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Congregation Beth Ahabah

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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

by Mariano Hernandez

On Friday, November 20th 2015, I visited Congregation Beth Ahabah. It is located on Main St, right outside off of VCU Campus. The address is 1111 W. Franklin St. Richmond, VA 23220. The service began at 7:30pm and it was about an hour long. Rabbi Martin P. Beifield conducted the service.

The outside of the temple is very beautiful. It is built in a similar way to the Cathedral of the Sacred Heart. The pillars in front are very old looking and made out of cement. The inside is beautiful very similar to the cathedral but a lot smaller. When approaching the synagogue I thought that it was going to be a lot bigger in the inside because of the way it looked from the outside. The glass windows are also similar to the Cathedral's; they are old school mosaic (stained glass) with very beautiful religious images. Just a few small crosses here and there. The altar is similar to the Catholic Church even the chair where the Rabbi sits. This really made it stand out in comparison to the Baptist church I visited. It makes a very early church feel which can either be good or bad; in my case I love being around churches so I don't like going to a church that looks like a lecture hall. There were a lot of Stars of David around the area.

The inside is very large and there were many people who attended. People from various ages attended but mainly young adults and adults. Almost everyone was white, the usual skin tone you expect when you imagine a

"Jewish" person. Everyone in the service was dressed either business casual or formal. I dressed business casual and didn't feel under dressed.

For the most part I felt comfortable during the service. I was a little nervous and didn't know what to expect but it was very comfortable being there. I didn't know anyone there but everyone was friendly from the start. I think that they often get new people because it didn't seem to be "small". I did a little research prior to visiting because when I Visited the Baptist church I felt a little uncomfortable and I think it was mainly because I wasn't prepared.

The service had a beautiful opening song with someone playing the guitar. The Rabbi said many things which included a welcome to the service and began saying the appreciation of God towards us for worshiping him.. I arrived early for the Shabbat service so I am not sure if they had a greeter in the entrance but it seemed that most people who were at the service. I assume that they did gave someone welcoming people at the door because as I mentioned earlier there seemed to be people who were new or just visiting. For every song all of the people in the church participated in the singing and they all seemed to know exactly what to do. There was a lot of preaching done by the Rabbi. I like preaching about the Gospel but I like being able to pray and rejoice with the community at services. I think that the Shabbat lacks of prayer time as it is mostly

preaching. Luckily there were songs in between the preaching conducted by a designated person. He seemed to be part of the clergy because of the way he was dressed but I could be wrong. I'm sure that not all Rabbi sing. The songs were some mixed with Hebrew.

I was very surprised to not see more pray done during the service. Even after doing research I was expecting more prayer time since it is a Jewish service. I was waiting to see the "Our Father" prayer be done. Something that I really enjoyed was seeing women playing major roles in leading preaches. I think that the part that stuck out to me the most was the singing and sharing of stories by women of the synagogue.

I did not write down the readings that were said during the service but I do remember what the preaching was about. The preaching was about Jewish holidays. One of the preachers (not the main Rabbi) spoke about Halloween and how young Jewish kids think that Halloween is a Jewish holiday because of the giving of candy. She also mentioned that a lot don't like Hanukkah because it is the celebration of a military victory. At the end of the service they gave announcements, which included, a bar mitzvah and a sharing of food after the service was over. I didn't attend that because of other commitments following the service but I would like to go back and do it next time.

I really liked the service and I think that it was my second favorite but will probably visit again sometime in the future. The people there were very nice and the preaching made sense and didn't involve history like it did in the Baptist church. The preachers used examples of their lives to contrast with stories

of God. In the Future I would also like to visit a more traditional synagogue to compare the difference. •

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