



Limmud

A music performance at Limmud NY, a multid denominational, intergenerational Jewish learning retreat in the Catskill Mountains.

FIRST PERSON

A Southerner in the land of Limmud likes concept's possibilities in Dixie

By Rachel Pomerance

ATLANTA, Jan. 17 (JTA) — Its medieval theme suggested the age of the building, which reeked of mildew and moth balls. And the decor defied explanation: Imagine metal sculptures of limp-wristed lions, maze-like hallways, creaky stairs, off-track betting and the occasional gigantic birdcage.

It's like the set of a David Lynch film, one observer sniffed.

That was the setting for Limmud NY, a multid denominational, intergenerational Jewish learning retreat that drew more than 800 people to its third incarnation in New York's Catskill Mountains over Martin Luther King Jr. weekend.

Limmud is perhaps known as much for its bare venues as its bountiful content. The original Limmud, the U.K. Jewish lollapalooza founded more than 25 years ago and which still summons more than 2,000 participants each year to its winter conference, is held in a bare-bones college campus.

New York's Knights of the Roundtable version, I should note, offered spotless rooms and a culinary spread worthy of a New Yorker's palate. The bizarre accommodations began to feel just campy enough for camp — Limmud's unstated goal — a bubble-like experience for bonding and renewal.

So what was an Atlantan like me doing there?

I was part of a larger movement. Limmud NY brought community delegations from across the country — Chicago, Boston and Los Angeles, for example — to observe the program, so we can transport the concept to our own backyards.

Heavy on experimentation, Limmud NY supports an array of programs and

almost anyone with a Jewish idea.

The panoply of events on offer at any given time ranged from a meditative, musical Shabbat service to a packed lecture on “the whole of Jewish history in one hour.” The mother of a transgendered child spoke of acceptance, and an Atlanta-raised writer for “The Daily Show” described Southern Jewish comedy.

David Klinghoffer explained why Jews rejected Jesus, and activist and author Leonard Fein relayed captivating anecdotes about the late Palestinian Authority President Yasser Arafat.

Fein recalled sitting across from Arafat in a group meeting, unassumingly projecting seniority. In response, Arafat honored Fein at lunch by cutting his steak “like a Jewish mother,” he said.

It was the sort of high-caliber Jewish programming that New Yorkers might expect.

But Atlanta is a different animal. And while I’m not sure how Limmud will take root here, I am sure it will provide a vital Jewish injection.

Don’t get me wrong: Atlanta is burgeoning with day schools, adult learning and organizational life. But we’re only slowly approaching the kind of innovative Jewish renewal programming in prayer and culture that’s already sweeping New York, where there’s a veritable matrix of hybrid minyanim on the Upper West Side alone.

Sometimes I feel like I’m waiting for the hot movie to come to town.

So while we’re happy for you, New York, that you’ve got another tremendous outlet for creative Jewish expression, we’re even happier to participate in the project. Especially since we plan to reach out to Jews in nearby enclaves like Savannah, Ga., Charlotte, N.C., and Birmingham, Ala., for whom a Limmud experience will be a remarkable opportunity.

It’s what I’ll call the “Matzo Ball” theory, referring to the Christmas Eve singles bashes for Jews. New York offers several versions of the party — some singles go, some don’t. In Atlanta, if you’re Jewish and single, you pretty much have to go.

“Limmud is even more important for communities that are smaller than New York,” says Jodi Mansbach, who helped coordinate the Atlanta delegation.

In communities with fewer Jews and Jewish educators, “Limmud is the one time a year where a large group can get together, eat meals together, share experiences together and learn together,” she says. “That is what created the original magic of Limmud UK, held during the Christmas holiday week in England, and that is what we hope to do with Limmud here in Atlanta — bring together Jews from across the Southeast to celebrate our shared heritage and to feel, at least for the weekend, cohesive as a community.”

Atlanta is home to a huge influx of New Yorkers, but it offers a different cultural sensibility. Fiercely proud of their Jewish heritage, most Southerners aren’t privy to heady, YIVO-like grappling with the intricacies of Jewish thought found in some circles in New York.

They are, generally speaking, a more lighthearted bunch, less likely to go for hours of cerebral Jewish aerobics than an outlet of basic learning rooted in humor and fun.

Truth is, the primers and entertainment proved to be the most popular sessions at Limmud NY. They were the experiences that refreshed and stimulated even the most Jewishly identified and educated New Yorkers.

In Atlanta, where we really need it, I've got a hunch it will go over big.

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