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2015

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Congregation Beth Ahabah

by Jack Burrell

For my second field trip paper assignment I chose to attend a Jewish mass at the Congregation of Beth Ahabah, this particular synagogue was situated at 1111 West Franklin Street Richmond, Virginia 23220. I attended an Shabbat evening service on Friday October the 23rd at 7:30, this service was not just an evening Shabbat however, it was a pre cursor to a young girl named Ali Shea Cohen's Bat mitzvah that would be happening the following Saturday morning. The Rabbi who led the service was named Martin P. Beifield, Jr. and others who assisted him in the mass whether it is through song or reciting/ explaining of prayers, as well as the young girl I mentioned above patiently awaiting her Bat Mitzvah on Saturday accompanied him.

Upon approaching the synagogue I couldn't help but think it was a government building, it had several stone columns it sort of looked like the Lincoln memorial honestly just minus a giant statue of Abraham Lincoln. My friend and roommate Greg Rosenberg suggested I go to this synagogue, he actually identifies as a part of the Jewish Faith so I decided to take his word for it. He said he thought it looked beautiful from the outside in passing and that he had always wanted to attend a service there. He ended up deciding to accompany me to the mass which was comforting cause like the prior visit to the catholic church I had last month this was the first time I had experienced a Jewish religious ceremony aside from a funeral years prior to today.

We walked up the stairs and toward the grand wooden doors where we were greeted by door men and handed prayer books and programs for the service itself and another program outlining the Bat Mitzvah that would be happening the following day. The congregation with sincere looking smiles and understanding nods welcomed us warmly. I felt like the regulars could tell I stuck out like a sore thumb but didn't mind and actually wanted to make me feel at home without knowing anything about me. The Rabbi approached me and my friend when we were looking for a place to sit and pointed out some other VCU student who were also attending the service, he said we were welcome to sit where ever we please, but if we felt more comfortable we could sit with our fellow students. This gesture was very considerate in my eyes and differed greatly to what I had witnessed in the Catholic mass where it didn't seem like anyone cared to make you feel at home. This group was much more friendly compared to my other experience at the Cathedral. A woman sitting in front of me and the other VCU students, who had attended with her husband and teenage sons, actually kept turning around and helping me and the other students find our place in the songs and prayers printed in our prayer books in Hebrew. She also approached me and my friend after the mass and informed us that they were handing out free food and beverages in the basement after the mass, saying we were more than welcome and hoped we would

attend, which was an awfully kind thing for her to do for us as strangers.

This congregation did not seem very diverse nationality or race wise, which did differ, from the Catholic service in my experience, the attendance was primarily white men with some white woman too. The age gap in attendance was very apparent too, besides the VCU students there were limited children and young adults and primarily middle to upper age adults. The social class seemed to be middle to upper class similar to the catholic service but the number in attendance here was much smaller than the catholic mass. I figured I could attribute the difference in attendance to the fact that this building was in fact smaller than the Cathedral of the Sacred Heart, but also because people of the Christian faith are far more common in our state, country, and quite frankly world.

The service in itself was quite enjoyable there, like the Catholic service, was a lot of singing, but these songs differed in the respect that the actually sounded like songs not just in audible bellowing over an organ. The songs were catchy and easy to follow along with in our prayer books for the most part which made me feel like I was being more involved in the service. After some more singing and reading through prayers the Rabbi with some help removed their copy of the Torah from a shrine behind his podium. As they read stories and prayers from the massive scroll dressed in fine fabrics and silvers I began to read about the history of this Torah from the back of the service's program. I learned that this very Torah had been one of 1,544 Torah confiscated from Czech synagogues during the time surrounding the Holocaust and World War II by the Nazis. I also learned that this particular

Torah had been copied down in 1820, almost 200 years ago! Next the Rabbi spoke about the assassination of former Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin; he talked for a long time about the former prime minister and how much he did for the state of Israel. Afterwards my friend who had already been familiar with that part of the history of Israel asked if I heard the Rabbi use the name of the murderer, I could not. He explained to me that the reason he didn't and most people don't is because for respect for the late Prime Minister, it is looked down on to bring attention to the one who committed the crime so the murders name is hardly ever spoken, I found that incredibly interesting cause that is not how we do it in America at all. Going back to the service they wrapped up the mass shortly after the Rabbi's history lesson with one last song and then some hand shakes as we left and that was all.

This experience for me was a lot more comfortable for me as a whole, and I even told my friend Greg that I would be interested in going back to the congregation with him maybe sometime during Hanukkah. Comparing the way people acted toward each other in this congregation compared to the one I attend last month this was much more enjoyable, I felt like I belonged and was genuinely loved by the strangers around me, It was quite a touching experience. •

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