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## Congregation Beth Ahabah

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# Congregation Beth Ahabah

by Danh Le

On November 30th I visited the Congregation Beth Ahabah on 1111 West Franklin Street Richmond, Virginia 23220. The Congregation is Reform Jewish and is the 6th oldest Jewish Congregation in the US. If I had planned my visit better, I would of visited the Shabbat on Friday but visiting the synagogue at this time was not a lost in anyway. I arrived at the synagogue at 6:00 pm but because it was raining, the sky was dark and I could not see the pictures on the window very well. The place still looked very nice either way. There was no presiding officer because well, I did not attend a service. I attended a tour. My guide was the Director of Education, Ramona Brand. To summarize what happened, I planned my trip poorly and did not get to attend a Shabbat but the Director, Mrs. Brand, was nice enough to help me out with a tour of the synagogue and also, the school.

The synagogue was very big and looked much like some kind of Roman building. The roof was triangular shaped and there were four pillars in the front. The inside was much like a Christian Cathedral. It was not as big as the Cathedral I visited here in Richmond but it gave a similar feeling. There were pictures on the window, an altar which the Director called Bima, and the Torah, much like the Bible, were very well kept. The synagogue was connected to the religious school that is run by the same Congregation. I had a whole tour of the school and it was way bigger than the synagogue. It was much like a normal high school building

but there was a room meant for small services as well as what could be considered a museum. I did not get to check out the museum because of the time but touring the building was still pretty nice. There was a Midrasha class being held at the school which is how I got approval to come that day. The Director allowed me to come an hour before the class and ask anything I wanted to know about the Congregation. I did not get to ask about how the Shabbat is done because of the limited time but I did learn a lot nonetheless. I was greeted very kindly on arrival and I also saw some of the students there later on during my tour. They were mostly of Jewish origin and the gender ratio was fairly even. I met some Rabbis there but I could tell they were busy preparing for the arrival of the students so I did not get to talk to them much.

In the first 20 minutes of my visit, I was able to ask a lot of questions about the Torah and even got to touch and take a picture of the writings in one of the scrolls. The writings were so perfect I could hardly believe they were all handwritten. I was shown the Nertamid, which basically meant the eternal light. This light was above the Torah and is always on. The 10 Commandment was behind the Nertamid and I was told it is supposed to be read right to left. I was then shown the Torah themselves. The Torah was kept much nicer than the Bible, at least in my opinion. I learned that the Torah is created with Sheep skin. They were all decorated with mantle

(AKA dressing the Torah). There were breast plate in front of each of the mantle with very interesting designs. I saw the 12 tribe of Jacob, a lion, and a crown. The Torah was literally crowned with the Rimonim which is both a crown and a pomegranate. I was also shown the Yad which means hand. This stick is meant to be used on the Torah. Apparently, a person is not supposed to touch the Torah due to how delicate they are. The Director opened one of the scrolls for me and showed me the writings. It was perfect, like it was typed, but the material seemed very old and delicate. I was told that a scribe takes a whole year or longer to write it perfectly and if this person ever mess up, it has to be started all over. The Rabbi told me each of the scroll is worth 60 to 100 thousand dollars. I was mind blown! I learned that each of the Shabbat service follows a procedure with slightly varied scriptures from time to time. I also learned that the Hebrew text were all the same in Shabbat around the world but the poem (allegory stories) and English translations tend to vary. The Torah is supposed to be passed around during the Shabbat for everyone to see and even touch. It is highly worshipped. I was told that music are played during the Shabbat and varies in chants and lyrical songs. I couldn't learn much more than that about the Shabbat. I plan to attend the Shabbat this Friday even if I am done with my essay. Some time passed, the director had to leave and I was left with a guy named Mario.

Mario was part of the 5 members in the maintenance crew. I asked him about the Shabbat but he said he never attended one. Mario is actually the guy that gave me the tour of the school. He seemed like a very nice guy. I took this opportunity to learn more about the school. First thing I wanted to know, what do they teach at this school? I was answered

with varied subjects. It is mainly a religious school that focus on Judaism so classes focuses on the Torah, the Hebrew language, and the Jewish history. This is when I got to see the small service room. It is apparently used mostly in the summer and for services like funerals or other special occasions. The room has a stand and many chairs, a small version of the synagogue. There were many pictures on the wall which seemed to be very important contributors to the school like a past directors or teachers. I headed upstairs with Mario and I could see a lot of interesting stuff. It was like being back in elementary school with pictures and projects hanged on the wall. The school had a second building with 3 floors instead of two. There was a small library on the second floor and a big lounge on the third floor. The first floor had a lot of desks where the students were eating pizza. Apparently, every Monday, pizzas is ordered for the kids before class. I believe those kids were about high school age, about 9th grade. The school teaches all age up to 12th grade and it cost money to attend classes like any normal school. There was a basement and a few rooms I couldn't enter like the museum but the experience was still very fulfilling.

I learned a lot while I was there and the people were very nice. Everyone seemed busy but they still found the time to guide me around and even allowed me to touch the Torah. I wish I could have attended the Shabbat but the tour was definitely worth it. I am planning on going to the Shabbat on Friday and getting the full experience or else I feel like I would regret it. •

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