

Voices of Limmud NY

Participants Share their Experiences



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Introduction

Limmud NY is a grassroots community that works all year to create a conference celebrating Jewish learning and culture for Jews of all ages and backgrounds. The conference itself is the Jewish expression of about 100 volunteers and reflects the diversity of ideas and thoughts of these individuals. The multi-media formats of sessions throughout the weekend include music, text, film, lectures, and hands-on workshops. With hundreds of people in attendance and over 300 sessions throughout the weekend, the event is a celebration of the vibrancy of Jewish life.

Limmud NY was established in December 2003 by six volunteers who traveled to the annual Limmud Conference in England to study its unique model and determine how that model could be adapted for implementation in New York. With the help of UJA-Federation of NY, this group undertook a year-long needs assessment and strategic planning process. At the conclusion of this process, UJA-Federation – through a grant from the Picower Foundation – provided funds to seed the creation of Limmud NY. At the same time, Limmud NY became one of the select residents of *Bikkurim: An Incubator for New Jewish Ideas*. The second annual Limmud NY was held on Martin Luther King weekend, January 12-16, 2006, with 750 people (a growth of 100 people from the first year) from all walks of Jewish life in attendance. Our next conference is scheduled for January 11-15, 2007 with more than 800 participants expected.

Limmud NY's mission is to “invigorate and celebrate Jewish life by bringing together Jews from across a wide spectrum of experiences, ages, and backgrounds through a conference of Jewish learning and culture,” and as you will read in the following pages, in just two years Limmud NY has touched the Jewish lives of many. The descriptions of the individual experiences that follow were written by the participants themselves, based on presentations they made at a session at Limmud NY 2006. While these twelve voices represent a cross-section of the Limmud NY community, there are hundreds more experiences and Limmud NY stories to be told.

The community that Limmud NY envisions is represented in the stories you've just read: a community in which Jews of all stripes come together to create and celebrate Jewish learning and living, to meet one another and to learn from each other. As one participant exclaimed,

I loved the variety and diversity of programs. The services were wonderful – rejuvenating. The people I met, however, were the best part of the Limmud experience.

We hope that you too get involved in Limmud NY, whether by volunteering to help out with the planning process, participating in the conference, or making a donation. For more information, visit our website www.limmudny.org, call 212-284-6968, or email our Director, Abi Dauber Sterne at abi@limmudny.org.





Lisa Sacks chaired the 2006 Limmud NY conference. She served as co-chair of the 2005 Participant Care team while pregnant with her first child, who was born 3 weeks before the conference.

Until I was 23, my involvement with the Jewish community was intense and fulfilling. In college, I was active with the pro-Israel group on campus and with Hillel, and was one of the first students to serve on AIPAC's National Executive Committee. After college, I spent a year in Israel; but when I returned to the US, I found it impossible to get involved in the community the way I had as a student.

Even after I moved to New York, I still didn't find many avenues to get involved in the Jewish community in a meaningful way. Since I wasn't interested in attending benefits and fundraising, I focused my organizing energy on the political realm, and spent the next few years working on political campaigns and in local government. Then I discovered Limmud NY through a couple of friends who were involved in creating it.

Limmud NY has enabled me to use my organizing and leadership skills to do something about which I feel passionately - learning and building inclusive Jewish community. Limmud NY is an organization that values the amount of time and energy one can give rather than the amount of one's financial contribution. This powerful model allowed me to rise to a leadership position within the organization now, not at some future point when I (hopefully) will have enough money to write a big check.

I was honored to be asked to serve as the 2006 conference chairperson and found it to be an ideal activity to keep me engaged in the community during my year of childcare leave. I've met a number of extraordinary people who are now my friends and look forward to many more years of significant involvement.

Volunteers



The Limmud NY "staff" is comprised of about 100 volunteers, and the support of one full-time director and a program coordinator. These volunteers, some of whom do not even attend the conference, sit on one of nine teams – Programming, Children's Programming, Web/Tech, Participant Care, Marketing and Outreach, Scholarships, College/High School, Volunteer Development, and Catering & Facilities -- and a Steering Committee that plan and implement the conference itself. This complex structure reflects the vibrant, diverse, and multi-generational approach that Limmud NY seeks to promote, and, thus, the success of the entire program rests in the hands of these volunteers.

Through this volunteer planning process, we strive to build a community in which all individuals – no matter what their Jewish background or lifestyle, no matter what their economic status – take part in imagining and creating their own Jewish experience. This non-judgmental and virtually non-hierarchical community aims to embrace and empower its participants, inspiring them to delve deeper into our rich tradition. The weekend itself is fuel for the entire year, propelling a community of volunteers along with many conference participants to become further engaged in Jewish life, to model a new kind of leadership, and, most importantly, to be empowered to take action in shaping the broader Jewish community.

Here are three of our volunteers...

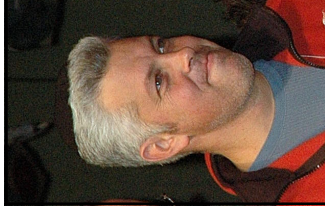


Alyssa Frank is a 23-year-old non-profit professional who headed the Arts & Culture track of the Programming team.

Limmud NY helped me to cultivate my management skills and build tremendous confidence in myself. For the 2006 conference, I was responsible for overseeing the art, music, theatre, literature, poetry, and cultural programs. I learned how to set goals and create realistic time-tables, train other volunteers to do outreach, manage the expectations of presenters, and resolve conflicts. It was a tremendously meaningful experience. This organization put so much trust in me and taught me about my true potential.

Limmud NY is also creating an avenue for me to be involved in Jewish communal life as a lay leader. Throughout college I struggled with the question of whether or not to become a Jewish professional – a dilemma that my many of my peers also face. Part of the reason this decision was so challenging was that I did not have a model for involvement in organizational Jewish life outside of work. I believe that the Jewish community depends to a great extent on both career professionals and lay leaders; involvement with Limmud NY is excellent lay leadership training.

The Limmud NY conference is just four days long, but the experience is much more – ten months of planning every year, enduring questions left from inspiring sessions, and wonderful friendships. I wouldn't trade my involvement for the world!



Steve Kay Kupietzky, who has co-chaired Catering and Facilities for two years, first learned about Limmud from his partner, an active volunteer in Limmud UK.

A few years ago, my partner, who lives in London, served as Programming chair for (the British) Limmud. I wanted to know what was taking so much time out of his life, so I decided to check out Limmud – and I've been "hooked" ever since.

The diversity of the classes and the attendees was amazing. For the first time, I was able to fit right in and be "me" – something I could not say about other "Jewish" environments in which I had found myself.

In the past, my experience with Jewish organizations was limited to writing a check. But I have learned that there is much more to be gained by devoting time and energy to something you really care about, like Limmud.

As a kid who went to yeshiva his whole life, I thought I had already learned "enough." I was wrong. Limmud NY has taught me there is so much I still need to learn about myself and the greater Jewish community.



Corrine O'Neill a member of the Marketing team, recently completed her conversion to Judaism.

Over 3 years ago, I began to explore the world of Judaism. Reading, taking a multi-week conversion class, and talking to my Jewish friends was all part of my exploration of this amazing path. How I got to Limmud NY in 2005 is a long and complicated story. What brought me to volunteer for this year's conference was the simple desire to become more involved in the Jewish community – a crucial part of my conversion process.

I thought, as a graphic designer, it made sense for me to work on marketing. At the first meeting, our team discussed its goal: to increase diversity at the conference. I was assigned to come up with an image to convey the theme: "Jews of all Stripes". The image I chose was a multicolored zebra.

Last year, as a participant, Limmud NY made me feel extremely welcome in a community I was exploring, and gave me a foundation for further Jewish study. This year, as a volunteer, Limmud NY created a place for me to continue to build the type of Jewish community that I believe in integral to being a Jew by Choice.



Jason Troshinsky helped to publicize Limmud NY and recruit other new participants even prior to attending his first conference.

This was my first time attending Limmud NY. I grew up in Northern California, where the Jewish population was just 3% out of 2 million. Although I was a member of a Reform synagogue and had a Bar Mitzvah, for the most part, I wasn't involved with a lot of things Jewish. My girlfriend introduced me to the concept of Limmud NY. She heard about it from a friend and had become a volunteer herself. Her strong Jewish identity and passion for Judaism caused me to re-think mine. So I decided to volunteer on the Marketing team too, helping to get the word out about the conference. The experience also allowed me to explore my Judaism further.



Judith Hauptman, a professor at the Jewish Theological Seminary, was invited to teach at the first Limmud NY. She chose to return as a volunteer presenter in 2006.

My husband and I came back to Limmud NY this year not just to socialize (although we like doing that), and not just to be in the country for the weekend, (although we like doing that, too). We came because we are Jewish learning junkies. And we came because we love the frenzy of it all – including standing there and agonizing over which class to take.

Why did I pay to come to Limmud NY to teach this year, when last year, as an invited presenter, my expenses were covered? The answer can be found in the Talmud. The rabbi says, "More than the calf wants to suck, the cow wants to give milk" (Bavli, Pesachim 112a). Although I do not like being called a cow, there is a wonderful metaphor here. Torah is like mother's milk. It is necessary to drink it to live. And it is necessary for the mother's wellbeing to give milk to her child.

Teaching is my life. I am a professor of Talmud; I train future rabbis. I love to interact with people over Jewish text. We enrich each other and we relate to each other in a deep way. Textual connection is vital – it is what keeps the Jewish people alive. Every Jew can find a point of entry through text. For me, coming to Limmud NY and not teaching is, therefore, inconceivable.

Jews of All Stripes

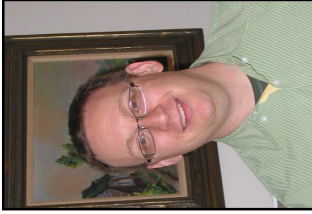


Participants come from various denominations and walks of Jewish life, including Reform, Orthodox, Renewal, Conservative, Reconstructionist, Secular, and as well as those who do not affiliate at all. At our January 2006 event, 38% of participants identified themselves as “just Jewish” or “Other” when asked about their Jewish affiliation.

Gay, straight, young, old, single, married, artists and executives, Jewish professionals, and communal volunteers -- Limmud NY is a place where everyone can feel welcome.

People also come to Limmud NY for many different reasons. Some come to enrich their spiritual lives, while others participate to meet new people. Some are mostly interested in the educational experience, while others are excited by the volunteer-run nature of the event.

What follows are the Jewish journeys of three Limmud NY volunteers...



Abe Sterne formerly served on the board of Limmud in England and co-chaired their conference in 2000. He met his wife, (Limmud NY's director, Abigail Dauber Sterne), at Limmud NY last year.

One of the central themes of Limmud is the idea of individualized Jewish journeys within the community of friendships forged out of tolerance and respect. Inherent in the word 'journey' is the notion of movement – of lech lecha that was commanded to our progenitor Abraham.

Lech lecha is the primal imperative to Abraham to leave his comfort spaces, the places he knows: home, community and country; its call to us reverberates even now in the comforts of technology and other signs of modern life. The call to explore and be dynamic in our lives.

Limmud is a place where Jewish journeying exhorts us to meet new ideas and become re-energized Jews – whether through baking challah, learning Torah and Talmud, singing and dancing late into the night, or through hearing history. But perhaps more important, Limmud is an opportunity to confront our own Jewish boundaries when we meet people different to us in Jewish beliefs and practice, and yet still hold them dear in our community.

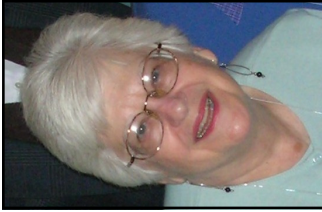
I came to Limmud NY in 2005 to experience the excitement of a first conference. I did not expect that within a few months that my own Jewish journey would be so definitively changed, so that I would leave my home, community, and country to live in the US as part of new family. But that is not the end of my own lech lecha – it continues, forever influenced by my involvement in Limmud, as well as what Limmud has given me on my Jewish journey.

Jews of All Ages



At Limmud NY 2006 participants spanned the generations. Our youngest participant was a few months old, and our oldest was 94. A large contingent of over 120 high school and college students were an integral part of the weekend. Many of these participants volunteered, staffing the help desk, checking participants into the hotel, leading sessions. With programming for toddlers, kids, tweens, high school students, families, and adults, Limmud NY has something for everyone. Here are just three members of our intergenerational volunteer teams...

Sue Rudnick attended Limmud NY 2005 along with her husband and three other couples from Riverdale. All of them returned in 2006.



Before my first encounter with Limmud NY, I had no idea of the amount of planning and work that went into it. I was truly amazed at the number of volunteers who put everything together to produce such a magnificent, organized program. This year, I decided to participate in the planning and served on the programming team along with a diverse group of people who were enthusiastic and knowledgeable. All the volunteers and their contributions were welcome.

In addition, the group of us who came to Limmud NY last year shared our enthusiasm with others and doubled our numbers to eight couples. My daughter, her friend and friend's daughter also attended this year. Next year, we hope to increase our numbers even more!

For me, the opportunity to meet Jews of all ages and "stripes," and to participate in diverse programs of learning are the highlights of Limmud NY. Beyond the great program and organization, there is an atmosphere of warmth, acceptance, and caring. As a recent retiree, I am looking forward to participating in Limmud NY 2007



Pam Ehrenkrantz served on this year's programming team. She came to Limmud NY with her daughters, as well as her mother and her fiancé.

The Limmud experience has been both a great learning experience and a leadership development tool for my family. I have three teenage girls who thought that Limmud NY was going to be a bad version of a weekend at school. In fact, they went to last year's conference kicking and screaming. However, throughout the year that followed, I would hear them talk about Limmud NY with guests at our Shabbat table, and I realized how much they actually enjoyed it!

When it was time to get involved in planning the second Limmud NY conference, my daughters spent a good deal of time not only recruiting their own friends to come, but reminding me which families I should be inviting. They have learned several important lessons from our being involved in Limmud NY: to respect and be a part of the diverse spectrum of the Jewish community, to help create the warmth of such a gathering, and that the responsibility of making this happen rests with each of us.

My children go to Jewish day school and live an observant lifestyle. While there is a great deal of learning in their lives, Limmud NY stands out. It is the place where they get to see learning not only as an intellectual activity, but as a living experience of Jewish values.

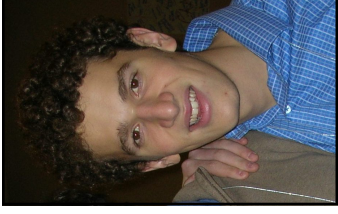
Marco Veissid, Limmud NY's treasurer, co-chaired the Catering and Facilities team at this year's conference.



My family had our first Limmud experience in Nottingham, England in 2002. That was where I (or should I say we) caught the Limmud "bug". Since then, Limmud has become an important part of our Jewish journey and education. My children (three daughters, ages 2, 4 and 6) go to a Jewish day school, and we plan on sending them to Jewish summer camp when they get older. I see their Limmud experience as the third leg of their positive Jewish educational stool.

This year my wife taught two sessions at Limmud NY: one on food, the other on challah baking. Her experience summarizes truly what Limmud is all about: a girl brought up as an Atheist in rural Ohio, moves to New York, converts to Judaism, marries, has three kids, and finds herself teaching a challah-baking class to about 35 Jews of all backgrounds, ranging in age from 5 to 87, including the son of Limmud NY's Orthodox kosher caterer. To me, that is the essence of Limmud.

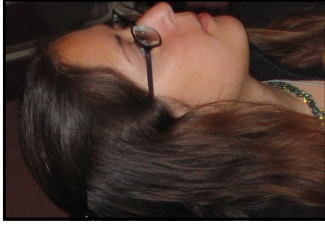
Jonah Fisher, a junior at the Abraham Joshua Heschel High School, helped recruit other high school students to attend Limmud NY.



Over the past few years, my Jewish identity has been impacted by many different sources: teachers, family members, friends, and books. However, at Limmud NY, I finally felt that I was able to play a role in the community and to influence and teach others.

Limmud NY fosters one of the most comfortable learning environments I have ever seen. It provided me with the opportunity to take classes with people of all ages and have my voice heard. For the first time ever, people older than me were asking my opinion in a religious debate and seeking my help in translating a text, or singing a certain song. In addition, people of different ages and beliefs shared so much of their knowledge with me, both inside and outside of the formal classroom setting.

Limmud NY is a place where I am comfortable approaching anyone and asking them anything. I had always felt as if my opinion was only valid inside the school or camp setting, and that the only place to learn and teach was inside the walls of those institutions. Limmud NY taught me otherwise. It was a turning point for me Jewishly because I realized that Judaism is not only something I am forced to learn and be tested on; but, instead, Judaism is a lifestyle.



Jill Goldstein first attended Limmud NY as a college freshman. She returned this year and co-chaired the college recruitment effort.

I had the opportunity to attend the first Limmud NY while a freshman at New York University. When a Jewish community is large and diverse, like the one at NYU, the different segments rarely come together. I experienced this first-hand through my involvement in NYU Hillel and at the Bronfman Center for Jewish Student Life.

The Bronfman Center staff members decided try and bridge this gap by gathering a group of nine NYU students (3 Reform, 3 Conservative, and 3 Orthodox) to attend Limmud NY. Why Limmud NY? It is a safe, warm, and pluralistic environment – though pluralism is rarely talked about directly, only experienced. The conference kicked off what has endearingly been referred to as our "semester of pluralism." Rather than focusing on our differences, we (the students) began to dwell on what we do share – a thirst for knowledge, love of partying, and pride in being Jewish.

Families



Limmud NY is an event that many people come to with their loved ones and to meet loved ones. A great place for families, Limmud NY offers a full camp program for kids over two, a high school program, and sessions that kids can participate in with their parents. At Limmud NY 2006, about 60 kids – ages 2 through 13 -- took part in Camp Limmud NY, and a number of 3-generation families participated in the weekend. In addition, Limmud NY is a great place to meet a significant other; over the past few years a number of people have met their spouses or partners through Limmud NY.

The following vignettes describe three distinct family experiences...