



At Jewish learning fest, the chosen people overwhelmed by choices



by Johanna Ginsberg
NJJN Staff Writer

The pace is frenetic, the learning intense. The hardest part of [LimmudNY](#), the annual festival of Jewish learning, held this year over the Martin Luther King Day weekend at the Friar Tuck Resort, Spa and Convention Center in Catskill, NY, is deciding what to attend:

- ▮ A text study with Rabbi Dr. Arthur Green, a Newark native, rector of Hebrew College's rabbinical school in Newton Centre, Mass., and one of the world's preeminent authorities on Jewish thought and spirituality?
- ▮ Rob Kutner's presentation on how he went from being a nice southern Jewish boy to becoming a writer for the *Daily Show*?
- ▮ Princeton University professor Ephraim Isaac's talk on being black, Arab, and Jewish?

Or maybe you're in the mood for Jewish meditation, or a feminist reading of the story of Adam and Eve with Pardes Institute of Jewish Studies professor of Bible Judy Klitsner.

"The worst part is making decisions," said Debbie Meron, 57, of Rockaway who attended her third LimmudNY weekend this year, choosing among hundreds of presentations spread out over four days. "It's like getting an injection of Jewish learning."

LimmudNY is a volunteer-run weekend of Jewish celebration and learning based on a British model that began over 25 years ago.

The New York version, now in its third year, bills itself as a diverse conference bringing together people of all Jewish backgrounds. An estimated 60 of the 800 attendees came from New Jersey, including two Montclair residents who serve on the steering committee: John Feinberg, chair of the technology committee, and Penny Arons, cochair of the children and family programs team.

While most participants hailed from New York City's five boroughs, a smattering of attendees came from far-flung areas of the country with the goal of creating their own Limmud weekends.

Judging by the wait list of more than 60 people who couldn't get into the conference, the event is only growing in popularity.

The goal of the weekend, according to conference cochair David Shriner-Cahn, was “to celebrate Jewish learning in as many forms as possible.” He said the organization is conducting formal evaluations, but from an anecdotal perspective he believes they succeeded. “There was a very positive buzz within the walls of the conference and people seemed glad they were there.”

While some, like Meron, criticized a certain homogeneity in the number of people from the Upper West Side of Manhattan, Shriner-Cahn said that in planning and marketing, they reached out “to as diverse an audience as possible.” And looking at the variety of religious services and numbers of people in each room, he said, “I think this was a fairly diverse crowd religiously speaking. But I want to wait for the formal evaluation to say whether we had a greater diversity of people this year than in previous years.”

If the level of study and the pace of the 2007 weekend matched last year’s event held at the Jewish Catskill throwback, Kutsher’s Country Club in Monticello, the accommodations this time were slightly grander.

Among this year’s headliners were Blu Greenberg, author and lecturer on Orthodox feminism; her husband, Rabbi Irving “Yitz” Greenberg, president of the Jewish Life Network; teacher and publisher Joel Grishaver; and Erez, aka DJ Handler, a Jewish rapper who references Ashkenazi and Yemenite music in his tunes.

Beyond the household names, there were plenty of participants, well known and obscure, who volunteered to lead sessions. All together, there were 145 presenters and more than 300 sessions.

Films are always a favorite at the festival. This year, one of the featured ones was *Praying with Lior*, a documentary by Ilana Trachtman about the bar mitzva of a boy with Down’s syndrome. (With the film still unfinished, Limmud participants saw only the first 35 minutes.)

Children attending Camp Limmud can thank Penny Arons for her efforts. The camp has evolved from being a parents’ babysitting cooperative the first year to a full-fledged part of the Limmud experience this year. It included presenters like Shir La La, a children’s rocker; Grishaver; and Rabbi Kevin Hale, a scribe.

Matthew Reber of Chester, a senior at Montclair State University who is planning to move shortly to Highland Park, attended for the first time this year.

“I’m disillusioned with denominations and the established religious order,” he told *NJJN* in between sessions. “This has offered me some reillusionment. It’s definitely the most diverse and inclusive environment I’ve been in.”



[Comment](#) | [Print](#) | [Subscribe](#) | [Webmaster](#)

©2006 New Jersey Jewish News
All rights reserved