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Limmud comes to Jerusalem

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The Limmud International Jewish learning organization held one of its renowned conventions over two days on Thursday and Friday in Jerusalem.

The Limmud International Jewish learning organization held one of its renowned conventions over two days on Thursday and Friday in Jerusalem, and included a plethora of panel discussions, presentations and workshops from a diverse list of speakers on subjects ranging from Jewish food and culture to female Jewish spiritual leadership, and peace building, to rabbinical power.

Among just some of the speakers and presenters were MK Aliza Lavie of the Yesh Atid party; Mutassim Ali, a refugee from Darfur leading the struggle for political asylum; Iris Yaniv, a secular humanist rabbi; Ephraim Tziyon-Lavai, a keis (Ethiopian Jewish religious leader); comedian Yisrael Campbell; and The Jerusalem Post's Lahav Harkov who presented a model Knesset workshop.

Rabba Dr Melanie Landau, a graduate of Yeshivat Maharat, the first institution to ordain women as Orthodox clergy, was one of the participants in a panel discussion regarding the role of female Jewish religious and spiritual leaders.

With regards to the different forms of ordination that is now available from several modern Orthodox institutions, Landau noted that many female leaders have been functioning as spiritual leaders in communities for some time.

The recent development enabling women to gain formal titles as religious and communal leaders constitutes a critical step in advancing this process, and promoting women as teachers of Torah who can provide counsel and instruction on religious issues and facilitate in life cycle events.

Landau, who runs the leadership program at the Encounter educational organization, also argued that the development is an important step forward for Jewish communities.

"Half the population is female, but Jewish communities have traditionally been cut off from the pool of potential leadership of that population," she said.

"On a second level, because of the different experiences of women, we can also offer a range of different voices and perspectives about the way we think about God, Torah, Halacha, community

then has been available until now.”

In another of most pertinent sessions was a multi-faith panel discussion between several religious leaders and inter-faith activists addressing the concept that religion could be a force for peace within the Israel-Palestinian conflict.

Daniel, a Palestinian Christian minister who asked his family name not be disclosed, said that it was critical to create platforms and opportunities for Israelis and Palestinians to meet, including religious leaders, but also insisted that the practical groundwork for peace be laid first.

“I believe both people can live in this land but justice must precede peace,” said Daniel.

He criticised the expropriation of land in Beit Jala and other areas, and said injustices could not be done in the name of God, but added that radicals on both sides of the conflict needed to be excluded.

“We want to send a message to the whole world that if we can remove the fanatics from both sides and if we increase these stages for creating links between Christians, Muslims and Jews then we can progress towards peace.”

Eliyahu McLean, the founder of the Jerusalem Peacemakers organization and Co-Director of The Abrahamic Reunion group of religious leaders, also participated in the panel discussion and cited some of the work of his organizations as evidence that religion can unite and not divide.

In particular he spoke of the monthly meetings that have sprung up as a result of a multi-faith fast breaking event that took place last summer during Operation Protective Edge in Gaza.

At that time during the war, The Abrahamic Reunion took two buses of Israelis and Palestinians, including rabbis and imams to Nazareth to break the Jewish fast of 17 Tamuz and end the day of fasting of Ramadan.

“We need to respond to religiously motivated violence and show that people inspired by tradition and commitment to faith, religion and spiritual practice should make us come together in mutual understanding and not create conflict,” said McLean.

He argued that unifying, peaceful and inclusive understandings of religious texts were more legitimate than divisive, antagonistic interpretations and noted that his organizations were seeking to work with the more divisive religious leaders to try to convince them of this approach.

Limmud, the global grassroots Jewish learning movement which was founded in the United Kingdom in 1980, is today in 80 communities and 40 countries. Limmud JLM is part of the Israeli Limmud community, with events in Arava, Beersheva, FSU Israel, Galil, Haifa, Modiin, Tel Aviv and Yerucham.

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