

**EDUCATION**

# Expanding Identity

Learning conference, based on a British model, aiming to push the boundaries on Jewishness.

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**K**aren Radkowsky and Jeffrey Schwarz look nothing like revolutionaries.

Radkowsky, 46, is a senior partner at the Ogilvy and Mathers advertising mammoth. Schwarz, 45, is the CEO of a hedge fund. He is dressed in an azure button down and camel-colored khakis, she in a dark suit. Both have long histories of sitting on the boards of various Jewish organizations.

Still, the two are out there to revolutionize the New York Jewish landscape by challenging the boundaries of what constitutes Jewish identity.

In January, Radkowsky and Schwarz will preside over the first session of Limmud NY, a four-day conference of Jewish learning.

It's a hard event to define. Sessions on everything from cooking to kabbalah will offer a hodgepodge of Hebrew knowledge that is designed to appeal to Jews across denominational and generational lines.

"The purpose of Limmud NY is to help people come across difference," said Schwarz. "We are creating a new form of communal structure, which is empowering to folks who have not always felt welcome in other Jewish institutions."

To ensure this happens, Schwarz and Radkowsky assembled a small committee of volunteers, and set out to try and ponder which presenters were worthy of inclusion. The list they came up with was varied and includes author Letty Cottin Pogrebin, Holocaust scholar Deborah Lipstadt, Rabbi Leon Morris and former Manhattan Borough President Ruth Messinger.

The methods of presentation will vary, too, spanning everything from frontal lectures to performances to discussion groups.

The result, said Schwarz, is a "happening" of Jewish learning in which anyone could find something of interest.

"I don't believe that there is such a thing as normative Jewish behavior," he said. "What might be considered normative behavior is — for Limmud NY — incredibly wide. There are multiple ways of expressing one's Jewishness."

Schwarz would know. Before he started Limmud, he and Radkowsky spent six months surveying the Jewish educational field, approaching the task as they would any they undertake daily in their respective professional arenas. Both were both members of the UJA's Commission on Jewish Identity and Renewal charged with generating and supporting Jewish education and identity



development efforts.

The more they learned, the more they realized that what they both had in mind was sorely missing.

"There was nothing out there that was multi-day, multi-denominational, multi-generational and non-affiliated," said Radkowsky.

Then the commission traveled to England to participate in Limmud, the original model on which Limmud NY is based.

Founded in 1980 by four young British Jews, Limmud was perceived as an annual learning event taking place over Christmas and blending both formal and informal education for young Jews from across the world.

For 23 years Limmud has been growing gradually; more than 2,500 attended the conference last year in Nottingham, England.

"The model of Limmud seemed pretty much right on," Radkowsky said. "We decided to go with the Limmud name, which is known in the presenter community but not as well known in the local Jewish community."

Armed with what they believe was an effective model, Radkowsky and Schwarz nonetheless had to confront translating the English model into American. First came the logistics; while the British hold their conference over Christmas, a time in which all businesses are closed, Limmud NY is being held on Martin Luther King Jr. weekend, one of the only opportunities employed adults have to get away for four days without missing work.

Even more important were the accommodations: the British Limmud is traditionally held on university campuses, most of which

the conference is held on a weekend, Limmud NY's organizers had to debate how to celebrate Shabbat without offending any of the multiple religious sensibilities present.

It's a problem with which they are still grappling.

"We had to ask ourselves, how do we create a Shabbat that is meaningful while helping create community and encourage diversity?" said Abigail Dauber, 26, who Radkowsky and Schwarz hired as Limmud NY's full-time director. "So we intend to offer different options so that everyone feels respected and comfortable."

Even, however, when the conference's main conceptual pillars were more or less sturdily planted, undertaking such an endeavor with a staff of one employee and several volunteers proved daunting.

To help launch Limmud NY, the organization received financial and logistical support from both the UJA-Federation of New York through a grant from the Picower Foundation, and from JESNA/UJC's Bikkurim: An Incubator for New Jewish Ideas, which is providing free office space and services. The rest of the backbone is comprised solely of volunteers.

"This is an organization that is not about what size check you're going to write but about how much you're willing to roll up your sleeves and volunteer your time," said Schwarz.

Many young people did just that, he said, by making calls, arranging meetings and working to make the conference happen.

Schwarz said this spirit is part of what Limmud NY hopes to be about — an organization that successfully engages young people, a group commonly perceived of as immune to affiliation and institutional commitment.

To encourage the trend even further, Radkowsky and Schwarz contacted groups of college and high school students hoping to raise an organic leadership that will be able to carry on the task.

"I hope the Jewish communal world sees that to engage young people, they need to create serious opportunities for them to get involved," Radkowsky said.

Still, even with all the talk about mobilizing the youth, crossing denominational lines, and redefining Jewish learning and life, Radkowsky and Schwarz insist that they're no rebels.

"We're not doing this to challenge Jewish communal life," said Schwarz. "We're just providing an alternative model." ■

**With unconventional ads and eclectic offerings, Limmud NY organizers hope to shake up the Jewish scene.**

are empty for Christmas break. The entire event, then, resembles a Jewish summer camp of sorts, with people sleeping on cots and sharing substandard food.



**Advertising maven Karen Radkowsky, above, and hedge fund CEO Jeffrey Schwarz are marketing Judaism to the disaffected.**

Radkowsky and Schwarz knew this would not pass in New York. So the conference will be held in an upscale hotel in the Hudson Valley.

The most challenging issue, however, pertained not to the guests' stomachs or their schedules but to their spirituality. As