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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 Chaverim

by Erin Spare

On Friday November 27, I attended a Friday Night Shabbat Service at the Congregation Beth Chaverim at 8pm. The Jewish synagogue is located on 3820 Stoneshore Road in Virginia Beach. The service was led by Rabbi Israel Zoberman.

When I arrived at the synagogue, I was surprised at how large it was. I have lived in the Virginia Beach area for almost my whole life and have never heard of it so I was originally expecting it to be a smaller worship place similar to the Buddhist temple I visited for my second field trip. The building was very modernized; it was painted with neutral colors and surrounded by a surplus of beautiful greenery. On the side of the building there are multiple little windows placed side by side to create one large window, bringing in a lot of light to the synagogue. As I walked inside into the foyer, I was immediately greeted by a middle aged woman who I assume was a member of the church. She asked how my day was going and expresses how happy she was that I was attending the service that night.

As I walked further into the synagogue, I observed various classrooms, a social hall, and I even noticed a storage unit. I then followed the rest of the people as they filed into the room where the service was going to be held. When I walked in, I noticed that the chairs were arranged very close together which gave me an opportunity to meet some of the people in attendance that night. The synagogue was

completely packed that night. Looking around I estimated over 100 people attended the service. A majority of the people around me were wearing business casual clothes and some even wore head coverings and prayer shawls. I observed that the crowd seemed to be male dominant and everyone seemed to be a part of the middle class. It was mainly composed of families with younger kids.

Despite the significantly large amount of people in the attendance that night, I felt very comfortable conversing with the people around me. I think it had something to do with the warm greeting I received when I first walked in. I sat next to a family consisting of two middle aged parents and their younger children who were nice enough to explain things to me. They made me feel so much more comfortable participating in the service and were very happy that I was embracing their religion.

After a few more minutes of mingling with the family that I befriended, it was time for service to officially start. The opening was very formal. An older man walked up to the podium that was on the platform 'stage' in the front of the room. He greeted the crowd and introduced the rabbi that was going to lead the service that day and then lead us into an opening song. After the song was sung the service officially began with a prayer. Everyone around me seemed to know this prayer by memory so I asked the family next to me what the

significance was and was told it was called the Reader's Kaddish. They described it to me as an ancient prayer of praise that appears in the beginning and again at the end of the service as the prayer memorializes the dead. This was then followed by the Bar'chu. The Bar'chu is call to worship dating back to the time of the Temple in Jerusalem.

Next came the central prayer of the liturgy. This is the part where we as a whole content ourselves with prayers of praise. I noticed that the congregational participation was very strong. Everyone around me began to chant the first two parts of the Amidah. These are the Avot, praising the God of all generations, and the Gevurot, which acknowledges God's power. It ended with a period of silence allowing people to meditate, reflect, or even say a prayer to themselves.

Then we read a reading from the Torah. The father of the family sitting next to me explained that the whole congregation says a prayer before and after the reading of the Torah. He told me that the depending on the specific synagogue, the blessing could be said in English or in Hebrew but at Congregation Beth Chaverim it was recited in English. After that, the Kaddish was recited. Its purpose is to memorialize the people who have passed away within the last year. The Friday night service concluded with the Kiddush, which is the blessing over wine and one last final prayer.

After the service was completed, the family sitting next to me invited me to the dinner set up by the synagogue. I was able to meet many of the people who attended the service that night and really embrace the experience. Overall I thoroughly enjoyed my time at the Congregation Beth Chaverim. Coming from

a Catholic background I noticed many similarities between the two religions. Both are very structured and seem to be ritualistic. Everyone I encountered in the congregation was very friendly and was very willing to answer my questions and I am even considering going back to attend another service. •

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