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2015

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 Callie Moore

On the evening of Friday November 27, I attended a small Shabbat service held in the chapel of the Congregation of Beth Ahabah at 1111 West Franklin Street. The Congregation of Beth Ahabah is a Reform Jewish synagogue. The presiding official for the evening was Rabbi Jesse M. Gallop.

The exterior of the temple is actually modeled more after a traditional Christian church architecture, because at the time it was built, the congregation was not trying to be so obvious about being a Jewish place of worship. There are steps leading up to a portico with four large Doric columns. The windows are covered with stain glass depicting scenes of the Jewish tradition, such as the menorah. We unfortunately did not have our Shabbat service in the temple because it was a holiday weekend and the number of attendees was quite small. Instead we had our service in the chapel, a small room with maybe twelve or so pews and a piano and podium at the front. I do plan to go back the Beth Ahabah on my own to see the inside of the temple, as it is supposed to be quite spectacular.

There were only about ten people present at the service all, one family of four, but most other attendees were slightly older couples or individuals. Everyone in attendance was Caucasian, but there did seem to be a range of social classes.

Everyone greeted each with "Shabbat Shalom."

My friend and I were greeted by the Rabbi, who introduced himself and made us feel very welcome by telling us about how the service would be conducted and asking if we had any questions. A couple also introduced themselves to us and very kindly invited us to sit with them.

We happily agreed to sit with them and they ushered us down to a pew closer to the front, laughing and joking with their friends in the congregation. I immediately felt very comfortable and very welcome. Once we sat down, she asked if this was our first time at Shabbat and when we told her it was, she could not have been more helpful. She told us how our books opened opposite of how we are used to because in Hebrew you read from left to write. She then showed us how everything was laid out in the book with the Hebrew on the right side of the page, the phonetic pronunciation on the left, and the English translation underneath. This was incredibly helpful with my understanding for the rest of the service.

The service started with a specific family coming up and lighting the ceremonial Shabbat candles. The lighting of the Shabbat candles is a rabbinically mandated law, and is usually done by the woman of the household. After the candles were lit and the blessing said, we began the service. The first half of the service consisted of us reciting and singing passages from our books in Hebrew. I was reading the English translation, as I cannot speak or read

Hebrew. Our friend always made sure that we were on the right pages and reading the right lines. She would lean over and tell us which pages to turn to and point to which part we were on if we were ever confused.

In reading the English translations, I noticed how uplifting and happy the meaning of everything was. The tone of all of the music and songs was rather upbeat and joyous. The overall message was about how we are loved and we are strong with God and with the community. It was really beautiful. In other religious services I have been too, mostly of the Christian faith, I always felt that the services were telling us how humans are innately bad and sinful and the only reason God has any mercy on us is if we truly follow Jesus. I felt as if the Shabbat service also focused much less on a patriarchal ladder, which I appreciated and enjoyed. We spoke and sang everything together, as a community, which made me feel like we were all connected somehow rather than just having someone in the front read to us. Rabbit Gallop did of course lead the service and tell us what pages to turn to, but it was so much more community based than any other religious service I have ever been to, and the feeling was palpable in the room.

The second half of the service consisted of a teaching from Rabbit Gallop. He talked of Jacob and his four wives and families on their way to return to his homeland after many years and of Jacob's wrestle with the Lord. What I really appreciated about Rabbit Gallop's teaching though, was that he did not simply retell the ancient story. He related it back to his own life, and of the lives of all the Jews, and put it into a modern day context. He also talked of modern Jewish and religious scholars and their interpretations and

opinions. He was very passionate about what he was talking about, but was able to make the message so relatable. Once again, he focused on the uplifting elements of the community and Beth Ahabah, and how we are never truly alone. He talked about how Jews need to be in today's society versus how they needed to be thousands of years ago, and the similarities and differences between the times. He was very poignant and the teaching was eloquently given.

At the conclusion of the service we sang a final song and Rabbit Gallop opened a cabinet behind the podium and bowed to the Torah that was inside. Beth Ahabah's Torah is actually one of 1,544 Torahs that were taken by the Nazis from Czech synagogues in World War II. It was originally scribed by David Lipin in 1820 and was used in the Prague Pinkas Synagogue.

After the Shabbat service, we were all invited into the next room for dessert and mingling. Unfortunately I had to leave right after the service, but I felt more than welcome and would have stayed had I been able to.

I found myself feeling so happy and uplifted after attending this Shabbat service. It was honestly the most positive religious experience I have ever had. I do not think I will convert to Judaism, but the next time I am having a bad week, I just might go to Shabbat at Beth Ahabah. •

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