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2015

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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: “Sabbath Service”

by Kia Montgomery

On Friday October 16, 2015 at 6:30 P.M, I attended a Sabbath with friend from my Curiousness class. Temple Beth Ahabah is located at 1109 W Franklin St, Richmond, Virginia 23220. I went there because my friend is Jewish and she welcomed me to accompany her the next time she went. The denomination of Temple Beth Ahabah is Reform/Conservative. The service I attended was put on by VCU Hillel their presiding official/president of the organization is Madeline Paul. VCU Hillel is a group in which their mission is to enrich the lives of Jewish undergraduate and graduate students.

Structurally the outside of the Synagogue was built like a smaller version of a Cathedral, in my opinion. The top meets at a peak like a triangle and there are about four Roman columns that come down in front, followed by a set of stairs. There are three doorways that allow entrance into the temple; they are a dark red and above them is a rectangle mosaic of stained glass. In each of the sainted glass windows there is a picture of a Menorah, above the outer ends of the doorframes is a rounded light but in the middle doorframe is an light that hangs a little lower and oddly shaped. Above the lights is another stained glass that has a picture of the Kiddush cup. Instead of being in the Synagogue, the service I went to was held in a place called the Joel House that was accessible by walking through the backside of the Synagogue. The Joel House was very plain and simple. The outside was a

one door sided building, nothing that popped, no bright colors, just an ordinary building. Although on the inside it was set up with about five round tables and a small rounded ceiling light. The only thing that stood out in the room was a quilted panel that depicted a river that had been dedicated to the congregation.

My friend and I were actually pretty early to the service and arrived before anyone else. It was funny because when everyone else arrived the presiding official apologized for running on JCT, which stands for Jewish central time. Once we entered the Joel House, my friend introduced me and told them I was accompanying her to write this paper. They were all very welcoming and accepting of me, considering all of the people at the service were Caucasian and I was the only African American. I would say there were between 12-16 people in attendance but they all seemed to be like a little family. They all seemed close and knew about parts of their personal lives, asked how their week had been and how classes and school events had been going. There were more girls in attendance then guys but we were all around the same age group except for a couple who had catered the food for after the service.

Although I was the only African American at this service I still felt very comfortable and welcomed. Since everyone had been so nice and friendly it was not awkward being apart of their service. Before the service was starting

my friend asked Madeline if should explain parts of the service a bit more when going through it for me to have a better understand of what was happening and Madeline was happy to do so, which gave me a nice feeling of relief and less confusion.

The service as a whole was very interesting to me, fun and positive. The emotional tone was happy but peaceful, there were some upbeat songs that required tapping on the table and some very peaceful/calming songs that would make me want to sway and relax. There was a great sense of togetherness and being one. The service starts with Kabbalat Shabbat in which you bring in Shabbat. You get in the mood by saying a prayer together that is called “Y'did ne-fesh” which is a poem portraying the soul’s yearning for god. There are also multiple payers that are said/sung and very communal. Some prayers are written in Hebrew and others in Aramaic. I would say the opening to the service is very casual not over the top or dramatic in anyway. After the Kabbalat Shabbat there is Maariv, which is the official service. In which you praise god, then you have your own private time for prayer followed by pray for the sick and lastly praising god once more. The congregation was pretty reserved throughout the service since it was a pretty small group of 16 people or less, there were emotions of happiness and joy but I still consider it more on the reserved side. The service was ritualistic it seemed like this was their routine to go through Kabbalat Shabbat then Maariv after they drink wine (grape juice) break challah and finish with a dinner. The dinner that was served consist of salad and fish, a mix of vegetables with side dishes of chips and cheesecake pudding. The service ended in a prayer before drinking wine and break challah. While having dinner we just had

normal conversations about things happening in our lives, what events were coming up in the following week and random topics pertaining to school, engagements and the class human spirituality. There were no symbolic images or art in the Joel House beside the quilted panel that depicted a river.

Overall the service was really nice and fun to be apart of. I met some great people and learned a lot about what it is like to attend a Sabbath service. Maybe one day I’ll go back and attend a Sabbath service in the actual Synagogue. •

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