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Megan Riggs

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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 Ner Shalom

by Megan Riggs

I have always been curious about what a Jewish service is like because I don't have any friends that are Jewish and it is something you don't see much on television. I decided to attend Congregation Ner Shalom in Dale City, Virginia. I was visiting my mother at the time and figured it would be easier to go to one there. It is located at 14010 Spriggs Rd. Dale City, VA 22193. I went to the Friday night Shabbat on November 20th at 7:30 p.m. It lasted until about 9:00 p.m. It is a Reform Jewish synagogue and Rabbi Levin led the service.

When I lived there, I had noticed the building many times. It is right across the street from my brother's high school. It is kind of out of the way, but there is a big sign off the side of the road that shows where it is. The building itself is actually pretty plain. It is just a white, wood panel building with a large wooden Star of David over the front doors. However, the prayer room was huge! It had a very tall ceiling and it was absolutely gorgeous. It had stained glass windows, which I wasn't able to see from the front of the building.

There were people near the front of the building outside the prayer room (which I'm not sure if that's what it's called; I just know that it's called a sanctuary in my religion). They were all talking about their weeks since the last service. I felt as if the entire congregation was really close and were all friends because it seemed to be a smaller congregation. It made me feel sort of uncomfortable being an

outsider, but I quickly learned that everyone was really nice! From what I observed, everyone seemed to be similar. Everyone was Caucasian, middle to upper-middle class, mostly older. There weren't many people around my age. There were children there, but they were the children of older people that were there. There was an even mixture of the genders. There didn't seem to be a dominant gender at all.

Unfortunately for me, no one offered to sit with me and explain things, so it was up to me to figure out what was going on. However, that may have just been because I mostly keep to myself and didn't try to talk to anyone. They all did seem to be very nice and inviting. They would say hi to me and everyone else in my pew as they passed before the service started.

The service itself seemed to be very formal and ritualistic. There was not much participation from the congregation. Everyone just seemed to listen to everything the Rabbi was saying. The whole thing seemed to be very solemn, so I wasn't sure how to act. I don't want to say that it was depressing, but it definitely was not upbeat. To my surprise, there seemed to be a lot of singing. Again, I had never attended a Shabbat and I don't have any Jewish friends that I could have asked, so I didn't exactly know what to expect. People did sing along with the Rabbi, but there were also times where the Rabbi would sing by himself even when there was no music. It started and

ending with a song that I'm assuming were prayers and there was plenty of singing in between. Some of the songs were in a different language, which I'm assuming is Hebrew. There was a brief sermon about the part of the Torah they were talking about that week. I liked that the Rabbi related the sermon to everyone's lives; it made it seem very personal.

One thing that I did expect was everyone wearing the little hats that I later found out were called kippahs. It is something that is very stereotypical because it is always seen in the media. Everyone seemed to be dressed up, more so than I had seen at churches I have been to. Like I said, the whole experience was just very new to me. The attire that was worn by the Rabbi seemed to be very ceremonial. He was the only person that was dressed like that, so I'm assuming it was a special thing that only he was allowed to wear.

One thing that seemed very symbolic to me was that there was a special place where the Torah was kept. I looked it up and found that it was called the Ark. It was very ceremonial when it was brought out. It seemed to be enclosed in some kind of garb. Mostly everyone stood up and no one sat down until the garb was taken off and was about to be read. This had interested me because it was something that I had never seen done before. In my church, everyone just had their own bibles and there was no ceremony to bring them out. It makes me think that the Torah is extremely sacred in Judaism.

Another thing I saw was a menorah. At first I was confused because I thought those were only brought out during Hanukkah, but I did some research and found out that it is normal for them to be in the prayer room because

they are meant to symbolize light.

All in all, the experience was very new and eye opening for me. Up until now, I had never had very much experience with Judaism and I am very grateful that I was able to explore it. •

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