



‘Tis the season

Since I discovered Limmud conference in 1996 the *Kratzmas* holidays have never been the same. Past is the season of tinsel-ducking and having to find something festive to do – I’m a Limmudnik, and I know both what I’ll be doing, and why. As a non-Jewish friend of mine says: ‘Limmud, isn’t that Yiddish for Christmas?’

First up, I should – in the spirit of *glasnost* and the register of MP’s interests – admit that I’m biased: I’m a longstanding Limmud volunteer. That doesn’t make what I’m about to say party political, it just gives you a context.

You can probably tell from my last few columns that I love being Jewish.

While I like to think that I’m not a hello-I’m-Jewish Jew – although I’m not sure all would agree – I love pretty much everything about being Jewish. I love people who double-park on Golders Green Road to get their *challahs* and can’t understand why not everyone agrees that it’s OK; I love discovering where Jewish customs meet modernity (my most recent discovery, the Bondage Haggadah, can you believe); I love knowing where I came from, having a sense of family, community, connection. Belonging. Yeah, and I like *holishkies* and pickled cucumbers and all manner of other things that I found out when I went to Warsaw were actually Polish.

I’ve been *involved* forever. I taught in *cheder*, I studied Jewish History, I went to Manchester University (when that indicated you must be Jewish), I was in a youth movement, I know lots of those complicated Israeli dances, I speak more Yiddish than most people in their 30s, I’m a member of three shuls (I like to think I’ve confused the census figures, suggesting a possible increase in the number of British Jews) and I used to be on the Board of Deputies. So by rights I should be marching as to war when it comes to Jewish activity.

But there was a time, about ten years ago, when I lost my way. I was practically in a 12-step programme: ‘Hello, my name is Sasha and I’m a wandering Jew.’

A lost generation statistic I wasn’t, but I couldn’t find a mode of being Jewish the way I wanted to be: not hung up about communal politics; not interested in the numbers game; not focussed on intra-denominational strife; not – and here’s the tautology – defined *against* what I wanted to be. I got tired of the ‘Hitler’s posthumous victory’ school of Jewish identity. I was shopping for something dynamic, intellectual, positive, even slightly funky, and definitely not a singles club.

I should put my hand up and say that I come from a long line of shul presidents, and I absolutely knew where my *duty* lay. It’s just that duty only connects with the administrative part of your being: I wanted something emotional, engaging . . . *real*.

And then I discovered Limmud. Not that it was hidden, just that the Limmud style is neither the hard-sell methodology nor the single agenda of the communal organizations of my youth.

A shul says: ‘Our door is unlocked, but only if you meet our membership criteria; we’ll guilt trip you into coming in and praying, possibly in a language you don’t understand.’

A Jewish charity committee says: ‘Your door is closed; but we’ll call you and mail you till you come in and give us some money. And you might meet someone.’

Limmud says: ‘Our door is open, we’ll take you one step further on your Jewish journey.’ Of course, the cynics among you may regard that as wishy-washy or jargonesque, but Limmud’s about you choosing the Jewish stuff you want to do.

I believe that Limmud has changed Anglo-Jewry – and, as its influence grows globally, world Jewry – for the better.

Do you remember when Jewish education was purely for kids and black-hatters?

In the way the guy who thought up Jewish fundraising bike rides reduced the chances of untold numbers of heart attacks, Limmud has changed the face of education and self-development. Look at the exponential growth in synagogue and adult education programmes. The explosion of interest in Jewish cultural activities. Look at how Jewish Book Week has grown. There’s an infectious vibrancy within the community, tempered with a tolerance and respect, that’s upbeat and affirmative and turns being Jewish from a substantial kosher albatross hanging around your neck to the best thing since sliced rye.

So – while it’s completely up to you – *nu*, what are you doing this *Kratzmas*? 

Find out more about Limmud from the website, www.limmud.org, or by calling 020 8438 6555.

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