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Congregation Beth Ahabah

by Emilie Urquidi

The full name of the church service I attended was called the Congregation of Beth Ahabah. This church service is located at 1111 West Franklin Street, Richmond, Virginia, 23220. This congregation participates in the Jewish religion, participating in a Sabbath church service. The service I attended was on November 20th at 7:30-8:45pm. At this Sunday church service, the adult volunteer choir was directed by Natan Berenshteyn who music ranges from contemporary to classical. The rabbi who led the church service this Sunday was called Rabbi Martin P. Belfield, Jr.

The outside of the church appeared absolutely gorgeous. The outside color of the church was an eggshell white color. The church contained four pillars that supported the roof of the church. The church included stained glass windows, three doors, and stairs that led the church-goers into the church. The church building really was in my opinion, beautiful. The inside of the church included pews in orderly lines, gold stained interior lining on the walls, and multiple stained glass windows. The Rabbi stood in the middle of the room on the little stage area in front of the pews so that the church-goers could hear and see him properly.

The visitors were greeted very well and very politely. The service came from all sorts of different backgrounds and ethnicities, but for the majority the church-goers were all deriving from Jewish backgrounds. The average

gender were men, and the age derived from very young to very old. During service, there were a large amount of people present for the service. For the men at the service, it is considered a sign of respect for all male attendees to wear a head covering, or usually a dress hat or yarmulke. As for everybody else, the dress code was business casual or business formal. As for the politeness of the crowd, no one offered to let me sit with them since I was with my friends.

In the beginning I felt a little out of place while attending service. I was out of comfort zone by a large amount and it just did not feel normal to me. I feel like I felt uncomfortable because this isn't what I'm used to and this was my first time experiencing a true Jewish Sabbath Sunday. As time went by and during the church service I started to feel a little bit better, I just for some reason couldn't shake the feeling of feeling so out of place. Although there were a diverse amount of people, the majority were true Jewish faith believers and I obviously am not. I almost felt like I was in a way not being a true Christian, which sounds absolutely ridiculous.

During service, the Rabbi and most of the prayers that were recited and used came from Our Siddur; a prayer book. This is called Mishkan T'filah, the new prayer book of the reform movement. During service, there were prayers upon arising and upon donning the Tzitzit, Tallit, and Tefillin. After these prayers

were said, morning blessings were said later after which are then followed by blessings for the Torah and the readings that derived from biblical and rabbinic writings. Afterwards, Shema Yisrael came next, in orthodox Jewish services, this is usually followed by a series of readings from biblical and rabbinic writing that recalled the offerings made in the temple in Jerusalem. This section concludes the Rabbi's Kaddish. The next section of morning prayers is called the Pesukei D'Zimrah, were are otherwise known as versus of praise that contain many psalms and many prayers that are made from a tapestry of biblical versus that are followed by the song of sea that is shown in Exodus. After this, the formal public call to prayer occurs which is called Barechu. Barechu is an expanded series of prayers relating to the main recitation of a bigger verse. The tone of each prayer said was very emotional and it was very clear that the Rabbi reciting these prayers were casual but it had a bigger, and very big and deep meaning behind it. The prayers that were said were serious but were voiced in a more relevant and personal way. The congregational participation were, as stated before, personal and interactive. The rabbis were much invested into the prayers that they were saying and tried their best to interact their crowd into connecting with the prayers that they were reciting. The service was ritualistic for the most part, but it felt as if it was almost spontaneous by the amount of singing and bonding that everybody participated in. The service ended by a final prayer and with everybody who attended service talking to each other and catching up as old friends. I actually really enjoyed the Sabbath Sunday service although I did feel out of my comfort zone and a bit awkward. Back in high school I took a world religions course similar to this class and during our topic of the Jewish

religion, we discussed whether we viewed the Jewish religion as a religion or as a community/culture. I still held onto my belief that the Jewish community was more of a culture, with religion incorporated as a vital to their culture. Attending this Sabbath Sunday service really helped in forming and stabilizing my opinion of the Jewish religion. •

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