

Exploring Jewish Space: A Critique of Limmud

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It is a deeply engrained tradition in Jewish learning, that in order to approach a phenomenon about which we want to learn, we have to ask the correct questions. Indeed this questioning attitude is perhaps the greatest and most enduring tradition in Jewish scholarship. Yet what *sort* of questions we should ask is less often considered. Usually we ask 'what' and 'why' questions; 'What does this passage mean?' Or, 'Why does Rashi say such and such?' Yet there are other ways of asking questions that open up radically new insights into the Jewish world, questions of time and space, questions of 'where' and 'when'. By asking these questions of the Limmud conference I want to show how situating our Jewish concerns in time and space can show us new directions in the development of Jewish life in Britain.

Limmud is a conference that takes place each year for five days over Christmas in the UK. It began in 1980 with 80 participants, primarily as a conference of educators. It has grown to the point where in 1997 there were 1200 participants. The content of the conference is 'educational' in its broadest sense. Between 8am and 1am there are five to ten sessions taking place - from Jewish music and comedy performances to Talmud *shiurim*.

Space and Time

As dimensions along which social life is organised, space and time are taken for granted in much lay and academic thinking. They are absolutely inescapable features of everyday practice and discourse. We use metaphors such as 'mapping' a particular intellectual 'terrain' or securing a firm 'grounding' in a particular subject, for example. We rarely stop to think what such spatial metaphors actually imply and why they are so omnipresent. As Edward Soja (1989), following

Michel Foucault argues, space is generally seen as something static and empty, whereas time is vigorous and productive. It is no coincidence that Marxism puts such store in history as a productive force. Nor is it a coincidence that geography has until recently been the enclave of a particularly rigid and conservative kind of positivism. Traditionally then, as Doreen Massey (1994) argues, in lay and academic discourses, space is assumed to be a rigid 2-D or 3-D slice moving through time. Space is a given, enduring, bounded entity - a source of stability in a changing world. Space is increasingly invoked in the Jewish community. For example, one of the aims of the United Jewish Israel Appeal is to build 'Jewish space' in Britain. What space means in the Jewish context is rarely examined, yet it often appears to connote ideas of stability, continuity, fixity and exclusion. By building Jewish space it is assumed that 'authentic Judaism' can be preserved and renewed, safely away from the pathological influences of modernity. Jewish continuity is thus maintained by 'coralling' Jewishness into a space protected from the vicissitudes of time.

Yet in recent years, critical geographers and social theorists have pioneered new and radical approaches to time and space; approaches that treat space as unstable and multifarious, and that open up new insights into the social world. Various theorists have uncovered the loaded and negative connotations of our everyday conceptions of space and sought to replace them with new, critical conceptions. So, rather than seeing space as a single, bounded slice moving through time, it is argued that we should treat space as always multiple and multidimensional. As Massey (1994) puts it: ' "Space" is created out of the vast intricacies, the incredible complexities, of the interlocking and the non-interlocking, and the networks of relations from every scale from local to global.' (p. 265.)

Far from being a safe, limited entity within which we can securely situate things, space is chaotic. Spaces exist on a range of scales, coexist within and without each other, never entirely excluding things 'outside' them. Space is also intimately related to time. It is dynamic and ever-changing. Nor is space the same as place. The

latter implying the boundedness and fixity that space lacks. Jewish space can therefore never entirely exclude other, non-Jewish spaces, nor can it exist unchanged. Whether we like it or not Jewish spaces exist constantly in tension - sometimes antagonistic but always creative - with modernity and the non-Jewish world.

Space is not neutral and empty. It is both constructive of social relations and a social construct. Henri Lefebvre (1991) refers to the triad of spatial practice, representations of space and representational spaces. For Lefebvre, society 'secretely' a particular form of space - in contemporary society for example, an objectifying, totalising 'abstract space'. Yet representations of space can and do challenge this. Since the spatial practice of society is related to the mode of production of a society, challenging representations of space becomes an important political act. So for example, the Paris events of 1968 can be seen as a way of creating a new kind of space. Similarly, we can see Jewish space as an outcome of forms of Jewish sociality. Yet attempts can and are made to construct and alter Jewish spaces - they are not simply a given.

But all this theorising still leaves the concept of space very opaque - just what *is* it? It seems that the concept is so ontologically and epistemologically complex that this question is hard to answer. Moreover, uses of the concept vary considerably between writers. Some treat it as a concept virtually analogous to identity (e.g. Keith and Pile 1993), others as a particular post-modern standpoint (Soja 1989) and still others as a more recognisable 'geographical' concept (Massey 1994). Space is thus perhaps a concept more fit for demonstrating in use than describing in the abstract.

Jewish Space

In this paper I am trying to show how a certain concept of space can open up new insights into Jewish life in Britain. Yet I am also analysing the sort of Jewish space that we might like to see in this country. Space is thus both an analytical tool and a source of critique. Like the authors mentioned above and like the Jewish

ethnographer Jonathan Boyarin (1996, pp.160-82), as well as critical theorists of race and ethnicity such as Paul Gilroy (1993), I believe that we need to challenge existing ways of thinking about such concepts as space, identity and ethnicity. Just as space is always multiple, shifting and contested, so (Jewish) identity can never be fixed or settled. The exercise of reflexivity allows us to negotiate and reflect on our identities and the spaces in which we move. I believe that this constantly critical approach to Jewish life in Britain has many advantages. If identity is always active and worked on, it is fitter to approach the challenges of diaphora life. Creative Jewish identities also stimulate creative, challenging forms of Jewish practice. In this paper I treat as ideal those Jewish spaces in Britain that allow us to reflect on and creatively challenge and manipulate our identities as Jews in a particular diasporic country. This approach offers much and is perhaps the only way forward for the renewal of Judaism (apart from the right-wing Orthodoxy).

Limmud in Space

Why should we apply the insights and contentions of critical social theory to Limmud? Indeed, why should we offer a critique of Limmud at all? The conference appears to be wildly successful. It attracts more and more people each year and has influenced learning schemes throughout the British-Jewish community - from the Modern Orthodox Lishma conference to the recent festival of Reform Judaism. Limmud also provides a way back into the community for those on its fringes. Limmud is lauded for providing a forum in which all sections of the community can congregate without rancour. The only opposition to it is from the most right-wing Orthodox and even here there is a considerable amount of ambivalence. So why meddle with this success?

The critique I intend to offer does not aim to subvert, ridicule or undermine Limmud - indeed it comes from a Limmud participant and fan. But I view critique as a necessary part of any system, discourse or organisation that intends to move forward. A

thoroughgoing reflexivity - the relentless questioning of the basis on which things stand - is a requirement of any Jewish organisation that intends to be part of the 'solution' to the Jewish problem in the twenty-first century. That reflexivity must proceed through asking the questions that are not asked in the everyday life of Limmud.

The questions that are asked of Limmud are of course very important: Who should be invited to speak? What should we programme? How can we better accommodate Orthodox participants? The question I want to begin with is 'Where is Limmud?' What kind of space (or spaces) is it? To answer 'Manchester UMIST' would clearly open up no interesting new insights! But therein lies part of the problem. The physical surroundings of Limmud are viewed as almost incidental to the conference itself. When they are mentioned it is generally in a purely negative or utilitarian way - they are too cold, too hot, too small, too big, too far, too near, etc.. We do not think about where we are in Limmud, either in terms of space or place, and, as we shall see, the organisation of the conference only deepens this lack of spatial reflexivity.

So where is Limmud? Limmud is a space that exists as a nodal point on an extremely diverse set of trajectories. Individuals coming from very diverse backgrounds on their journeys through life come to Limmud hoping to gain very different things. These differences are along a large number of axes - religious affiliation, age, gender, religious practice, nationality, level of Jewish knowledge, etc. Moreover, Limmud is not simply a node on a set of individual trajectories, but is also a major node in a wide-ranging set of networks of Jewish intercultural communication. Limmud attracts significant numbers of participants from across the Jewish world, principally the United Kingdom, Israel and the United States. It is an important site of cultural exchange between diasporic and Israeli communities. It helps to maintain a healthy and vigorous circulation of information through the Jewish world, whilst nevertheless existing primarily to serve the British-Jewish population.

The strong claims made for Limmud and the extraordinary

loyalty that the conference attracts is, I think, based on the fact that Limmud is a space in which diverse sections of the Jewish world can meet and, moreover, meet without antagonism. It might seem therefore that Limmud has found an answer to a difficult Jewish and indeed human problem in the late twentieth century - that of accommodating *difference*. In a world in which affiliations and beliefs are increasingly a matter of conscious choice, it is vital to find a way in which people of different affiliations can coexist within the same spaces. This is a particular problem in the UK Jewish community (and indeed throughout the Jewish world) where there are great conflicts between those of different affiliations. Limmud is loved as it is seen as a space where such problems are not found.

Yet things are not quite so simple. Limmud is a space that is founded on certain exclusions as well as differences. The majority of rabbis from Orthodox communities will not attend Limmud and neither will members of the *haredi* community. Here, ironically enough, it is the difference of Limmud that actually excludes people - parts of Orthodoxy view sharing the same space as a tacit act of legitimisation of Progressive Judaism. Limmud also excludes those for whom Jewish study - however broadly defined - holds no attraction. Limmud then, may be a site that accommodates difference, but it is a qualified difference. It may be hard to envisage a Limmud not based on exclusions, but it is important to recognise that they exist.

Limmud is also founded on a more complex form of spatial and temporal exclusion. Limmud takes place on a site somewhere in the United Kingdom over Christmas. That the conference takes place over Christmas is partly a pragmatic matter - it is a time when virtually all of Limmud's potential clientele are free to attend. But it is also a deliberate statement of intent. Christmas for many committed Jews is a difficult time in which a nationwide holiday is 'enforced' although participation in whatever form would be extremely problematic. Limmud is an ingenious, and popular, answer to the problem. Limmud space is thus paradoxical. It takes advantage of a non-Jewish/Christian temporality yet defines itself against it in an exclusive manner. The attitude to the physical siting

of Limmud is similarly paradoxical. It is viewed as an almost totally pragmatic matter. The organisers have to find a location able to fulfil a long and difficult set of requirements in regard to accommodation, siting of activities and catering. The choice of venues is thus severely circumscribed. Yet circumscribed or not, the consequences of the choice of venue are enormous and barely reflected on. The physical surroundings are viewed as something to be endured, as something totally incidental to the outcome of the conference. Yet the conference takes place in an environment designed for other, non-Jewish related, purposes. The posters and notices on the wall do not relate to Jewish matters. The design of the building is for entirely different and non-Jewish purposes. This environment exerts subtle, micro-spatial influences on the structure of the conference. For example, rooms designed for seminars are in Limmud transformed awkwardly into rooms designed for other, less formal activities. But the consequences of using a non-Jewish space for Jewish ends are left unexplored.

So, just as Limmud is founded on a paradoxical refusal of a non-Jewish temporality, so is it founded on a paradoxical refusal of a non-Jewish location. What is lost here is any attempt to deal with the status and identity of Jews in Britain - what it means to do Jewish things in a non-Jewish space. Limmud is a fictional, delusionary space that, for a limited period of time, maintains the illusion of an entirely Jewish world in the same way as it maintains the illusion of a Jewish world without certain controversial differences. The difference embodied within Limmud is thus of an extremely limited kind. It turns its back on any engagement with inconvenient 'other' spaces. It reveals a deep desire on the part of British Jewry to wish away difficult, problematic and intractable conflicts.

The social theorist and geographer Manuel Castells (1996) has diagnosed the main fault line of contemporary 'informational society' as between the 'space of places' and the 'space of flows'. The latter consists of individuals and groups whose wealth, culture and mobility is not confined to one limited, bounded place and who form globally extensive interculturalures. The space of places is parochial,

bounded and an increasingly disadvantageous place to be - it is cut off from networks of power and influence. The Jewish community and Limmud can be seen to be paradigmatic of the space of flows - cosmopolitan, globally extensive and not confined to place. Yet Limmud's very structure and lack of spatial reflexivity reveals a deep desire to be bounded within the space of places, to be insulated within a bounded and entirely Jewish place. It is this strange ambivalence that is visible throughout Limmud.

This impression of Limmud is compounded when we consider Limmud's relationship to time. From 7:00 am to 1:00am, every moment of is programmed with a wide choice of activities. These activities fit all tastes within a broadly 'educational' framework. They also fit all religious affiliations through a particularly ingenious arrangement. Limmud does not hold debates, or confrontations of any kind between people of different religious beliefs. This satisfies the worry expressed by some Orthodox leaders that to appear in debates with other affiliations is to grant them legitimacy. Moreover, the affiliations of each session leader are clearly marked in the programme book so that no one need be exposed to differing beliefs or be challenged in their own. Finally, the enormous number of concurrent sessions arranged along a number of 'tracks', allows participants to plan their own Limmud along the lines of their own affiliation.

The key word here is choice. Limmud offers an overwhelmingly diverse choice of activities for every taste and affiliation. This encourages a type of educational consumerism in Limmud participants. My experience of Limmud is one of constant activity and motion. Participants move from session to session clutching the ever-present programme guides. They feel free to enter sessions late or to leave sessions early if they are not to their liking or if they want to go elsewhere. The organisation of Limmud encourages, even publicises this kind of activity. The publicity form contains the phrase 'at Limmud we don't know the meaning of the word sleep'. Participants are encouraged to rush, to consume knowledge to such an extent that even socialising has to be programmed into 'schmooze

groups'. Conversations are half-formed, meals are snatched and sleep is inadequate. Limmud, in its publicity material and in the way participants speak, views itself as a continuous flood of activity. Contemplation, reflection and quiet do not form part of this discourse and the micro-spatial organisation of the conference discourages it. There are few 'quiet corners' and private accommodation is merely serviceable and hardly used. Everything is packed into crowded public spaces and seminar rooms.

Individual experience of the Limmud space is overwhelming. It is a flooding of sensations and experiences that keeps the participant in a permanent state of receptiveness. The philosopher Jean Baudrillard (1988) describes the contemporary experience of 'hyperreality' in similar terms. Faced with the power of communication networks which flood the individual with signifiers, experience becomes utterly depthless as signs lose all meaning. Whilst to apply this wholesale to Limmud would be an exaggeration, it is certainly a space that conspires against a certain kind of reflexivity and meaning. As we have seen, the whole structure of Limmud space avoids any kind of engagement with what it means to be a Diaspora Jew in a non-Jewish country. Moreover, the efforts to ensure different sections of the community can be accommodated prevents debates and hard discussions from taking place. Ensnared in the Limmud 'bubble' - or what Marc Augé (1995) calls a 'non-place' - intoxicatingly, blissfully unaware of the contradictions and hard choices of British-Jewish life, the participant is flooded by sensations masquerading as 'education'. There is indeed a kind of infantilism about this. The constant and gleeful references to lack of sleep in publicity material treat Limmud almost as though it were the fantasy of every Jewish youth - a residential camp where no youth leader will try and enforce bed-time.

But everyday life as a Jew in Britain is anything but infantile and involves continuous and painful negotiations of identity and practice. Unlike other ethnic minority communities in this country, we shy away from debates about identity and difference. The ironies, complexities and difficulties involved in carving out a British-Jewish identity are hidden, like a guilty secret amongst talk of 'authentic'

Jewish identities. Painful differences between different sections of the community are left unresolved amidst an almost manic concern for communal consensus. Yet any future for the British-Jewish community must involve some kind of hard negotiation of identity and practice, based on the exercise of reflexivity, a relentless challenging of the assumptions and categories on which everyday life is based.

Limmud poses few answers to these difficult challenges. In finding ways for those of different affiliation to stay under the same roof, it actually avoids the necessary hard and painful debates that the negotiation of difference requires. Limmud is an unreal/hyperreal 'bubble' that masquerades as a space of diversity but is in fact founded on a set of exclusions. Of course, participants come away with an overwhelmingly positive attitude and indeed, through Limmud many people have been drawn back into the community. My intention is not to give a purely negative critique of the conference but to point out where Limmud falls short of its own ideals. The basic problem is that Limmud is not a space in which certain crucial debates about the future of Jewish life in Britain can be fought out.

Building Jewish Spaces - 'Other Limmuds'

It seems to me that a central task for those concerned with the 'renewal' of contemporary British Jewry, is to envision new forms of Jewish space. As I have argued, space is both a product, and productive, of social relations. 'Spatial engineering' is therefore a way in which we can stimulate new forms of interaction and ways of being (Jewish). This spatial agenda should extend right through the community - from building Jewish space in the home to building Jewish space in Britain and the world. In this paper, however, we are concerned with Jewish events such as Limmud. The importance of such events, such as summer camps, Israel visits and conferences, is difficult to summarise. They are often seen as important tools in the renewal agenda. The feedback on them is overwhelmingly positive and they provide an intensity of Jewish activity generally impossible

to achieve in everyday life. This has led to great claims being made about such events as vehicles to promote greater Jewish identification. Such claims are difficult to assess sociologically - whether quantitatively, qualitatively or theoretically. What this paper has attempted to show is that an ethnographic 'reading' of an event like Limmud can, at least, show the forms of sociality that a particular space does not encourage, even if it cannot unambiguously assess its long term 'impact'.

It would also be useful to engage in the opposite exercise - to imagine Jewish spaces that do encourage certain forms of Jewish interaction and being. In this final section I will briefly assess some of the models on which we might draw in imagining these 'other Limmuds'.

1) The Retreat

Retreats have traditionally not been popular in British Jewry. They are Christian innovations based on a very different concept of spirituality. Serving God through quiet, asceticism and meditation (as well as study) has monastic connotations perhaps distasteful to many Jews. But in certain respects, Limmud is a radical, Jewish reworking of the retreat - based on more earthy things such as noise, interaction and laughter. This is of course an extremely creative way of building Jewish space. Yet there are still things we might want to recover from the retreat model and bring back in to Limmud. As we saw in my critique, Limmud suffers from a certain depthlessness and lack of space for contemplation. When I attended a meditation session in Limmud 1996, the room was so packed that people were standing around the outside. Even when the session began there were still isolated whispers and occasional interruptions. Limmud space conspires against contemplation and we might argue that to programme such sessions at all is rather self-defeating.

Limmud would benefit enormously, then, from working to find spaces where contemplation can take place. Perhaps this could be through setting aside 'quiet rooms', or perhaps through leaving a

certain period of time during the day as unprogrammed. Such mechanisms would greatly enhance the educational value of the entire event through allowing time to assimilate and reflect on what is learnt.

Retreats also take place in rural areas. Here again they betray their Christian roots in idealising nature and distrusting the 'wicked' city. However, as we have seen, part of the problem with Limmud is that it is a 'bubble'; its participants do not reflect on its position within the United Kingdom. Siting Limmud in a rural space would encourage a material engagement with place through the pleasures of being in an attractive area and through activities such as walking. It is of course difficult to imagine a rural location that could cater for 1200 people. Moreover, one might argue that with such a large number, no area could fulfil the retreat model of Jewish space. Thinking about the retreat therefore forces us to question the size of Limmud. It may be that considered, quiet reflection and an engagement with place and position within the United Kingdom, may be impossible within a space the size of Limmud.

2) The Festival

There are other spatial models however that positively require large numbers of people. One of these is the festival. In particular, I am thinking of the Edinburgh Festival and others of that type. The Edinburgh Festival and Fringe consist of hundreds of different performances by performers from all over the country and the world performing at hundreds of different venues throughout the city. In many respects the experience of visiting the Festival contains some of the same pitfalls as Limmud does. Visitors rush to see as many performances as possible with little time for consideration or reflection - as with Limmud there is an overwhelming choice with little actual debate or engagement.

Yet there is a crucial difference in that whilst Limmud takes place at a single, self-contained venue, the Edinburgh Festival takes place at venues throughout the city. The visitor, staying perhaps miles from

the city itself, has to move throughout the city to view performances. Performance spaces may be other spaces radically altered for the Festival - restaurants, schools etc. The Festival thus transforms Edinburgh in certain respects - often to the anger of local residents. But nevertheless, the experience of visiting the festival involves a real and unavoidable engagement with the city. The Festival takes on its unique character through the unique convergence of a place and a set of activities. This also happens at Limmud. But whereas Limmud has switched venues a number of times with little comment from participants, it is absolutely unthinkable that the Edinburgh Festival could take place anywhere else. It thus takes on a materiality that Limmud lacks.

Jewish space needs to engage in some way with its positioning within this country. One way to facilitate this would be to situate Limmud at a number of venues within a city. In travelling from venue to venue, participants engage with the spatial and temporal life of the country. One thing I have always enjoyed about Christmas Day is the sense of peace and emptiness on the streets. Experiencing this whilst driving or walking to a Jewish conference stimulates certain critical reflections about the ironies of being a Jew in Britain. Using the festival model Limmud could transform an area of a city into a publicly Jewish space - even more visible because of Christmas. To be visible as different, but yet to draw on the materiality of place in a British city is a radical and contradictory act - similar perhaps to parading a new Sefer Torah through the streets. At the moment, Limmud hides our difference behind closed doors and refuses to engage with our Britishness. To transform Limmud into a publicly visible festival forces us to consider difficult but necessary and creative questions.

3) The Carnival

I want finally to turn to the carnival as a model for building Jewish space. This has become a popular motif in recent critical theorising due to the influence of the Russian literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin

(1984). Bakhtin shows how the medieval carnival, as described by Rabelais, is a space of symbolic transgression - a world with its symbolic hierarchy turned upside down. Imbeciles are crowned kings, women dress as men, and nobles dress as commoners. This is not merely playing but a form of "deep play" involving riotous behaviour that is barely held in check.

The carnival is in some respects the most Jewish and Limmud-like of all these 'other Limmuds'. The festival of Purim institutionalises many forms of carnivalesque behaviour. Moreover, Limmud is like the carnival in being a space self-consciously divided from daily life. One might also argue that the exaggerated respect paid to the view of others at Limmud is 'the world turned upside down' in an increasingly divided Jewish community!

Yet Limmud is not carnivalesque in other respects. As we have seen, it does not encourage conflict or transgression - in fact it continually and desperately seeks a kind of liberal consensus. Neither is it a space characterised by excess. There is a kind of asceticism to Limmud. The physical is downgraded in importance. With the possible exception of Shabbat, food is not accorded great importance and there is very little drinking. The permitted bodily pleasures are excesses of learning, lack of sleep and wholesome singing and dancing sessions.

I would not argue that Limmud should be taken over by riotous, yobbish behaviour in the carnivalesque tradition. However, just as the conference is characterised by a lack of reflexivity and attention to its positioning within the United Kingdom, so there is an ignoring of physicality and the body. Learning from the carnival means learning from the body and from the literally painful conflicts that characterise our lives as Jews in this country. The carnival provides a real engagement with everyday life - Limmud tries to escape it.

Conclusion - Building Jewish Space

What I hope to have shown in this paper are the potentials of thinking spatially about Jewish life in Britain. By asking different

questions of our institutions and practices we can find new solutions to old problems. The concept of space is flexible enough to be applied to a vast range of questions. By seeing the problem of Jewish renewal as one of building new Jewish spaces, we can begin to think about how and where we might be Jewish in the next millennium. Spatially evaluating, and perhaps re-engineering, spaces such as Limmud is a starting point in this process.

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