

# All in the spirit of learning

More than 1100 people attended the 200 sessions on offer at Limmud-Oz over the long weekend. The festival of Jewish learning covered topics ranging from human sexuality to how we talk about Israel and even “kosher gospel” singing. **Joshua Levi, Gareth Narunsky and Alexandra Roach** attended a number of sessions for *The AJN*.

## Kosher gospel workshop hits the right notes

**H**ANDS were clapping and feet were tapping as the “Prince of Kosher Gospel”, Joshua Nelson, broke down musical boundaries in an entertaining “Kosher Gospel Workshop”.

Fresh from performing for the Limmud-Oz crowd on Saturday night, the infectiously enthusiastic Nelson mixed history with personal anecdotes and plenty of soulful renditions of Hebrew classics, as he explained the similarities between the African-American and Jewish experience and the evolution of gospel music in American synagogues.

He explained that African-American history was a common denominator no matter what faiths they practised today.

“If you grew up in a society where blacks have been persecuted ... being Jewish does not change your history. And with the Jewish thing it actually reinforces it, because Jews have always been persecuted,” he said.

He gave a fascinating insight into gospel music’s origins as a means of

coded communication between slaves in the American South to plan escapes without their masters realising their plan.

Nelson also gave a demonstration of how early cantors sang and linked it to the soul style sung by the slaves.

“There are no lines, there are no notes to follow, you have no idea what’s coming next. It’s just all inside, that’s the way the chazans used to sing back in the old days,” he said. “The elements of soul are the bending of the notes. So you can see what the connection is.”

He said what constitutes Jewish music is a matter of opinion.

“What is Jewish music? Jewish music is whatever the Jew is singing,” he quipped, before adding more seriously, “What is Jewish to some people, what is Jewish to another, it’s all relative, there are no absolutes. And what’s absolute in Judaism is the text.”

Nelson also paid tribute to America’s “Queen of Gospel”, Mahalia Jackson,



Joshua Nelson, left, and Chad Thorne had people on their feet singing and dancing during Limmud-Oz. Photo: Giselle Haber

calling her 1961 concert in Israel the “first kosher gospel concert”.

“I went to the Great Synagogue [when] I was 17, it was my first year in college and I heard this cantor sing [Adon Olam] ... and I said, ‘Wait a minute, that sounds like a Mahalia Jackson album,’” he said.

Throughout his presentation, Nelson, backed by Chad Thorne, wowed the crowd with his impromptu bursts of song. Highlights included a haunting *Ani Ma’amin* as it may have been sung by a Jew during the Holocaust, a soulful rendition of *Let My People Go*, complete

with audience participation, *Lecha Dodi* and *Adon Olam*.

At times he even kept the piano riff going between verses as he explained the theory behind the notes he was singing.

He concluded his session by teaching the crowd a “kosher gospel” song.

## Education, it’s a numbers game

**A**TENDING a Jewish school does not necessarily guarantee your child will have a strong Jewish identity in adulthood, according to Professor Andrew Markus (pictured) from the Australian Centre for Jewish Civilisation (ACJC) at Monash University.



In the session “Give Me the Numbers or Tell Me the Story: Interrogating the Impact of Jewish Day Schools”, Markus reflected on the findings and implications of the Gen08 Survey in regard to education. He said that of all the variables tested, upbringing appeared to be the most important predictor of Jewish identity. “By contrast, years in Jewish day school was, for the most part, relatively unimportant,” he said.

Explaining some of the survey’s qualitative data, he spoke of the metaphors “Jewed out” and “life in a bubble” being the main negative points raised in focus groups.

These were further explained in a pre-recorded video from Israel featuring ACJC researcher Melanie Landau. “Focus group participants ... repeatedly discussed their sense of separation from mainstream Australian society and their search for a place of belonging that straddles both their Jewishness and their Australian-ness,” she said.

“They also expressed coming to the limit of what they can tolerate in terms of Jewish input. They expressed it in terms of being overloaded with Judaism to the exclusion of other things. This raises the broad question about how Jewish culture, history and textual tradition can be taught in ways to engage students’ creativity and imagination in an open and inspiring way.”

The high quality of secular academic studies in Jewish day schools was also discussed, with JCA president Peter Philippsohn giving an impromptu analysis. He noted that many parents send their children to a public primary school and then, for academic reasons, to a Jewish high school, lamenting that it should be the reverse – a Jewish primary school would play a more vital role in shaping Jewish identity.

Philippsohn also commented that the declining rate of Jewish children being enrolled in kindergarten was a cause for concern.

## The community must work together on child abuse

**T**HE president of Adults Surviving Child Abuse, Cathy Kezelman, and founder of Tzedek – which is the only Jewish organisation in Australia established to deal with issues relating to child abuse – Manny Waks (pictured), discussed how the community can work together better to address child abuse.



Waks said there has been a great deal of progress in the last two years.

“Initially, there was a great deal of reluctance to address this issue in any meaningful way, but more recently we have seen signs from some of the peak bodies that they are willing to address this issue,” Waks said.

He added that there are some bodies that still have a long way to go, but he praised the Jewish Community Council of Victoria for setting up a child protection reference group.

“I welcome that initiative and we work closely with the group because it is a big step for the community.”

According to statistics gathered in the wider community, one in three girls and one in six boys under the age of 16 are sexually abused. Although statistics have never been gathered for the Jewish community, there is no reason to believe that the Jewish community is immune to the abuse.

Waks said that education for parents is key to preventing child sexual abuse and then dealing with it if it occurs.

“Parents need to be well equipped with the tools to understand how to react and what to do. If abuse has occurred, then they need to address it and respond in an appropriate manner and that is only possible through education.”

Kezelman spoke to the audience about the federal government’s Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse.

“It is an opportunity for survivors to come forward, many after decades of silence,” Kezelman said. “They can tell their stories and give testimony, which will generate police investigations and perhaps lead to convictions.”

## ‘Multiple citizenships don’t affect loyalty’

**A**PERSON who holds more than one citizenship need not have conflicts of loyalty, Professor Kim Rubinstein (pictured) from the Australian National University (ANU) believes.



Rubinstein, who is the director of the Centre for International and Public Law (CIPL) in the ANU College of Law, delivered the session “Dual Citizenship in a Globalising World” in conversation with Bettina Cass, emeritus professor of social policy in the Social Policy Research Centre, University of NSW.

Among the topics discussed were the evolution of Australia’s citizenship act, the influence of globalisation on people seeking multiple citizenships, and the consular responsibilities of nations to help citizens in need.

In framing her view on loyalty, Rubinstein likened multiple citizenships to having more than one child.

“You can have more than one child without that undermining your love and affection for any of those children,” she said.

“I believe citizenship is more like parenthood in the sense that you can have a connection to more than one place, just as a human being has connections to different aspects of their identity.”

In light of the 2010 “passports affair” and more recently the Ben Zygier case, Rubinstein also addressed the issue of Australian citizens conducting espionage for other nations, explaining that it is technically not prohibited.

“There is no legislation which precludes an Australian citizen from using their passport when they’re outside of the country and they’re travelling,” she said.

“The only way you can lose your citizenship ... is if you’re fighting in a country which is at war with Australia.”

She also said that in instances such as the Zygier case, Australia was not obliged to provide assistance.

“If Ben himself had sought protection, then the Australian government would have had to make a decision, and they could have exerted their right to diplomatic protection. But they didn’t have a duty to do it,” she said.

## Learning about sex

**M**ARJORIE Solomon (pictured) began her session, “Between the Sheets: The Current Revolution in Jewish Erotic and Sexual Literature”, by turning off the lights.



Although the intention was to help the audience see the projector, it created the perfect atmosphere for one of the most confronting topics in the Jewish religion.

“People who are negiah [restriction of touching people of the opposite sex until marriage] often grow up in a sheltered environment and have no idea about the nuts and bolts of physical intimacy,” Solomon said.

She said that as a result, several books and websites have been written, and established, to directly engage with religious people and help inform them about their own sexuality.

One such website is Jewrotica.org.

“That site is bringing the issues together in a mainstream way that is accessible for people with sensibilities by using a series of ratings on the site and there aren’t pictures that are too suggestive,” Solomon said.

*Jewrotica* contains essays, education workshops and Torah commentary to provide a platform for Jewish sexual expression and to educate people about sexual health. The site includes titles such as, *The Rabbi’s Wife*, *Sex with the Rabbi*, which is a Q&A session with a rabbi, and *Jewish Porn and Beyond*.

Solomon said that most people probably don’t realise that in historical texts, Judaism discusses sexuality quite openly.

“Judaism and Jewish literature have been comfortable talking about sex for a very long time, but various cultural settings impacted on how Jewish communities view their own sexuality.”

“This all started to change again, however, when Rabbi Shmuley Boteach released *Kosher Sex* in 1999, then we had *50 Shades of Grey*, and more recently a great book, *The Newlywed Guide to Physical Intimacy* was released by Jennie Rosenfeld and David Ribner.”

The most recent book teaches people about the nuts and bolts of sexuality within a halachic framework, but doesn’t show any explicit images.