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Congregation Beth Ahabah

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Congregation Beth Ahabah

by Matthew Moynihan

On Friday October 23, 2015 I went to a Jewish Shabbat at congregation Beth Ahabah. It is located at 1111 W. Franklin St. Richmond, VA 23220. It is the oldest and largest synagogue in Richmond for reform Jews. The presiding official was Rabbi Martin P. Beifield, Jr. and the service started at 7:30pm.

Walking up the steps of the synagogue you notice how much history the building has. It is over a hundred years old and was built in 1904. The synagogue has a huge dome and beautiful stained glass windows. A lady told me that one of the windows depicting a volcano was made by the Tiffany Company. The inside has wooden pews all facing a stone podium or bimah. This is where the rabbi does most of the service from.

When I first entered the synagogue I was given a very warm welcome. I told the person greeting me that I was new and he introduced me to a woman who would guide me through the service, and explain everything that was happening. The people at the service were of all ages and races, ranging from little kids to the elderly, and I would say the gender ratio was an equal 1:1. It seemed like most of the people attending the service were from the upper middle class, based on the way they were dressed. The congregation was maybe 25% full. The congregation definitely made me feel welcome and helped me understand what was going on during the Shabbat service.

The lady who offered to sit with me really helped me understand what was going on during the service, and without her I would have been lost. I felt very comfortable asking questions and talking to her, and I really appreciated the help. Probably the biggest help was her just showing me where we were in the book so I could read along. Most of the service was in Hebrew so it was hard to understand where we were in the book.

The Shabbat service was not as structured as I had anticipated. It appears that the service is very flexible depending on what is going on during the year. For example during the Shabbat I attended, they had a young girl read something in Hebrew for her Bat Mitzvah and they also had a baby naming for a newborn. The Hebrew naming involved bringing the newborn up to the bimah and the Rabbi saying the child's full Hebrew name.

The service started out with the Rabbi along with a few others entering from the back of the synagogue. The opening of the service was pretty casual comparing it to the Catholic service I attended for the last field trip. We then proceeded to sing songs mainly in Hebrew following from the book. The Rabbi told us that if we could not say the words in Hebrew to just hum along. The entire congregation was actively participating in the service and seemed to be pretty knowledgeable on the Hebrew. The emotional tone during the entire service remained pretty consistently upbeat.

The most important ceremony during the Shabbat seemed to be reading from the Torah scrolls. This happened about 40 minutes into the service and involved a ritual of removing the scrolls from their case (called the aron kodesh). The aron kodesh is supposed to represent the ark according to the woman I sat with. After the Rabbi and another lady removed the scroll, she started to read from the Torah while everyone in the congregation stood up. After she read a passage, they put back the scroll in a similar manner to how they removed it. We then sat in silence for a while and I assume we were supposed to reflect on what was just talked about during the passage.

service as well. •

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There was also another part of the service I found interesting. The Rabbi asked every-one to raise their hand and say the name of someone they wanted everyone to pray for. About 10 percent of the congregation asked for prayers for their loved ones. This seemed to fit really well into the service because of all the participation that was involved.

The Rabbi then ended the service by talking about the assassination of the prime minister of Israel 20 years ago. He talked about problems in Israel and how while it is important to keep your heritage strong, you need to be welcoming of other peoples. The Rabbi then walked down the main aisle and greeted everyone as they left.

I thought the Shabbat service was a very beautiful service and the congregation was welcoming. They did not seem to mind explaining what was happening, and they had a very bright outlook on life. I would describe the service as energetic and more casual. The beauty of the synagogue really added to the