



Why Food Doesn't Matter at your Next Jewish Event

By Anna Stern

For the past 2.5 years, I have worked in the Sydney Jewish community curating and delivering cultural, professional and social experiences. In those 2.5 years, food has often been a major conversation point. Which local caterer shall we engage for our next event? Which one delivers on time? Will there be enough food? Do people actually turn up for the food?

When asking for feedback post-event, we've also noticed a tendency amongst participants to comment on the food served when they have no remarkable feedback about other aspects of our events (please note that we do not run food events). The feedback is generally about the quantities, the queuing process to access the food, or to tell us that the catering at our previous event was better or worse. My rule of thumb is that if no other feedback is provided – about the content, speakers, venue – then we should assume that we are doing well. (We have other measures for assessing the success of our programs outlined in [this article](#)).

My foray into professional Jewish life began with a conversation about food. On a slow day at work, I RSVP'd to a Limmud volunteer meet up taking place that evening. The staff member organising the event apologised that there may not be enough food as I was RSVP'ing so late, but that I was very welcome to attend. This amusing comment stuck with me. I have since gone on to co-chair a Limmud event as a volunteer and run Limmud professionally at [Shalom](#), all despite the lack of food (disclaimer, we were well-fed). But what hooked me into Limmud – and ultimately, a career in the Jewish community – was in fact the welcome I received from the key volunteer leader and several staff members. I was hooked by the relationships, and this is what kept me coming back.

At Shalom – which some describe as a JCC without walls – our mission is to increase the vibrancy and engagement of the Sydney Jewish community (numbering between 35,000 and 45,000) by fostering Jewish life and learning in an inclusive way. We engage people of different ages and backgrounds, we build connection and community. We are highly regarded for the quality of the events we produce and experiences we offer. How we measure success is an on-going and passionate discussion for our team and board. How we currently measure impact and success are explored in this [article](#).

By all these measures, we are successful at what we do. Anecdotally, on numerous occasions I have had young adults telling me “this is the best Jewish community event I've ever been to”

or “this doesn't feel like a Jewish event!,” So, what does this really mean? What is Shalom's *je ne sais quoi* that distinguishes our events from others? I have distilled it into three parts:

1. **Hakhnasat orchim – The Welcome**

We start playing host the minute we tell you about our event in an email or on social media. Our language is deliberate and directed at the intended audience; not only do we want you to know what the event is about, and that we will make you feel welcome. The same tone is used in all communications in the lead-up to the event and prepares you for the welcome you can expect when you meet us face-to-face.

Once you turn up at our event, you are treated like guests in our home. We set the tone by our first interactions with you. If you have attended before, we'll know you and greet you by your first name. If you're new, we'll introduce ourselves and tell you something about ourselves. Everyone is greeted with a smile, a welcome, enquiring about your day/work/how you go to the event/whether it was hard to find and if we know you well, something more specific. We point out where the food and drinks are, what the order of the evening will be and where the facilities are located. Depending on how many staff, ambassadors and volunteers are working, we may personally walk you into the venue and stay to chat. Later, we'll check in on you, or introduce you to people – someone we think you'll have something in common with, or perhaps someone who works in a similar industry. During our events we sit among you, staff and volunteers divided up to sit at different parts of the room or at different small-group tables.

Before you leave, we'll invite you to stay back to chat some more, maybe casually ask how you enjoyed the event or talk about something else entirely. We also share information about ourselves – this is not just interrogation but an opportunity to form a relationship. We are deliberate with where we stand – we always have someone standing at the exit to give you a proper send-off, make you're ok to get home, and to know that you are welcome back to our tent.

For over ten years, Dr. Ron Wolfson has been telling us that it's about the relationships – that this is what will keep people coming back. We've seen this in practice.

2. **Kavana – The Why**

We refer to the following models when designing and delivering our Jewish experiences: Design Thinking principles (are our participants' experiences, needs and behaviours at the heart?); the ABC model of attitudes (what are the affective, behavioural and cognitive components?); and the Jewishness (apart from the other participants and staff, what makes this meaningfully Jewish?). We are also aware that our biggest competitor is time. With careers, families, health and wellbeing, study, 'me' time, communal responsibilities and dozens of events taking place in the Jewish community and broader Sydney community on any given

day, we need to ensure that we provide value to our participants. We need to create our experiences with *kavana* – intention, purpose and sincerity – to ensure maximum impact.

3. *Kahal* – The Who

In his article about [Relational Judaism and Synagogue website design](#), Dr Ron Wolfon asks how we intend to connect people to other members of the same community. These, along with the connections forged with hosts inspired by *haknusat orchim*, are what make people leave an event feeling that an event was valuable. It is also one of the reasons that people will return.

We have been deliberate in our efforts to connect people in person at events and to remain in contact. We have three tried-and-tested successful initiatives. ‘Find nearby’ is a relatively new feature on LinkedIn that provides a quick and convenient way to put people in the same vicinity in touch. By connecting to bluetooth and opening the LinkedIn app on your phone, you’ll receive a list of people in your vicinity, making connecting with new people seamless. Requiring more input from participants and also creating a culture of giving has been #giveanhour. At the end of an event, each member writes their contact details and a skill they can offer to another participant at no cost for one hour on a post-it. The skills can relate to their professional expertise or a personal strength, e.g. website development, practicing Hebrew-speaking, budget review. Each participant then takes a post-it and is encouraged to follow up after the event with their match. And lastly, we always ask people to raise their hands at the end if they want to get involved with our next event, creating a new cohort connected by the common in-person experience they have just had.

These three steps help create value and impact.

We’ve had the debate about whether there is a need to provide our participants with take-home gifts – pretty notebooks and keep cups with our branding, or goody bags with samples of local organic kosher sweets. But does this really have an impact on the level of engagement and connection participants feel? And most importantly, does it keep them connected to community? We are not in the business of creating unnecessary waste (even if it’s created out of recycled materials), especially in a post-Marie Kondo era. We are in the business of building community, of connecting people to one another and to their Jewishness, of creating Jewish experiences. Food doesn’t make a difference.

Anna Stern is passionate about developing meaningful Jewish experiences, volunteer leadership and connecting people within the Jewish community. She works as a Program Manager at Shalom, running Limmud Oz, and Thinktrepreneur, a young Jewish professionals network.

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