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Congregation Beth Ahabah: “Reform Judaism”

by Hallea Ross

On Friday October 23, I attended a Shabbat service at the Congregation Beth Ahabah. The Congregation Beth Ahabah is located at 1111 West Franklin Street. It is the largest and oldest synagogue in Richmond. The synagogue offered a wide variety of programs to attend throughout the week that were based on a modern version of Jewish education. The synagogue is a reformed Jewish congregation. The rabbi that presided over the service was Rabbi Martin P. Belfield, Jr.

I arrived at the synagogue for their Friday night service. Upon my arrival to the synagogue I first noticed the huge dome that arched over the top of the building. Being that it is the oldest synagogue in the city of Richmond the architecture had an old 18th century feel. The building had two large columns that guarded the front doors. There were two copper lights that stood at the base of the steps tarnished in green showing the age of the building. Inside of the synagogue there beautiful stain glass windows throughout the church. One of the windows was colored flame surrounded by some form of greenery with a red broader. Another window was an erupting volcano, with an inscription at the bottom of the window. At the front of the church was the alter, where in the middle was a golden candle hanging. On the walls behind the alter were two tablets outlined in gold, and inside was gold Hebrew writing. I believed it to be the Ten Commandments on two stone tablets like in the story of Moses. The ceilings

were high and had these beautiful paintings on some of the panels. Also in the large room, on one of the walls sat what looked to be a large organ. The organ took up the most of the wall; the organ had so many of these golden pipes that it appeared as if it could play any note. The whole synagogue was decked out in white gold from the walls to all the trimmings. However, the one thing that stuck out the most was the green furnishings. Everything was gold, and regal, except for the pews, and the carpeting that were an interesting light green color.

When entering the synagogue I watched how all the members of the congregation greeted each other. The members of the church all seemed to be middle aged, middle class people, with a few scattered young adults. I was expecting the congregation to be like most churches that I have attended, where majority of the people attending were going to be women and children with a few men scattered in the mix. I was also surprised to find that this synagogue welcomed the gay and lesbian community. However at this synagogue there was more a family feel. I saw more whole families; the mother, father, and the children, and in some cases it appeared the grandparents attending too. As a whole it seemed the church had a very family oriented feel. The focus of the church was on the family as a whole, and growing a stronger family. Everyone was really friendly. I even had one member of the congregation invite me to sit

with them noticing that I had never attended before. I was welcomed to the church and it made me feel comfortable in the situation.

Prior to attending the service I took a look at the church's website. I noticed that this Jewish synagogue was considered a Reform Judaism. The woman who invited me to sit with her and her two kids, was making small talk with me about the synagogue and asking questions about the class. I made sure to ask what Reform Judaism was. The way I understood it, Reform Judaism was a mixture of the strong history of the Jewish tradition while at the same time incorporates new innovations, which are more accepting of diversity; it affirms beliefs without rejecting the people who may have some doubt. One thing that stuck out about Reform Judaism is Reform Jews see Jews as God's partner in bring peace and freedom.

When the chorus began to sing, it was sung in Hebrew, so I did not understand any of the songs. Even though I was unable to understand what they were singing about the words sounds beautiful, and like they carried a lot of emotion in them. The overall emotional tone of the whole service was uplifting. It seemed as if everyone in the congregation was proud of their religion. The opening of the service was nothing overly dramatic, like it was for the Catholic Church that I had attended. It was a casual start to the beginning of the service, starting off normally, with a song. The congregation was active, and participated when it was the appropriate time. The overall service was ritualistic but modern at the same time. I think that had something to do with the synagogue being Reform Judaism. The service had a lot of traditional elements but also added a new spin on faith while still keeping

the traditional feel. The service ended with a long prayer and then another song. The main symbolisms that I could pick out on my own throughout the church were the two large menorahs that staid lit during the whole service, and the yamakas that the men and young boys in the congregation wore. As an overall experience it was interesting and educational. I really enjoyed the inviting and welcoming environment. •

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