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Student perspectives on worship services from Instructor Jennifer Garvin-Sanchez's Religious Studies 108 Human Spirituality undergraduate course at Virginia Commonwealth University.

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# Congregation Beth Ahabah: “My Visit To A Synagogue”

by Rihana Ahmed

I was set on going to a Sunday Service at Buddhist center as my final visit for the semester. But then one Friday, while i was walking to Sugar Shack with my roommate, she pointed to a big building from far away and informed me that it was a synagogue. “Don’t you have to attend services for your class?” she asked. I do have to attend a service, but I wasn’t thinking about going to a synagogue. The next day, I decided to walk to the synagogue and explore, get a feel of the place. As my eyes caressed the outer building, I could feel my curiosity growing. I went back to my room, called the synagogue and inquired about the time of their Shabbat Service. So on Friday Nov 20th at 6:40pm, I went, with my roommate in tow, to the Congregation Beth Ahabah, right at the corner of 1109 W Franklin St, Richmond, VA 23220 where I participated in a series of prayers and songs led by Rabbi Martin P. Benfield, Jr.

It was very cold that Friday, my roommate and I decided to go to the synagogue early so we can make ourselves feel comfortable before the service began. We were very nervous, we didn’t know if we would be accepted or comfortable amidst the religious people. We took a moment to appreciate the outer beauty of the big building, which is also a museum, before we went inside. The building looks like it was made of stones, there were windows adorned by colorful drawings, and two, tall, dark wooden doors that led inside. Inside was a long narrow hallway that contained a shelf

full of book of prayers, shawls for the ladies and various information and advertisements for the attending worshippers. I picked up a prayer book with a hebrew scripture on it and flipped through the pages. The book was filled with poem-like prayers written in hebrew and the prayers sounded out using english letters.

The room of congregation was empty when we entered it. We were early. I took pictures of the stunning design of the interior. There were rows and rows of wooden chairs. The room was incredibly big in height and width. The walls were covered with windows with colorful murals. The whole room had a gold and white theme. The room reminded me of a Greek Temple with it’s Parthenon-like structures, and intricate designs that went all the way up to the roof. There were candles by the stage, and a warm light that bathed the room in an ethereal hue.

One by one, people started to fill the place. My roommate and I sat on the edge of a bench. People warmly greeted one another with “Shabbat Shalom,” which means “Peaceful Sabbath.” It seemed like everyone knew each other. They were like one huge extended family. One usher came and warmly welcomed us as did everyone else, they knew right away that we were visitors. People came and asked us questions about ourselves and explained the service and what we can expect. Most of the worshipers were adults in their late 30’s and above. There were few kids and a group

of students that sat in rows from a nearby church. There wasn't much variation in ethnicity. Most of the people were middle class caucasians. The congregation was more than a hundred people. Although we were guarded upon entering the synagogue, my roommate and I felt welcomed and joined the service comfortable and happy.

Rabbi Bielfeld began service by welcoming everyone and greeting us by saying "Shabbat Shalom." He gave an overview of what will go on during the service. The service began by the Choir singing "Hineih Ma Tov" from the book of prayers. The song talked about the blessing of unity and how good it is worship together. After the song, a Bar Mitzvah was performed. I've heard about Bar Mitzvahs but I have never seen one. The girl being celebrated, dressed in her best, read from the prayer book while everyone joined in at the end. After the Bar Mitzvah, the Rabbi continued reading from the prayer book in english and everyone read along with him in a calm, subdued voice. It was more of a murmuration raising up in the room. The choir then started singing in Hebrew while everyone in the congregation stood up, with the book in their hands, following along. The choir had quite a beautiful voice. The way they carried the notes, their voice rising up and down in synchronicity was mesmerizing.

One of the best part of the night was the "Prayer of Healing," where people from the audience spoke the name of their loved ones who are either sick or need healing. The Rabbi then incorporated those names in the prayers and read them out loud, sending peace and healing to those in peril. It was a touching moment to see the audience responding to those prayers. The silence of the room as everyone there thought of those people and sent good

vibes. I heard some crying coming from people who spoke out the names. In that moment, i too felt their sadness. Another service just like this one was the "Mourner's Kaddish," where another prayer was said for those who have died recently. Their names and their families was printed in the program booklet of the day. The Rabbi read each name out loud and said a prayer. There was a total of thirty-three names.

The service ended on a happier note, where people from the congregation with birthdays and anniversaries walked up the stage and prayed together. Everyone congratulated them and said a blessing. The Rabbi then talked about recent events in Paris. He talked about the similar attacks in other countries, and said a prayer for those who have died and those who are struggling because of those attacks. He wished us goodnight and walked down the stage. One of the ushers walked to the stage and urged the congregation to go downstairs and socialize more over sweets and drinks (not alcohol). My roommate and I decided to go home since it was getting late. We thanked the Rabbi and the rest of the attendees. At the door, several people asked us about what we thought of the service and we told them that everything about it was lovely. Which was the complete truth. Both of us were touched by the whole service. By the dedication of the worshippers, by the warm light that engulfed us in peace and tranquility as soon as we stepped through the doors. The synagogue was exactly as it's name suggests, Beth Ahabah; House of Love. •

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