

# THE JEWISH JOURNAL

January 19, 2011

## Limmud becomes a Jewish networking nexus

BY SUE FISHKOFF, JTA

[http://www.jewishjournal.com/nation\\_world/article/limmud\\_becomes\\_a\\_jewish\\_networking\\_nexus\\_20110119/](http://www.jewishjournal.com/nation_world/article/limmud_becomes_a_jewish_networking_nexus_20110119/)

Journalist and author Lisa Alcalay Klug flew across the country this month to present at the annual New York version of Limmud, one of the Jewish learning gatherings that occur worldwide. She'll fly in the other direction next month to attend the fourth annual LimmudLA, Feb. 18-21 in Costa Mesa.

LimmudLA will be Klug's eighth Limmud gathering in 12 months. Like the hundreds of other Limmud presenters whose paths she crosses, she doesn't get paid for her time.

"I've met amazing people, developed new friendships and reinforced past relationships," said Klug, who splits her time among California, New York and Israel. "My world has grown exponentially because of it."

LimmudLA, which attracted 600 attendees last year, has around 75 people signed up to present sessions — usually around 10 in any given timeslot, from morning till morning, on topics ranging from medical ethics to the Jewish Jesus to the Israeli military to challah baking. In addition to sessions, the conference, which will be held in Costa Mesa, will feature dozens of films, theatrical presentations, comedy acts and performances by one of Israel's top alternative bands, Aharit Hayamim.

Limmud started out 30 years ago in Britain as a conference for professional Jewish educators and has burgeoned into the world's largest network of gatherings promoting informal Jewish education. It has become a creative and professional hub for presenters, some of whom have become regulars on the Limmud circuit.

More than 35,000 people took part in one of 55 Limmuds held last year from Siberia to South Africa, according to the organizers. As more branches opened in more countries — there are eight now in the United States alone — it has become a collaborative opportunity for musicians and visual artists, who meet at Limmud and begin working together.

Some performance acts formed for a Limmud event have continued afterward, including Los Desterrados, a British band that sings in Ladino, and the klezmer-house dance mash-up project Ghettoplotz. Limmud gives writers an opportunity to promote their books and educators a chance to try out new topics. It also puts Jewish organizations in front of new audiences and potential donors.

Much has been written about Limmud's impact on those who attend — the celebratory atmosphere, the array of learning opportunities and the radical egalitarianism of its all-volunteer structure that encourages participants to present and presenters to participate.

That was all intentional from the beginning, says Raymond Simonson, the project's Britain-based executive director. But what he and other organizers didn't foresee was how Limmud would become a networking tool for presenters.

Unlike most festivals and conferences, which tend to invite experts, anyone can apply to be a Limmud presenter — a big draw for inexperienced presenters and established professionals wanting to try out new material.



Actor Ron Rifkin on a panel with Hollywood manager Joan Hyler at LimmudLA in 2008. Photo by Mitchell Griver.

"We tell them, you don't get money, but there's an opportunity for people to have access to your merchandise," said Karen Radkowsky, founding president of Limmud NY, which in 2005 became the first Limmud in the United States. "It's an opportunity for them to be exposed to other thoughts and ideas. When they're not giving their own presentations, they go to others.

"It's very different from the GA, where you might fly in, speak, and then leave," she said, referring to the annual General Assembly of the Jewish Federations of North America.

The Limmud structure facilitates this cross-pollination, said Uri Berkowitz, co-chair of Limmud International, which oversees all branches outside the UK. Last month, some 2,500 people went to Coventry, England, for the 30th anniversary Limmud Conference.

"Each Limmud is its own community, with a fresh audience, but they're still part of the same family," Berkowitz said. "That's why presenters can go from one to another. Now that there are enough of them, they'll often know at least one or two other presenters, and can continue the conversations and collaborations."

That's what happened to Klug. In February 2009 she went to LimmudLA on her own dime to talk about her new book, "Cool Jew," and was spotted by friendly spies from Limmud UK. They invited her to present at Warwick in December 2009, which led to invitations to Limmuds in Atlanta, Berlin, Amsterdam and Budapest. Next month she'll be back at LimmudLA, then on to Winnipeg in March for that Canadian city's first Limmud.

Limmud usually covers travel and accommodations for invited presenters but does not pay them for their presentation. Around a dozen of the 75 presenters at LimmudLA are invited, while all the others pay for their own travel and the conference.

Organizations leverage the Limmud opportunities as well — Pardes and the Hartman Institute, both educational organizations in Jerusalem, have longtime partnership with Limmud, and both will be presenting at LimmudLA.

This year, Cedars-Sinai Medical Center is partnering with LimmudLA and will have some its staff as presenters, and Rochelle Shoretz, founder of Sharsheret, an organization for young Jewish women with breast cancer, is bringing her message to the West Coast audience.

"It's a great place to network for fundraising, a great place to network for relationships and a great place to leverage explorations into new communities," said Shep Rosenman, a founder of LimmudLA.

Schools as well have used LimmudLA to teach leadership to students; teens from Milken Community High School have been training throughout the year to lead sessions for adults.

LimmudLA will have a wide range of political expression this year, from the progressive activist Andrew Lachman to a representative from Ateret Cohanim, which buys land and settles Jews in East Jerusalem.

Religious expression will be varied as well, from Web sensation Rabbi Simon Jacobson, who runs the Meaningful Life Center, to Rabbi David Saperstein, head of Reform's Religions Action Center in Washington.

Yavilah McCoy, an African American Jewish woman, will talk about moving beyond the hyphen, and Amy-Jill Levine, an Orthodox scholar who is a professor of New Testament and Jewish Studies at Vanderbilt University, will offer another view of diversity.

Joel Chasnoff, a stand-up comedian and author of "The 188th Crybaby Brigade," the story of his experience in the Israeli military, has presented four times at Limmud UK. Last year he led Limmud sessions in New York, Philadelphia and Atlanta, and this February he's headed to Los Angeles.

"The first time I went, I had no idea what it was," he said. "I love it. It's like summer camp. In terms of the audience, I find them smart and interested in Jewish thought. They're in tune with what I talk about."

Arthur Kurzweil, a well-known genealogist, educator, magician and former book publisher, has presented at four Limmuds in New York and is headed to his first LimmudLA next month. Like Klug, he is an invited presenter. An experienced public speaker, Kurzweil gets more invitations than he can accept. Limmud is one to which he says yes.

"These are my people," Kurzweil said. "It's what I do. Limmud is one more great opportunity to teach and share my interests."

*Julie Gruenbaum Fax, Jewish Journal senior writer, contributed to this report.*

© Copyright 2011 Tribe Media Corp.

All rights reserved. JewishJournal.com is hosted by [Nexcess.net](http://Nexcess.net). Homepage design by [Koret](http://Koret)