The process is not linear: product 'A' arrives at the event, and, after absorbing the content, emerges as clearly-defined product 'B', but is rather highly fluid: any product from A-Z arrives at the event, and after sampling from the

sumptuous buffet of Jewish educational delicacies available emerges again as any product from A-Z, albeit hopefully somewhat changed and enhanced by the experience. Sociologically, this approach very much fits with the contemporary age of the internet, in which we are no longer compelled to follow the linear paths set out for us by others (for example, when we read books from beginning to end, or go through courses structured from the first to the last class), but can rather surf, clicking our mouse on whatever link appeals at any given moment, and exploring the world almost entirely on our own terms.¹⁰ Nevertheless, the weaknesses of this method ought not to be missed – the scope for depth and systematically building on what one has learned previously according to a tried and tested method is profoundly reduced. Furthermore, the breadth of opportunities may actually be something of an illusion – Jonathan Sacks has pointed out that in spite of the vastness of information available to us today, many of us don't use this to broaden our horizons, but choose instead to "narrowcast," to focus solely on those issues or activities that we believe will interest us.¹¹ The strengths, however, are important too: individuals are permitted, even encouraged to take responsibility for their own development, to seek out opportunities, and to encounter the world in accordance with their own needs, interests and motivations at any given moment, thereby dramatically increasing the personal relevance of the material or ideas they meet.

In spite of all this, Limmud does nevertheless manage to underscore certain communal norms that are widely understood and regarded as vital to the whole endeavour. From its earliest days, Limmud sought to highlight specific ideas that were to stand at the heart of its work. As Alistair Falk, one of the founders of

Limmud wrote in the *Jewish Chronicle* after the first event, a key goal was "to build bridges between the professional and non-professional educators and between those of differing religious commitments." Over time, these ideas have been developed further so that it is now possible to see them clearly reflected in more nuanced and detailed form in the contemporary mission statement of the organization.¹² The document is littered with positive phrases like "We value diversity in all that we do;" and "Limmud expects all participants to be respectful of one another." However, importantly, unlike a number of non-Orthodox Jewish organizations, it does not limit itself exclusively to the realm of the affirmative – it also clearly outlines the types of behaviours that are off-limits: "Personal attacks are not acceptable within session material;" "We encourage people not to stereotype others;" and "Limmud does not participate in legitimizing or delegitimizing any religious or political position found in the worldwide Jewish community. Anyone who comes to Limmud seeking opportunities for this will not find it." There are strong notions of appropriate and inappropriate behaviour within the collective at Limmud: to borrow a model based on the thinking of sociologist Peter Berger, there are (i) prescribed behaviours (mutual respect, treating all people with dignity, adherence to certain fundamental halakhic norms – e.g. observance of Shabbat and kashrut – in public); (ii) preferred behaviours (learning, personal development, giving something back to the community, emotional and intellectual networking, participation, volunteering); (iii) permitted behaviours (argumentation, as long as it is "for the sake of heaven", varied modes of Jewish prayer); and (iv) prohibited behaviours (stereotyping of others, personal attacks, delegitimizing of religious and political positions found within the Jewish community). As a result, any critique of Limmud as purely

permissive of individual whim is, to some extent, found wanting. It certainly permits more individuality than is typically allowed within the realm of Orthodoxy, but it retains a prohibitive component based on collective values that should not be ignored.

Whilst the mission statement, which appears in all of the organization's publications, certainly provides a list of dos and don'ts, the way it is actualized in practice is also important. Every effort is made to create a spirit of equality between people, down to the smallest detail: academic and rabbinic titles don't appear on name badges, teachers are encouraged to be students and students teachers, all participants, including world-renowned teachers and scholars, are expected to help run the event in at least some small way, and even the accommodation – university dormitories rather than a plush hotel – engenders a sense of economic parity. By functioning in this way, Limmud's values are not preached from the organization's metaphorical *bimah* – they are rather lived out, through example, in the intricate details of the event. The added value of having a large pool of volunteers who buy into these values not as 'staff' but participants, helps to ensure that there are numerous people involved in every conference who understand exactly what kind of spirit they are seeking to engender, and can model it for the remainder.

In sum, I would maintain that a key part of Limmud's success is that it continually focuses on the positives on both sides of the polarity between individual and community. Individualism allows freedom of choice, expression and experience, but can descend into pure self-gratification, loneliness and isolation. Communalism

allows for warmth, familiarity, and clarity of values, but can descend into oppressiveness, loss of self and claustrophobia. Neither pole is empirically right or wrong, both have their up-sides and down-sides. Limmud seeks to emphasize the up-side of both, allowing the individual a large amount of freedom to determine his or her own learning path, whilst simultaneously ensuring that the community doesn't compromise on its most central values.¹³

The Social Perspective

The term "social" here may be a misnomer, but I have chosen it deliberately for want of a better one. I mean it in its informal day-to-day sense – social life, social networks, sociability, etc. – i.e. the claim being made here is that the interactions between people who become involved in Limmud are of a certain character, and they appear to be based on particular forces within the British Jewish community that may be unique to it. What are these, and how might they best be understood?

From its earliest days, Limmud was built by friends. This was not a conference that was initiated by a professional organization, and constructed and managed by professional colleagues who went their separate ways after office hours. This was an event that was in part motivated by the genuine friendships that existed between the core team, and their desire to do something of substance together. It had that air of informality about it from day one; it wasn't about professionalism or hierarchy or officialdom – it was about voluntarism, equality, and non-ceremonialism. There was

something profoundly counter-cultural about it – in a community known in the 1970s and early-1980s for the formality of the Board of Deputies, the elitism of the Joint Israel Appeal and the stuffiness of the United Synagogue, this was a complete breath of fresh air. That is not to suggest that the key players at that time were disconnected from the mainstream. Indeed, co-founder Clive Lawton served as the Principal of King David High School in Liverpool and later Executive Director of Jewish Continuity (a major educational organization initiated by the Chief Rabbi in the 1990s), and similarly Alistair Falk went on to be Principal of the United Synagogue (Modern Orthodox) sponsored King Solomon High School in London. Nevertheless, at the time, they sought to build something different, based on a much more informal paradigm, in direct contradistinction to the norm.

Understanding this element is critical on two levels – both the nature of the culture that was fostered, and the place it occupied in the larger Jewish communal context. On the first level, the culture of social ties, friendship and informality was significant in and of itself because it ensured that the event was grounded in genuineness. The people running it and participating in it did so because they genuinely wanted to work together, and they believed that they were doing something of substance. Carl Rogers, the founder of 'client-centred' or 'non-directive' therapy, highlights this notion in his writing about education, maintaining that learning happens best when it is facilitated by someone who is being genuine to him or herself, and not presenting a façade to the learner or denying aspects of self. Limmud exercised this culture of genuineness not just in the classroom, but in the organization as a whole – at Limmud, one was able to be oneself, to talk freely and openly, and didn't have to

pretend to be something one wasn't. This is important in and of itself. However, this feature was probably particularly important in the British-Jewish contemporary context because it tended to be antithetical to it. If British Judaism was marked by elements of pretence and feigned traditionalism (and the founders of Limmud certainly adopted that position as a critique), a culture of genuineness became all the more essential as a response. This perhaps also explains the organization's determination to equalize participants – in direct reaction to a national and communal culture saturated with issues of social status, Limmud sought to construct itself on the foundations of genuine parity.

However, this culture alone cannot explain Limmud's success. Whilst it continues to play an important role within the organization, the period of Limmud's most rapid and dramatic expansion coincided, not coincidentally, with Andrew Gilbert's period of office as Limmud chair (1990-1997), during which it grew from just over 200 participants to 1400. Gilbert's role in Limmud's growth is key, so understanding what he did, and how he did it, is essential.

Gilbert grew up in the British Reform Movement, and was active in its youth organization, RSY. As a student he became involved in national and Jewish student activities, and developed relationships with student activists, several of whom, in time, became major players in British politics. A card-carrying member of the Labour Party, he has continued to be involved in this world in a voluntary capacity; professionally, he went into the family business – silk – and with time became the head of a successful company. However, it is within the Jewish community that he

has really made his mark – serving variously on the Education Committee of the Jewish Agency, as Chair of the British Reform Movement, a member of the United Jewish Israel Appeal's (UJIA) Renewal Executive, and of course, Chair of Limmud. Whilst these titles provide us with a partial view of his CV, they explain little about his *modus operandi*, which appears to be the real essence of his success.

To borrow Malcolm Gladwell's terms from his book *The Tipping Point*, Gilbert is part "salesman," part "connector," and part "maven."¹⁴ A salesman is able to negotiate, influence and persuade people to buy into a product or idea without necessarily having a strong power base to do so. A connector is someone who stands at the hub of certain human social networks, and has the potential to influence those around him or her. Mavens are knowledgeable about their subject, and can quickly detect where falsities lie. Perhaps predominantly amongst these three categories, Gilbert is a good salesman. He worked hard at "selling" Limmud to large numbers of people, and encouraging them to become involved. He chose his customers carefully, drawing heavily on people who had previously held leadership roles in youth movements, the Union of Jewish Students and synagogue youth groups, and utilizing the social networks that existed between them. In that sense, he didn't necessarily play the role of connector himself – whilst almost everyone in the community seems to know him, he isn't situated at the heart of any social network – but he found the people who were, and encouraged them to buy into the Limmud idea. Finally, with the passage of time, he has become more and more of a maven, both in the sense that he has an almost encyclopaedic knowledge of people and how they are connected to one another, and in the sense that he has worked hard at

developing his knowledge of Judaism and Jewish organizations. In many respects, Limmud's success is difficult to imagine without him – Gilbert worked tirelessly to meet with and talk to everyone and anyone who could help him in his task, and, in turn, to persuade them to become involved.

As has already been hinted at, he was further aided by an important social and cultural reality that exists within the British Jewish community – the youth and student movements. First of all, these bodies provide a critical social function. Through their programmes, powerful social ties are developed within each movement that in some instances last a lifetime. Helped in part by the work of UJIA-Makor – the community's centre for informal education – more and more inter-movement ties are developed during the undergraduate student years, so that the network is expanded way beyond the boundaries of any particular movement or organization. Secondly, unlike the United States but similar to Israel, most of the youth and student organizations in Britain are run by young people. The Union of Jewish Students (UJS), all of the major youth movements – Bnei Akiva, Habonim-Dror, the Federation of Zionist Youth (FZY), Hanoar Hatzioni, BBYO, the Association of Jewish Sixth Formers (AJ6) – and the Reform, Liberal and Masorti synagogue movement's youth bodies, are all run essentially by *madrichim* aged between 16 and 23. Summer camps are typically run by 16-22 year-olds, with the eldest taking on the most senior roles and teaching the younger leaders via their example. Short-term Israel experience programmes are staffed by 21-22 year olds. Each of these youth organizations employ staff members who have just graduated from university to run their offices for one, or in some cases, two years. They are supported by *shlichim* and

administrators, and in one or two cases more senior staff from the community, who provide a higher level of professionalism and continuity from year-to-year, but authority always rests with the student and movement workers themselves. From the moment an individual becomes a *madrich/a*, the messages that are conveyed are that the movement belongs to you, and it is your responsibility to maintain it and take it to the next level. Without your input, the movement cannot survive – its future depends on you. As a result, young people active in British Jewish youth and student movements are given, and accept, extraordinarily high levels of responsibility – possibly even too high levels – at a very young age. Those who reach the highest leadership ranks of the youth and student world have experiences and develop skills that are foreign to most people ten, perhaps even twenty years older than them. And for the year or two of their tenure, student and movement workers are invited to sit around the table with senior community leaders, and influence the discourse.

And then, all of a sudden, their position ends. For movements to function on a peer-led basis, people have to leave when they outgrow them. And when they do, the major organizations in the community typically fail to recruit them, in part because they often regard them as too inexperienced, in part because the young people themselves see the Jewish organizational world as stuffy and unappealing, and in part because they are at a stage in their lives where their priorities begin to shift towards career and, in turn, family. As a result, there is a large pool of young people in their mid- to late-twenties in British Jewry who have considerable experience of

running events and activities for the community, who often remain committed to Jewish causes and ideas, but don't continue their involvement.

Part of Gilbert's genius was to draw on this untapped pool of energy, and deploy it in the service of Limmud. Furthermore, he extended his reach way beyond those who had held the most senior leadership positions, pulling in many talented others who had been members, but, for various reasons, not leaders. Part of Limmud's appeal to all of these people was that it very much mirrored the youth and student organizations they had grown up in. They could shape it how they wanted. They could determine its values. They could try out new ideas, push existing boundaries, and cause a few waves in almost exactly the way they had done when they ran their movements. They could replicate for the entire community the kind of summer camps they had run for young people in the past. And, most importantly, they could do it all with friends, and expand their social networks at exactly the point when the issue of a long-term partner was playing an increasingly central role in their lives.

It is difficult to understate how much these social ties – or "social capital" – matter. Several thinkers, perhaps most notably Robert Putnam, have championed this concept in recent years. He writes: "Whereas physical capital refers to physical objects and human capital refers to the properties of individuals, social capital refers to connections among individuals – social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them."¹⁵ Mark Smith adds, "Interaction enables people to build communities, to commit themselves to each other, and to knit the social fabric. A sense of belonging and the concrete experience of social networks

(and the relationships of trust and tolerance that can be involved) can, it is argued, bring great benefits to people."¹⁶ This is exactly what has happened within the pool of Limmud's volunteers. In the course of their work building the community of Limmud, the links between them have grown stronger and stronger, to the extent now that many of those individuals who were recruited by Gilbert during his time as Limmud Chair have bought homes in very close proximity to one another. They even joke among themselves that there is a small area of north London called "Limmudistan." They don't necessarily belong to the same synagogues or send their children to the same schools, but they are tied to one another in less formal, but in many respects much stronger and deeper ways.

In addition to Gilbert's work, there can be no doubt that Clive Lawton has been a pivotal figure too. A highly charismatic educator, he has been part-time Executive Director of Limmud since 1997 – i.e. at more or less exactly the same time as Gilbert stood down as Chair. Lawton's skill as a mentor and trainer of young people has been critical since his appointment – with the growing number of volunteers required to sustain an event of such magnitude, he has been a key force standing behind them, carefully guiding them, supporting them, and helping them to think through and deal with complex issues as they have arisen.

It should therefore be noted that to make the claim that young people have exclusively run Limmud would be somewhat false. First of all, the volunteer base is not comprised solely of people in their 20s and 30s, and secondly, they have been constantly supported by older and more experienced characters, chiefly Gilbert and

Lawton. Nevertheless, the critical energy source has typically come from the pool of young people, and continues to do so today. In considering how to develop Limmuds in other parts of the world, the issues of where the pools of energy lie, and how best to nurture them, become critical. In Britain, the source is clear; in other countries it may lie elsewhere.

The Educational Perspective

At the very heart of Limmud's work exists a certain conception of the human being that informs much, if not all of the organisation's educational philosophy. In contrast to traditional education, in which learning means "acquisition of what already is incorporated in books and in the heads of the elders" and content is taught "as a finished product, with little regard either to the ways in which it was originally built up or to changes that will surely occur in the future," Limmud locates the human being much more centrally in the whole endeavour.¹⁷ That is not to suggest that the organisation's conference epitomizes progressive education – indeed, any such claim would be rather fictitious given the level of respect granted to the text in so much of the programming – it is rather to imply that the progressive approach (which highlights the cultivation of individuality, free activity, experience, and the present opportunity over preparation for a remote future) is held in high esteem. In that sense, the organization would support John Dewey's view that people are active centers of impulse, and that they learn best when they are actively engaged in experiencing an idea or an event.¹⁸ As Barry Chazan has claimed: "Human beings

are not simply empty vessels waiting to be filled..., rather, the individual is an active dynamic organism who grows and is shaped through his/her own active engagement in learning."¹⁹ Accepting this view requires one to adopt a deep element of trust in the capacity of the learner to take his or her learning seriously, and Limmud undoubtedly manages to achieve this stance. Carl Rogers has written of it "as prizing the learner, prizing her feelings, her opinions, her person. It is a caring for the learner, but a non-possessive caring. It is an acceptance of this other individual as a separate person, having worth in her own right. It is a basic trust – a belief that this other person is somehow fundamentally trustworthy... What we are describing is a prizing of the learner as an imperfect human being with many feelings, many potentialities."²⁰ To achieve this, there is no set curriculum at Limmud; nobody is expected to 'receive' any specific educational content that the organizers regard as core or central. Rather, every individual defines every part of his or her learning, constantly choosing from the large number of options available at any given moment. To some organizations, this might be regarded as a rather hazardous policy – how could one responsibly bring together two thousand people and not provide them with pre-determined content that is designed to lead them in a certain direction? Indeed, many of the most successful initiatives in Jewish education are far more prescriptive in their approach. Even those that are openly pluralist, like the Hebrew University's 'Florence Melton Adult Mini-School,' and the 'Meah' programme are grounded in at least an implicit view of what constitutes, in E.D. Hirsch's well-known phrase, "cultural literacy."²¹ That is to say, these programmes, like many others, determine the content, format and style of the learning for the participant. Limmud, however, even though it partly sponsors the

Florence Melton programme in the British community, elects not to function in this way at its annual conference. For it, the more open-ended, non-prescriptive approach is simply good adult education. Allowing the learner to learn in his or her own way, on his or her own terms, with his or her own preferences, timetable, level of intensity and comfort zone is all indicative of what good adult Jewish education should be. A vast culture and literature of Judaism exists: adults should be provided with opportunities to swim within it, and sufficiently trusted to find their own way through it.

As an aside, the emphasis I have placed on education for adults, 'andragogy,' as opposed to education for children, is an important distinction to draw. The notion that children's education should be conducted in this open-ended manner is far more controversial. However, many of the writers on andragogy would be very supportive of Limmud's approach. One of the foremost thinkers in the field, Malcolm Knowles, highlights the importance of "self-direction" in adult learning, "in which individuals take the initiative, with or without the help of others, in diagnosing their learning needs, formulating learning goals, identifying human and material resources for learning, choosing and implementing appropriate learning strategies, and evaluating learning outcomes."²² Furthermore, Knowles points to four additional differences between andragogy and pedagogy, noting (i) that adults are better able than children to draw on previous experiences in their learning, (ii) they demonstrate a different degree of readiness to learn particularly in areas they regard as relevant, (iii) their orientation to learning is often problem-centred rather than subject-centred, and (iv) their motivation to learn becomes increasingly internal

as they mature.²³ Consciously or subconsciously, Limmud recognizes that adults require a very different learning environment from children, in which they can indeed self-direct, draw on previous experiences, determine for themselves what is relevant, seek out answers to problems in which they are engaged, and grow as individuals. Whilst the organization does offer child and teen programming, its work is fundamentally aimed at adults, and in evaluating its educational philosophy, its typical learner should be regarded as such.

Perhaps because of this factor, there is little, if any distinction drawn between learner and teacher at Limmud. As Jacqueline Nicholls has written, "everybody is a student and everybody is a teacher. At Limmud there is no separation between the presenters and students. All are participants."²⁴ As has already been mentioned above, this lack of difference is emphasized in many of the small details of a Limmud event (name badges, accommodation, etc.), and is designed to minimize the distance participants might feel between themselves and at least some of the presenters. Regardless of a particular teacher's style, which may possibly be quite frontal or even hierarchical in the classroom, the goal appears to be to create the possibility of open and genuine dialogue between teacher and learner, ideally within, but certainly beyond the formal learning environment of the particular session or lecture. Barry Chazan has argued that "People learn and grow through active social interaction, which stimulates ideas, causes us to think and rethink views, and helps us to re-conceptualize our beliefs and ideologies. The active dialogue back and forth with others is not simply pedagogically useful; it is, in a more basic sense, a pivotal factor in shaping our ideas, beliefs, and behaviors."²⁵ Whilst it may be stretching the point

to suggest that there is a Buberian quality to the interaction between people that seems to be desirable to Limmud – that is a genuineness to the encounter between people "where each of the participants really has in mind the other or others in their present and particular being and turns to them with the intention of establishing a living mutual relation between himself and them" – there is undoubtedly an attempt to enable meaningful quality conversations to take place.²⁶ Because of the efforts to neutralize differences between people, social interaction feels informal and natural, and, as a result, a great deal of learning tends to occur in very informal and natural ways – at mealtimes, and in conversation within other general social spaces.

Whilst organisers and participants alike often point to the teacher-learner dynamic as one of Limmud's greatest strengths, the context in which its events take place is also of paramount importance. In addition to the classrooms, there are a number of social spaces that exist to encourage social interaction between people. The way in which the dining room is set up supports the possibility of meetings between people; the bar area – throughout the day but perhaps particularly in the evenings – is a hive of social activity; general lounge-type areas – particularly in the main building, but across the entire site – allow people to sit and talk with one another; and the "learning zone" which is staffed by different educators at different points throughout the event, allows for individuals or small groups to engage in specific educational conversations. Additionally, the art exhibit areas, the bookshop, the crèche facility for young children, the youth lounge for teenagers, and the concert area late at night which often becomes an impromptu 'club' for teens and young adults, all serve to engender important elements of social interaction between participants. Jacqueline

Nicholls discusses Limmud's desire to create a "warm and welcoming atmosphere," as one of its essential educational aims, pointing out that "if a person feels comfortable, they are able to learn. For example, if there isn't somewhere they can just sit down and have some 'quiet time' or have a cup of tea and a chat with a friend, then it will not matter that there are amazing sessions going on: you haven't created a warm atmosphere where people feel they want to be and learn. So the planning of social spaces and participant care at a Limmud event are as important as providing high-quality education."²⁷ Barry Chazan stresses the importance of this in his writings, pointing out that to "stimulate interactivity, educators must create an environment which invites learners to listen to each other and to react with dignity and decency."²⁸

Nevertheless, to limit our view of the context to such inner spaces is to miss an essential component of the organisation's influence. Chazan also claims that "it is the total cultural milieu that teaches, by presenting, creating, and reinforcing values, ideas, experiences, norms, and ultimately a worldview."²⁹ At Limmud, each of the spaces described above exists within a Limmud-controlled wider environment of a university campus during vacation time, which exists as an all-encompassing Jewish milieu where individuals are able to express, perhaps even flaunt their Jewishness with unusual levels of freedom. Certainly one sees far more *kippot* being worn by individuals who do not normally wear them – many British Jews are not used to feeling such levels of comfort with their identity within a British public space, so the transformation of the campus into a comfortable and safe setting for the community is almost certainly an essential component of its success. Bruno Bettelheim is

perhaps the thinker most well-known for his work in this conceptual sphere, and his Orthogenic School at the University of Chicago prided itself in creating a "therapeutic milieu" for the emotionally-disturbed children who attended it.³⁰ It is probably reasonable to suggest that Limmud similarly provides something of a therapeutic milieu for Limmud's participants – a space in which Judaism is the norm, Jews are the majority, and Jewish culture permeates everything. Jerome Bruner has also written of the importance of the educational cultural environment, arguing further that "culture shapes the mind... it provides us with the toolkit by which we construct not only our worlds but our very conception of our selves and our powers."³¹ The all-encompassing culture of Limmud certainly offers an opportunity to construct a different Jewish reality for a while, and, in doing so, influences participants' identities and senses of self in multiple ways. In fact, in the same way as the dynamic between teacher and student is far more fluid than is typically the case in a traditional educational setting, so a similar dynamic occurs between individual and context. Rather than being fixed, unchanging categories, Limmud transforms the social, cultural and educational context into something that is unrecognizable from the rest of the year, and, in doing so, enables that context to speak to and influence the individual in a whole host of ways. As a result, the specific educational and wider cultural contexts both teach and are taught by Limmud's presence.

It is not just the realm of space that is transformed at Limmud; the realm of time is also altered. Limmud's main conference always takes place over the Christmas week – a time when Britain as a whole is on vacation, and when the country's

overwhelmingly Christian, or more cynically, consumer culture is dominant. It is difficult to underplay how all-pervasive Christmas is in the UK – its presence is felt in the media, on the high street, in schools, hospitals and workplaces for weeks, sometimes months, leading up to December 25th. Limmud provides members of the Jewish community with an opportunity to remove themselves from this cultural context, to such a great extent that one often fails to notice Christmas at all. In many respects, this is typical of non-formal pedagogy, which usually takes place during leisure or vacation time; however, in direct contrast to many such examples, the content of Limmud is not determined by the character of the season, but rather in response to it.³² The Christmas season in wider society becomes the absence of Christmas at Limmud.

There are other elements of time that are worthy of consideration. In the same way as participants are in control of the content of their learning, they are also in control of their time. Many, indeed most conferences schedule time slots for meals that are typically free of programming options, and many provide specific opportunities for relaxation or educational processing. Limmud does neither. That is not to say that there are no meals provided – there are – but the time slots allocated are unusually long, and programming continues throughout, thereby allowing the individual to arrange his or her meals around his or her needs. Indeed, one need not even sit down for meals – sandwiches and fruit are available to pick up and take into sessions, and additional food is available in the evening at the bar if one opted to miss dinner. Similarly, educational processing is not something that is scheduled; participants can opt to process sessions if or when they choose. No one imposes

specific times for this – there is rather an assumption that adults will take responsibility for it themselves, and make time to discuss and reflect on their learning in accordance with their own needs or interests in doing so. When one listens to the buzz of conversation in the corridors, over meals, and in the bar, one can be left in no doubt that this is occurring.

It has already been noted that there is no set curriculum at Limmud, and that no individual is expected to go through a particular set of classes or material. Rather, the programme is governed by a principle of variety: at its most recent conference in December 2005, twelve separate "tracks" or topic areas were offered, each one designed to cater to the different interests of participants as well as to serve as a guide to organizers to invite educators with diverse talents and abilities. The key, as Jerome Bruner has argued, is that "ideally, interest in the material to be learned is the best stimulus to learning, rather than such external goals as grades or later competitive advantage."³³ The twelve tracks – community, culture, education, family, history, how to..., Israel, music, philosophy, social issues, spirituality and *torah lishma* – run simultaneously over the five days of the conference; whilst not every single track will be offered in every one of the eleven time slots that exist during a typical day, sessions under each heading will be regularly available. In addition, presenters may elect to pitch their particular sessions at specific audiences, depending on level of subject knowledge or previous experience required. Finally, different presenters will utilize different educational approaches – lectures, discussions, panel debates, textual learning in pairs or groups, arts or crafts activities, musical concerts, theatrical productions, physical exercise, etc., any of which may

appeal to participants at different moments. Without articulating it in this way, there appears to be an appreciation of Howard Gardner's notion of "multiple intelligences", or Robert Sternberg's idea of "thinking styles" – a recognition that individuals learn in different ways and that education needs to adapt itself to some extent to allow for this.³⁴ At Limmud, there is ample scope for the lover of text to engage in formal textual learning on an almost continual basis, but equally, the lover of yoga is able to explore Judaism through that, and the lover of drama through that. Furthermore, no one Limmud is the same as any other – each year, different presenters teach different material, so that the vast number of educational opportunities in any given year will always be entirely unique. As a result, content is fluid and multi-faceted, and whilst certain approaches hold more prominent positions than others (for example, the textual-learning "chavruta project" is highlighted each morning), this is largely a reflection of volunteer and participant interest rather than any overarching educational philosophy.

In short, if one examines Limmud through the lens of Joseph Schwab's four commonplaces of education – the teacher, the student, the subject matter and the milieu – it soon becomes apparent that the four categories themselves are far more fluid and blurred than Schwab originally appeared to suggest.³⁵ The lines between teacher and student are deliberately minimized, and both the subject matter and milieu are continually altered from year-to-year and via their interaction with the participants. The result is a type of educational liquidity which, whilst lacking traditional coherence, is able to continually morph itself into a form relevant to the participant base.

There is at least one further element that ought to be raised with regard to the educational perspective on Limmud, and that is its fundamentally optimistic and hopeful view of the future. By allowing the participant the freedom to determine his or her own Jewish educational path, the organization is not only demonstrating a significant level of trust in each and every individual, it also seems to be inadvertently making the claim that the Judaism of the future need not necessarily mirror that of the past. When it insists on Jewish learning in the most general sense of that term rather than in a specific, bounded, set curricular form, Limmud appears to be effectively loosening the ties between Judaism's past and its future, allowing it a certain degree of freedom to redefine and reshape itself in the ways in which individual participants and presenters choose and believe. There is something almost Freireian in its approach: as Peter Jarvis has noted, Paulo Freire believed that "education cannot be a neutral process; it is either designed to facilitate freedom [which Freire certainly favoured] or it is 'education for domestication', which is basically conservative."³⁶ Limmud wouldn't quite regard its educational approach in such stark, either-or terms, because there is an important element of Jewish domestication that one finds within the programme. Nevertheless, it facilitates, perhaps even demands, Jewish freedom – it allows the individual Jew, the participating community, and even Judaism itself to spread its wings and fly. Therein lies the implicit element of hope and optimism – the open-ended notion that Judaism's future is there to be built and constructed, and that the contemporary individual and community have the capacity and potential to play a vital role in that process. As David Halpin has written, "being hopeful... connects with a particular kind of positive orientation to the world – one that entails an openness or readiness

of spirit towards people and the future."³⁷ Limmud's openness to ideas, its readiness of spirit towards those who choose to participate, creates a culture of optimism and hope which permeates its events, and is profoundly alluring. Hannah Arendt once wrote that "education is the point at which we decide whether we love the world enough to assume responsibility for it and by the same token save it from that ruin which, except for renewal, except for the coming of the new and young, would be inevitable."³⁸ Limmud's implicit understanding of education seems to closely reflect this. It is difficult not to love Judaism at a Limmud event – the sheer vibrancy, diversity, energy and creativity that can be found in almost every corner calls upon the participants to assume responsibility for its future. At the heart of Paulo Freire's ideas about education lies an expectation that once people have learned, they must become active participants in the wider world; if he is right, Limmud is a great example of this view of education.³⁹ The formal elements of learning that take place at Limmud events are, for many, just a prelude or climax; the real learning takes place amongst the team of over one hundred volunteers who build the conference on an annual basis. The reasons why they elect to do this are probably many and varied, but the overall message that Limmud seems to convey is that Judaism is highly dynamic and engaging, and that Limmud volunteers with their renewing energies are ideally placed to shape and mould its future.

The Ideological Perspective

Whilst Limmud's organizers make the claim that their primary goal is simply to provide educational events for Jews of different backgrounds and orientations featuring the best presenters and educators they are able to attract, the organization does maintain at least an implicit ideological position. Its openness to diverse opinions, its commitment to debate, its tolerance for individual choice all imply a certain view of the world and vision for its future. How might this ideological position best be characterized?

The tension between individual and community that was outlined in the first section of this paper is clearly not only a sociological issue. Indeed, it has been debated within Jewish circles for millennia, probably most acutely in the post-enlightenment context in which the Cartesian notion of *cogito, ergo sum* has been so prominent. Perhaps David Hartman best captures the tension when he asks: "Can you be rooted in a community on one level, yet find your own identity as an individual on another level? Must you distance yourself through total rejection in order to discover the meaning of having a self?"⁴⁰ Hartman himself emphasizes community, maintaining that "only within community do we hear the commanding word of the living God of Israel."⁴¹ Jonathan Sacks is similarly clear: "We believe in the primacy of community. That is not because we do not value the self, but because only in community can the self find identity... The sovereign self is one of the idols of our age."⁴² However, perhaps in response to recent sociological findings, other thinkers are beginning to differ.⁴³ Notably, Jonathan Woocher has lately called for a "Copernican revolution"

in Jewish education, which positions "the 'learner' – not the provider, the programme, or even the system – at the center of our thinking."⁴⁴

According to more traditional sources, it is clear how important the notion of community is. Hillel's famous dictum, "Do not separate yourself from the community" is backed up by Rambam's statement: "One who separates himself from the community, even if he does not commit a transgression but only holds aloof from the congregation of Israel, does not fulfill religious precepts in common with his people, shows himself indifferent when they are in distress, does not observe their fast, but goes his own way, as if he were one of the Gentiles and did not belong to the Jewish people – such a person has no portion in the world to come."⁴⁵ Clearly, the principle of community is central to Judaism; not only is it halakhically impossible to live a religious Jewish life without it, community is also a microcosm of the ethnic concept of Jewish peoplehood, which arguably exists as the most basic foundation of Jewish life and identity. Nevertheless, one can also point to sources from within the tradition that highlight the individual. A well-known midrash, for example, makes the claim that at Sinai "the Divine Word spoke to each and every person according to his particular capacity... If each and every person was enabled to taste the manna according to his particular capacity, how much more and more was each and every person enabled to hear the Divine Word according to his particular capacity."⁴⁶ According to this text, even at Sinai – probably *the* defining communal moment in Jewish history where we responded with the collective cry of *na'aseh v-nishma* – every individual actually heard something slightly different, and understood what he or she heard in an entirely unique and individual way.

So where does Limmud position itself within the context of this debate? Its claim would probably be that it simply provides a space within which to grapple with this issue as a whole, and an opportunity to encounter any or all of the aforementioned texts and learn from them. Certainly this is a key component of Limmud's style. Nevertheless, its harshest critics see something much more sinister in its efforts. One British Orthodox rabbi has commented: "We should be clearly aware that there is a clear ideological agenda on behalf of some of the organisers of Limmud to promote a more pluralist future for Anglo Jewry . . . Don't underestimate the impact in the perception of the community of the Orthodox establishment aligning itself as equals with the non-Orthodox denominations in religious programmes. Orthodoxy's place in the establishment community in this country would be eroded by initiatives of this nature."⁴⁷ In many respects, he is right. Limmud's power and influence is increasingly felt throughout British Jewry, and the organization undoubtedly stands in opposition to the status quo. Orthodoxy is dominant in Britain – approximately 70% of all synagogue members belong to mainstream Orthodox, Sephardi or *Haredi* communities.⁴⁸ Pluralism is in short supply – there are no pluralist day schools, although one is scheduled to open in 2009. But, perhaps therein lies the rabbi's point: Limmud has helped to make Jewish pluralism acceptable in the eyes of many, and the emergence of a school, not to mention other major cross-communal initiatives like the London JCC and Jewish Book Week, demonstrate exactly how its foothold is being strengthened. As a result of this perspective, Limmud has courted a fair degree of controversy – particularly during its period of most rapid growth – and has been continually boycotted by many of the community's Orthodox rabbis. To this day, the Chief Rabbi, Sir Jonathan Sacks, does not attend Limmud, in spite of the fact

that he is undoubtedly one of the community's greatest thinkers and orators, and the conference is probably the single largest and most significant Jewish educational event in the community's calendar.

As an adjunct to this critique, one might also add that it would not be unreasonable to question the individual participant's capacity to navigate the educational programme and ascertain the authority of any argument presented, when the levels of Jewish learning amongst Limmud participants vary enormously. Nevertheless, Limmud adopts a more charitable view of the individual, and appears to believe that by providing him or her with an opportunity for an intense Jewish communal experience – albeit one that may just last for a few days – it is creating a vital mechanism that will either become community for the individual, or will serve as the inspiration for him or her to seek it out elsewhere.

Of course, involvement and participation in Jewish community demands certain behaviours. As Aharon Lichtenstein has noted, "A Jew's life is defined by being commanded."⁴⁹ Indeed, the Talmud has little time for those who pick and choose – the individual who selects which *sugyot* s/he likes and which s/he dislikes is compared to a person who consorts with prostitutes, and those who learn Torah occasionally and don't set fixed times to do so are considered "heartless adulterers."⁵⁰ Lichtenstein explains such parallels as follows: "The essence of fornication is self-fulfillment. A man wants to extract sexual pleasure from a woman, and after he has used her to satisfy himself, he has no responsibility towards her and continues on his way. Tomorrow he'll find another woman. This is exactly what *Chazal* criticized so

sharply. A person has to approach Torah and *avodat Hashem* not as an adulterer – someone whose goal is to extract whatever pleasure he can, even spiritual pleasure. A person has to subject himself to Torah and not subject Torah to himself. He must be willing to commit himself to it unconditionally and accept whatever God imposes upon him."⁵¹ Is Limmud an opportunity to sample the pleasures of Jewish life, learning and community, that is absent of genuine responsibility and commitment?

It is true to argue that Limmud does not impose many obligations on the participant, and that those it does are generally more concerned with tolerance and respect for the other than strict halakhic adherence. Whilst Shabbat is observed halakhically in public and the laws of kashrut are carefully upheld, there is no obligation imposed on participants to, for example, daven three times a day, lay *tefillin*, wear *tzitzit*, or recite *birkat hamazon*, etc. Furthermore, a considerable percentage of the invited presenters do none of these things in their own lives, and profess no wish or inclination to do so. Nevertheless, to employ the talmudic language referred to above would be harsh in the extreme. Limmud's organizers recognize that the majority of Jews today are not halakhic, and that even amongst those who are, halakhic observance is not necessarily the sole means of measuring the quality of one's Jewishness. As David Hartman has noted: "the vastness of specificity of Halakhah can blind a person to the *telos* of Judaism, to the covenantal relationship between God and Israel. One can, for example, become so immersed in the myriad details of the Sabbath laws that one becomes oblivious to the significance of the Sabbath as a symbolic celebration of divine creation."⁵² As a contrast, he points to Abraham Joshua Heschel's book, *The Sabbath*, which, according to Hartman's

interpretation "is based on the insight that modern Jews need to discover a compelling Aggadah of the Sabbath before they can relate to it as halakhah. When one begins to understand the meaning of being enveloped by a sacred day and the meaning of sacred time, only then can one appreciate the religious significance of the halakhic rules and regulations of the Sabbath."⁵³ Limmud appears to adopt a similar stance with regard to the experience as a whole – that by being enveloped in an environment of learning and Jewish vibrancy, one is likely to better appreciate Judaism in all its complexity. Heschel himself sees the relationship between aggadah and halakhah, pointing out for example that "the essence of prayer is Aggadah, *inwardness*. Yet it would be a tragic failure not to appreciate what the spirit of Halakhah does for it, raising it from the level of an individual act to that of an eternal intercourse between the people Israel and God; from the level of occasional experience to that of permanent covenant."⁵⁴ Perhaps ideologically, Limmud stands at the point where aggadah meets halakhah, where the inward-looking search for Jewish meaning meets the more collective experience of being in community, and where both are celebrated as essential components of the whole.

The 'whole' here is both the ethnic concept of Jewish peoplehood, and the religious concept of Judaism. Limmud always tends towards inclusion rather than exclusion, allowing for the boundaries that are drawn both within and around Jewishness to be regularly blurred. Again, this is problematic for much of Orthodoxy. In one of his rulings, Moshe Feinstein permitted an Orthodox teacher to work in a Conservative school, but insisted that clear lines of demarcation be drawn. He ruled that for the duration of the teacher's contract, he should not be allowed to work in any Orthodox

school, on the grounds that if the faculties at both types of schools were the same, parents would see no reason to select an Orthodox school over a Conservative one.⁵⁵

A British Orthodox rabbi commenting on Limmud has similarly argued: "The dividing line between Orthodox/Halakhic Judaism as opposed to all forms of Masorti/Reform Judaism is a vital distinction in Jewish society. All *shuls* and schools have a clear policy concerning which side of the divide they belong and this dramatically affects the way that Judaism is taught. Only Limmud amongst all our educational programmes is designed to blur this distinction as part of its agenda."⁵⁶

Furthermore, a parallel, but not dissimilar critique has come from Isi Leibler, the former Chairman of the Governing Board of the World Jewish Congress. In an article entitled "The Validation of Jewish Anti-Zionism," he pointed out that "Limmud had no qualms in providing a platform to Queen Mary College Professor Jacqueline Rose whose *The Question of Zion* is an abominable book that conveys the message that Israel was a colonial implant and effectively a criminal state. On a previous occasion, Robert Fisk, the venomous anti-Israel demonizer, who was sacked from *The Times* for his unabashed anti-Israeli outbursts, had participated. There was a panel at Limmud on "Just Wars" comprised of Jews and British imams in which Muslim clerics discussed whether the intifada was an "obligatory war." And no less than Gideon Levy, the prolific pro-Palestinian journalist from *Haaretz*, also participated."⁵⁷ For Leibler, as for the Orthodox rabbis quoted above, the lines one draws around what is acceptable and unacceptable within public Jewish discourse need to be tightly guarded. For Limmud, the lines can be much more blurred: boundaries should be guarded certainly, but by occasional night watchmen, not impenetrable concrete walls. As a result, there is no conspiracy to undermine

Orthodoxy or Zionism at Limmud – the organization has no such desire, indeed many of its volunteers belong to Orthodox synagogues, and the vast majority would describe themselves as Zionists. Rather, the reason behind the blurring of boundaries is based on the much more constructive notions of shared ethnicity, faith and fate, and a belief in the idea that by creating the possibility of togetherness, the Jewish People as a whole is strengthened. In that sense, the watchword of Limmud should probably be Jewish peoplehood rather than pluralism – it is not open to more or less everything and anything, but it is open to more or less everything and anything that concerns the Jewish People, even if that calls on it to host difficult and unpalatable controversies from time to time.

The collective fortification of the Jewish People occurs in part through the learning that takes place, but equally importantly through the interaction between people and ideas. Once again, such dialogue has often been viewed with skepticism and fear by various Orthodox authorities – indeed, in an extreme example, the American Council of Torah Sages harshly condemned the book *One People, Two Worlds* which contains eighteen months of correspondence about their religious beliefs between Reform rabbi Ammiel Hirsch and Orthodox rabbi Yosef Reinman.⁵⁸ A more pragmatic view of such dialogue has been offered by the former British Chief Rabbi Immanuel Jakobovits, who wrote: "I can see no reason why we should not enter the Reform strongholds to preach our message on their own platform. There are surely ample precedents for rabbinical disputations with the sectarians of other generations; why should we shy away from such direct contests between truth and falsehood? And, after all, the Torah was not given for Orthodox Jews only."⁵⁹ Of course, in contrast to

Jakobovits, Limmud makes little comment about what constitutes truth or falsehood – it remains largely neutral on the issue. Instead, it prefers to allow the conversation to take place, with all of its difficulties, passions and pitfalls, perhaps in order to reach an agreement or to come to terms with one another (as Hans-Georg Gadamer understands the purpose of dialogue), or as a means of attaining self-understanding (Charles Taylor's perspective), or to create the possibility of a new insight for both partners (Martin Buber's desire), or even to affect change in the world (Paulo Freire's view).⁶⁰

The more idealistic and optimistic dimensions of dialogue represented by Buber and Freire, point to one final aspect of Limmud's ideological position that should also be noted. There exists within Judaism the notion that the further one moves in time away from Sinai, the more distant one is from truth, and that the present generation is inevitably inferior to the *g'dolim* of the past. There also exists a counter argument that we are constantly progressing towards the future, enhancing our knowledge and understanding as we move forward in time. Limmud's position appears to be best captured in the words of David Hartman: "I take *Ehyeh-Asher-Ehyeh* to mean 'I will be – I will be manifest in new ways.' God is understood in two ways: as the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob and as the God who says that radical novelty and surprise are possible. The past does not exhaust our understanding of the plenitude of the divine reality. We can build our spiritual lives with two perspectives: with a sense of surprise, wonderment, and openness to new possibilities, and, at the same time, with a sense of being totally claimed by our ancestral past."⁶¹ Limmud continually honours the traditions and texts of the past by giving them a high degree

of prominence in the educational programme, but continually allows for the possibility of a new and different future by encouraging dialogue and debate, and by constantly renewing its volunteer base. There is a strong emphasis on what Judaism has been, but it is accompanied by an equally strong emphasis on what Judaism could be.

In the final analysis, Limmud strives to maintain a difficult and unsteady balance between its commitments to communal togetherness, halakhic obligation and honouring the past, and its equally strong commitments to individual autonomy, aggadic free-spiritedness, and building the future. It has no qualms about blurring existing boundaries, not in order to cause damage to others, but to enhance and deepen Jewish life and ideas. It has great faith in dialogue, believing that the equalizing of people allows for meaningful social interaction to take place, which in turn creates the possibility of new relationships, new insights, and the renewal of Jewish life. Perhaps ultimately, Limmud's ideological position is captured most succinctly in the phrase "passionate openness." There are many Jewish organizations that are deeply passionate about a singular 'truth' without ever allowing alternative interpretations to challenge that belief, and there are many others that are extremely open to all kinds of ideas, but fail to engender much lasting passion about any of them. Limmud is serious about both notions – that one's engagement with Judaism and the Jewish People should be passionate, dynamic, exciting and invigorating, and that a major part of that passion can be found by opening oneself up to diverse opinions and allowing them to enrich and ennoble one's level of knowledge and depth of understanding.

Conclusion

As I stated in the introduction, the purpose of this paper is twofold: (i) to provide an analysis of Limmud UK in order to better understand what it does; and (ii) to offer guidance to anyone thinking about developing a Limmud-type initiative in their own community. This concluding section is primarily focused on the latter of these goals, although it is heavily informed by the analysis of the former.

The first point to highlight is that *sociological context matters*. In many respects, Limmud is a British phenomenon that has responded to existing realities in the British Jewish community, and utilized existing structures and sensibilities there to achieve success. One cannot expect to simply replicate Limmud UK in another country or community, because the context, the cultural norms, and the prevailing narrative are inevitably different. The first step in thinking about Limmud is to consider local communal norms and realities, and to develop a robust understanding of them.

Second, it is important to note that Limmud has always been a *reaction against* something – in its particular case, against the perceived formality, rigidity and properness of most Jewish communal organizations and institutions in Britain. The notion of critique is an essential component of Limmud – without a clear, compelling and shared sense of what is wrong in the Jewish community, it will be extremely difficult to engage a group of people to initiate something that is 'right.' However, this critique ought to be responsible – the criticism is not that of the wicked child at

the seder whose sin is to separate himself from the community, but rather what Mike Rosenak terms "loyal critique" – disapproval based on a strong sense of caring and love.⁶²

Third, in direct response to the shared loyal critique, Limmud is concerned with *making Jewish values live*. The values it selects as core are chosen partly in reaction against existing norms (which will, of course, vary from one geographic location to another), but more importantly out of a strong sense of belief that they are right. This is not principally a detailed intellectual understanding of the values, but rather a profound emotional belief in them and a commitment to live them out in one's day-to-day reality. Limmud's values, its core beliefs and mission must be entirely genuine – without this, a great deal of the spirit will be lost.

Fourth, and undoubtedly most essentially, *it's all about people*. From the very beginning, one's analysis of the community, one's critique of it, and one's articulation of core values should be developed with others, so that a group is cultivated that shares a common agenda. Jim Collins's finding in his book *From Good to Great* argues that the first principle of any organization becoming successful is getting "the right people on the bus."⁶³ This ought to *precede* any kind of strategic thinking – ensuring the 'right' people are involved from the beginning is utterly essential. The ideal people are those who fundamentally share the Jewish values, and have energy, talent, and influence within a strong social network, although anyone with even one of these four qualities should be cultivated.

Fifth, because people are so critical, the areas of *recruitment, retention, and supporting* the volunteer base are vital. Limmud's success is unimaginable without the input and influence of Andrew Gilbert and Clive Lawton, and more than anywhere else, they excelled in these areas. Both are particularly good at talent spotting, and sufficiently open-minded to recognize that more or less everyone has the capacity to bring something of value to the organization regardless of their level of Judaic commitment or understanding. Whilst differences in personality, ability and social skills obviously exist amongst the volunteer base, Limmud continually upholds the principle that all human beings should be valued, as all have something unique to contribute. As a result, all should be granted opportunities to give of themselves, trusted to do so well, and supported where necessary to help them to grow and develop.

Sixth, *content should be mediated by people*. Many educational programmes, organizations and institutions have very clearly-defined notions of educational content, and what the product of their initiatives ought to look like. Limmud doesn't. Instead, it allows the people that volunteer to run its events each year to define the content, according to their own shared interests and concerns, as well as wider community, national and international dynamics. One of the essential principles of Limmud is empowering people to define content, rather than imposing pre-determined content in an attempt to define people.

Seventh, the *dynamics between volunteers* are essential. It is important to pay close attention to the social and cultural ties that are developed between the people

running the organization. Limmud has excelled at building genuine friendships between its volunteers, so that planning meetings are almost as much about social get-togethers as they are about event management. There is a fundamentally charitable spirit that permeates the meetings, which is defined by bringing the best out of every individual, rather than competing against one another. Friends tend to regard one another as equals, and are far more likely than colleagues to give one another opportunities to excel, to see the good and the potential in one another, and to celebrate each other's successes. They are also more likely to offer support when needed, and honest constructive criticism when necessary.

Eighth, it is important to consider the *contextual spirit* within which volunteers meet and plan. Any Limmud meeting or event needs to strongly reflect the organization's values. Empowerment is perhaps of paramount importance – one of Limmud's most compelling characteristics is its capacity to allow individual volunteers to draw on their own creativity, actualize their own ideas, and activate their own initiatives. That is not to say it is a free for all – all ideas need to generate a reasonable level of support to happen and all must be informed by the organization's core values and Jewish commitments – but by empowering people to use their skills and creativity, a highly dynamic, optimistic and 'can-do' spirit is established.

Ninth, *manage fundamentally irresolvable tensions with respect*. Certain tensions are solvable – for example, the technical question of whether to offer more subsidies at the expense of bringing more presenters is something that ultimately has to be resolved one way or another. However, other more complex philosophical tensions

cannot be resolved – the right of the individual to search for personal meaning and the right of the collective to impose certain obligations are both important. In these instances, prioritizing one inevitably damages the other and dramatically alters the entire spirit of the endeavour, so both need to be upheld to the greatest extent possible.

Tenth, *it's about The Jewish People, as much as it is about Jewish people*. It is easy to become focused on individual groups within the Jewish community and the differences that exist between us. Limmud deliberately ignores these divisions, preferring to provide a space where Jews from diverse ideological, theological, cultural and geographic backgrounds can come together to learn from one another and develop a shared future. Differences are always respected, but never regarded as barriers.

Finally, *planning is the product*. Limmud draws little, if any distinction between the events it runs, and the manner in which they are planned. The values and principles that are desirable at its annual conference are the identical values and principles that are upheld throughout the planning process. For example, if neutralizing differences between participants in order to help generate dialogue is an important part of the conference, it must also be an important part of any planning meeting. The result of this approach is that the volunteer base not only understands the organization's values on an intellectual basis, but has spent the entire period of planning living and behaving in accordance with them, and therefore goes into the actual events *being* Limmud.

All the rest, I believe, is commentary. Of course, commentary is important, as it serves to enrich one's understanding of core principles, and I hope that the reader will spend as much time on the first few sections of this paper as on the conclusion. One should also be acutely aware of some of the gaps and holes in this document – perhaps particularly the absence of qualitative and quantitative analysis about Limmud volunteers and participants. To the best of my knowledge, there is no serious data on what happens to them when they encounter the organization and become involved in it, nor are there reliable statistics on rates of return from year to year. This information is needed, and would add much to our understanding. However, perhaps most importantly, I hope that anyone interested in developing a Limmud initiative in their community will first and foremost attend the conference in Britain, and spend time carefully consulting with some of the exceptional volunteers who have given numerous hours of their free time to the endeavour. Whilst the conference in Britain is a unique outgrowth of the dynamics and social realities that exist there, the experience and insights of these people will certainly be as rich and valuable as anything contained within this paper. There is something uniquely special and compelling about Limmud in Britain, and it may well hold within it some critical insights that could benefit the Jewish People as a whole. The more we do to uncover those insights, the more likely we are to succeed in our most fundamental task.

NOTES

- ¹ Anthony Giddens, *Sociology*. (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2001), p.2.
- ² Zygmunt Bauman, *Community. Seeking Safety in an Insecure World*. (Cambridge: Policy Press, 2001), pp.1-2.
- ³ *Ibid.*, p.4
- ⁴ Bethamie Horowitz, "Connections and Journeys. Assessing Critical Opportunities for Enhancing Jewish Identity." *Report to the Commission on Jewish Identity and Renewal, UJA Federation of New York*, (2003): pp.187-188.
- ⁵ See: *The Jewish Week*, November 4, 2005, p.43. The 'millenials' are those born during the 1980s or later.
- ⁶ Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Modernity*. (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2000), p.62.
- ⁷ *Ibid*, p.63.
- ⁸ *Ibid.*
- ⁹ From Limmud's mission statement. See: <http://www.limmud.org/about/mission>
- ¹⁰ For a more detailed analysis of this phenomenon, see: Don Tapscott, *Growing Up Digital. The Rise of the Net Generation* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1998).
- ¹¹ See: Jonathan Sacks, *The Dignity of Difference. How To Avoid The Clash Of Civilizations* (London/New York: Continuum, 2002), p.2.
- ¹² *Ibid.*
- ¹³ For further details on this notion of polarities, see: Barry Johnson, *Polarity Management* (Human Resource Development Press, 1992).
- ¹⁴ See: Malcolm Gladwell, *The Tipping Point* (Abacus, 2002).
- ¹⁵ Robert D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone. The collapse and revival of American community* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2000), p.19
- ¹⁶ Smith, M. K. 'Robert Putnam', *the encyclopaedia of informal education*, www.infed.org/thinkers/putnam.htm.
- ¹⁷ As portrayed by John Dewey in his book *Experience and Education* (New York: Macmillan, 1937), p.19.
- ¹⁸ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁹ Barry Chazan, "The Philosophy of Informal Jewish Education," downloaded from: <http://www.jafi.org.il/education/moriya/newpdf/Chazan.pdf>, p.7.
- ²⁰ See: Carl Rogers, "The interpersonal relationship in the facilitation of learning" (1937), reprinted in H. Kirschenbaum and V.L. Henderson (eds.), *The Carl Rogers Reader* (London: Constable, 1990), pp.304-311.
- ²¹ See: E. D. Hirsch Jr., *Cultural Literacy. What Every American Needs To Know* (New York: Vintage Books, 1988).
- ²² Malcolm S. Knowles, *Self-Directed Learning. A guide for learners and teachers* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall/Cambridge, 1975), p.18.
- ²³ See: Malcolm S Knowles, *The Adult Learner: A Neglected Species* (Houston: Gulf Publishing Co., 1978), pp.53-57. The final point was added in a later work: Malcolm Knowles and Associates, *Andragogy in Action* (San Francisco: Jossey Bass, 1984), p.12.
- ²⁴ Jacqueline Nicholls, "Limmud", in Jonathan Boyd (ed.), *The Sovereign and Situated Self. Jewish Identity and Community in the 21st Century* (London: Profile Books, 2003), p.198.
- ²⁵ Chazan, *Informal Jewish Education*, pp.10-11.
- ²⁶ Martin Buber, *Between Man and Man* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1947), p.37.
- ²⁷ Jacqueline Nicholls, "Limmud", p.198.
- ²⁸ Chazan, *Informal Jewish Education*, p.10-11
- ²⁹ *Ibid.*, p.12.

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- ³⁰ Seymour Fox has noted that Camp Ramah was heavily influenced by Bettelheim's thinking in this area. He writes: "One of the distinguishing marks of Bettelheim's school was its creation of a 'home haven,' a comfortable and safe setting for the children. To make this happen, Bettelheim used every resource at his disposal – from architecture to food. We believed that a camper's cabin at Ramah should function in a similar way, as a supportive environment against the inevitable pressures and problems created by an intense milieu. Bettelheim helped us understand how best to bring this about." See: Seymour Fox with William Novak, *Vision at the Heart. Lessons from Camp Ramah on the Power of Ideas in Shaping Educational Institutions*. (Jerusalem/New York: Mandel Institute/Council for Initiatives in Jewish Education, 1997), p.25.
- ³¹ Jerome Bruner, *The Culture of Education*, (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1996), p.x.
- ³² See: Diana Silberman-Keller, "Images of Time and Place in the Narrative of Non-Formal Pedagogy", in: Bekerman, Burbules and Silberman-Keller (eds.), *Learning in Places. The Informal Education Reader* (New York: Peter Lang, 2006).
- ³³ Jerome Bruner, *The Process of Education* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1960), p.14.
- ³⁴ See: Howard Gardner, *Frames of Mind. The Theory of Multiple Intelligences* (New York: BasicBooks, 1993); Robert J. Sternberg, *Thinking Styles* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).
- ³⁵ See: Joseph J. Schwab, edited by Ian Westbury and Neil J. Wilkof, *Science, Curriculum and Liberal Education. Selected Essays* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1978), pp.366-36. It may be important to note that Schwab's analysis focuses on curriculum for children, where it is probably more appropriate for his four commonplaces to be fairly static. The claim here is that in the realm of andragogy, a more fluid view of the inter-relatedness of the commonplaces is appropriate.
- ³⁶ Peter Jarvis, *Adult and Continuing Education. Theory and Practice*. (London and New York: Routledge/Falmer, 1995), p.83.
- ³⁷ David Halpin, "Hope, utopianism and educational renewal", *the encyclopedia of informal education*, www.infed.org/biblio/hope.htm, 2003.
- ³⁸ Hannah Arendt, *Between Past and Future: Eight Exercises in Political Thought*. (New York: Penguin, 1968), p.196.
- ³⁹ See: Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (London: Penguin, 1996).
- ⁴⁰ David Hartman, *A Heart of Many Rooms. Celebrating the Many Voices Within Judaism*. (Woodstock, Vermont: Jewish Lights Publishing, 1999), pp.137-8.
- ⁴¹ *Ibid*, p.137.
- ⁴² Jonathan Sacks, "Judaism and the Contemporary World: Foundation Principles of Jewish Identity and Community for the 21st Century", in Jonathan Boyd (ed.), *Sovereign and Situated Self*, op. cit., p.109.
- ⁴³ More and more sociological data is available that demonstrates this trend, but the best example is probably Steven M. Cohen and Arnold M. Eisen, *The Jew Within. Self, Family and Community in America* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2000). The central observation is that the average contemporary American Jew feels entitled, with little guilt or hesitation, to decide what to observe Jewishly, and is more than ready to place the search for personal meaning – over and above anything else – as the central arbiter of ritual practice and communal involvement.
- ⁴⁴ Published in *The Forward*, April 21, 2006. See: <http://forward.com/articles/7686>
- ⁴⁵ See: Pirkei Avot 2:5; Maimonides, M.T. *Teshuvah* 3:20.
- ⁴⁶ Pesikta de Rav Kahana, 12.

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- ⁴⁷ Quoted in: Gideon Sylvester, "Preaching Alone: A Study of the Educational Philosophy Behind the Decision of Orthodox Rabbis Not to debate or Share Platforms with Progressive Rabbis." Unpublished masters thesis, submitted to the Institute of Education, University of London, pp.41-42.
- ⁴⁸ See: Cohen and Kahn-Harris, *Beyond Belonging. The Jewish Identities of Moderately-Engaged British Jews* (London: UJIA, 2004), p.17. The document quotes Board of Deputies figures from 2001.
- ⁴⁹ Rabbi Aharon Lichtenstein, *By His Light. Character and Values in the Service of God* (Jersey City, NJ: Ktav Publishing House, 2003), p.49.
- ⁵⁰ See: Eruvin 64a; Sanhedrin 99b.
- ⁵¹ Lichtenstein, *By His Light*, pp.53-54.
- ⁵² Hartman, *Heart of Many Rooms*, p.175.
- ⁵³ *Ibid*, p.177.
- ⁵⁴ Abraham Joshua Heschel, *Man's Quest for God*, p.68.
- ⁵⁵ See: Moshe Feinstein, *Igerot Moshe, Yoreh Deah*, Volume 1, Chapter 139 (1973), p.278.
- ⁵⁶ Sylvester, "Preaching Alone," pp.42-43.
- ⁵⁷ See: Isi Leibler, "The Validation of Jewish Anti-Zionism," downloaded from: http://virtualjerusalem.com/leisure/jewishleisure_article.php?article_id=1284&page=1
- ⁵⁸ The Council's condemnation stated: "The entire gestalt of the book and its promotion, including the strong public emphasis on the warm personal interaction between the two authors and joint promotional appearances before large audiences, represents a blurring of boundaries between darkness and light, and an undermining of the Jewish religious tradition... We may not treat our perfect Torah on a par with other, casual speculations. Light cannot coexist with darkness, nor can falsehood be peddled along with truth. The book, therefore, is an entirely unacceptable enterprise, one to which we forcefully object." See: http://www.thejewishpress.com/news_article.asp?article=1710
- ⁵⁹ See: Meir Persoff (ed.), *Immanuel Jakobovits: A Prophet in Israel* (London: Vallentine Mitchell, 2002), p.252.
- ⁶⁰ See: Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (London: Sheed and Ward, 1979); Charles Taylor, "The Politics of Recognition", in: *Multiculturalism. Examining the Politics of Recognition* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1994); Martin Buber, *Between Man and Man* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1947); Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (London: Penguin, 1996).
- ⁶¹ David Hartman, *Heart of Many Rooms*, p.141.
- ⁶² See: Seymour Fox, Israel Scheffler and Daniel Marom (eds.), *Visions of Jewish Education* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p.188.
- ⁶³ See: Jim Collins, *Good to Great. Why Some Companies Make the Leap... and Others Don't* (London: Random House, 2001), p.41.