

# Limoud France

By: Ruth Ouazana, President, Limoud France

I will begin my presentation with a short story...

In France, 28 years ago, as I was playing in the playground with a little girl, the same age as me, who looked almost same too, I told her proudly that my parents came from the same place as hers, and that we were Jewish. Then she went to talk with her mother, and came back to excuse herself, because she could not play with me any more: she did not want to catch the “Jewish disease”. Of course I agreed with her, and ran back to my parents, asking them what it was, this disease that I had caught...

This disease, I thought about it, and realised that a lot of people hide behind their “racial or religious prejudice” to build walls around themselves. Muslims, like this little girl, Christians, Jews... It’s not a matter of religion but of education.  
So what should we do to improve the situation?

As a Jewish scout in France, I organised training camps, and represented my movement on all interfaith activities... and the more I understood the situation, the more I understood that Jews needed, in some way, to know about themselves better, and not to be afraid of others.

Around that time I also visited the Diaspora museum in Tel-Aviv. And to my amazement, what did I see? That the next big dilemma, in the twenty-first century, was the example of the Jews of France: either they stay in France and will completely assimilate themselves, losing everything Jewish within two generations, or they come to Israel, welcome home, and they will live a happy life ever after... I was surprised that only two ways were proposed...

And if...

And if...

And what if there were a few other ways, if we could dream of a means to strengthen the Jewish identity of the French Jewry, without forcing them to anything?

Then I discovered something amazing, in all its aspects: Limmud.

Why amazing?

- because it was a place open to every lover of Jewish learning;
- because it was a place of happiness, where people gathered to share moments of fun, of dance, of laughter;
- because it created links between generations;
- because it created links between Jews from all horizons;
- because it gave each Jew the choice of learning whatever they wanted;
- and more than that, it gave participants the opportunity to share their knowledge
- because it was a place like no other.

Coming back to France, I then realised that Limmud was exactly what we needed. For instance,

- All the interesting conferences which were held in Paris were mainly attended by people over 50, deploring that young were not here; we needed more inter-generation activities.
- There were activities organised for young adults; but many did not like to go to them, because each one promised either only parties, or only Talmud lessons, or only... we needed a place with a range of activities held in the same place so that people could come to this single place to meet.
- There are fights between different religious backgrounds; we needed a place where all of them could be accepted and create bridges between them.

- There is not much activity organised for Jews who have married non-Jews; we needed a place where everybody could be and felt accepted in a Jewish context, a place where anybody can come to learn about Judaism, Jewish culture, Jewish communities...

So we created Limmud in France, and our first event was held in Versailles, the 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> of May 2006. More than 500 participants attended this first Limoud, and the conference had a lot of success. Apart from the success of the Conference in itself, a few details were significant:

- people were smiling
- people did come back the following day and brought with them friends and family
- they gave ideas for new sessions, logistics, communication, willing to implicate themselves
- they asked for a longer Limoud
- a lot of them proposed to become Limoud volunteers (50).

So this is a story about discoveries, about acceptance, about creating a place together about Jewish learning.

## **1. About discoveries**

Everything in Limmud is about discovery. The theme of the sessions, in meeting new people, and maybe even more important, discovery about oneself.

Having in the same place, like a seminar or a festival, so many different activities in parallel is a great strength: People have the choice to go where they feel like, and to discover about things they were not even aware about.

I will always remember the surprise of my grandmother, 87 years old, coming to me with so much enthusiasm and saying: “Ruthy, how come you found this amazing pianist? I did not want to go to his session, and my friends told me to go, so I followed them... but I didn’t know, I didn’t know I loved jazz, I never heard any until now!”

## **2. About acceptance:**

Let’s say we welcome four types of people, the wise, the wicked, the simple, and the one who does not even know how to ask the question...

### **The wise**

Limoud welcomes people who are rabbis, erudite, scholars, already great speakers, recognised in their fields. These people, like any other, are welcome as both participants and speakers, as long as they want to give a session.

### **The wicked**

I was surprised a few years ago at Limmud UK to hear a man, 60 years old, a cute white beard on the edge of his chin, telling me “I never go to the synagogue, I don’t believe in God. But when I read in the newspaper (was it the Times?) that there was a big gathering of people about Jewish learning, and that the ultra-orthodox were against it - imagine, men and women could study or dance together! - then I decided it could be a place for me! And look at that... and he was showing the effervescence and enthusiasm of people talking with each other, smiling, hurrying from session to session, this is my link to Judaism, to Jewish life. I do not do Yom Kippur... my personal Yom Kippur, is Limmud!

### **The simple**

This is the ones who are more or less practising, who do not reject Judaism, even though they're not always very good in all the aspects... people who would like to gather to learn and to meet, simply...

Actually, as I was preparing my speech, I received a mail that I want to share with you:

“I would like to receive information from you, overall about opportunities to go and learn.

I was born in October 1945, in Basel, from Jewish parents, my mother from Paris and my father from Vienna. I have almost no family left and I lose more and more contact with this world which represented to me the vulnerable roots of my Jewish origin. I am psychiatrist.”

### **And for those one who do not even know how to ask the question**

I met so many people who won't ask, either because they haven't even thought of asking, or because they wouldn't dare to...

The ones who don't even think of it, they are mainly the Jews who are so separate from Jewish life or religion that they don't think there is a place to welcome them, where they could learn without any authority imposing them what they have to... they are the ones who just don't care, who will be brought to Limmud by one of their friends, and who just follow, saying “yes, do you really think I should come? I just have no interest in Jewish stuff...”

For those ones, 2 arguments : it's something which just takes place from time to time, it isn't like a regular session that they have to follow every week ... so they will feel more free to go to a single specific event.

And second argument, there are so many sessions at the same time; they really can always find something of interest for them...

For those ones who will not dare to ask, I think mainly of the non-Jews, either with a Jewish partner or not; a lot of them have a lot of questions, but feel the Jewish Community is closed, they might have barely even met a Jew, or they might live with one... do they have a place inside the Jewish Community?

I will take a very personal example: one of my cousins is not very concerned with Jewish things, though he will say proudly he is a Jew. He got married with a nice and lovely girl, who's not Jewish. I told them about Limoud, he did not really sound interested, she said it would be very interesting. For their birthday, we offered them two places to come to Limoud. They managed to come. Most of the time my cousin just acted like he was not interested by the whole event. She spent the whole time just running as much as possible from one session to the other, to learn as much as she could... she was eight months and a half pregnant.

I have the hope that their children will find a place in the Limoud community and that they might raise the questions to themselves when they are at an age to...

### **3. About creating a place together about Jewish learning.**

Limmud gives everyone (or “each person”) the opportunity to participate fully in the creation of a “Community of learning”.

People who come to Limmud really feel they belong to the Limmud Community. Sharing the same vision of an open and alive Judaism; no matter where they come from, no matter what they do at home, being at Limoud are just “days of rays of sunlight” as a French participant said at Limoud.

How is this possible? I believe, because Limmud gives to each one the possibility of finding a place in his Jewish journey, either creating the event and/or participating to it...

Creating the event:

It's about being active, learning to give time, and money, and skills, and knowledge, just to create an event which is like those who run it. And every single person can be part of it.

It's active citizenlimoudnikship.

Of course, during all the year, you can meet the organisation team.

In France, we are a team of 50 people, all volunteering, to create the event. We are organised into four main teams, the programming, the logistics, the communication and the global.

50 people who give between 2 and 40 hours per week in order to make the Limoud dream come true.

Then during the event, there are the participants!

Participants who volunteer to help in the running of the conference, participants who share their knowledge, the speakers, and those who "just attend", and contribute, by their smiles, their kindness, their pleasure to learn, to making a beautiful Limmud.

I must say that, to my great pleasure, all the attendants at Limoud France said the result was very good and professional, they just could not believe it was done only by volunteers. Then you know what? I thanked them and invited them to join the team...

And now, with the creation of Limmud International, Limmud is developing even better... to the great pleasure of future participants!

I received a mail last week saying the following "One of my friends participated to Limmud 2007 in Munich, and while I was surfing on their website, I discovered there is a FRENCH Limoud!

Please, send me your newsletter!

So if you wish, also, to join our team, I am sure that each Limmud around the world will be more than happy to include you...

And if you wish to keep in touch? Please, just ask, we'll be more than happy to send you our newsletter...