For this last field trip I traveled to Northern Virginia to attend a Jewish Shabbat worship service. The synagogue I attended was called the Temple B’Nai Shalom which is a progressive Reform Judaism synagogue located at 7612 Old Ox Road Fairfax Station, Virginia 22039. I attended the service on Friday November 27th from 8:00-9:30pm and the presiding official was Rabbi Amy R. Perlin, who is the senior Rabbi of the synagogue.

The synagogue looked similar to a Christian church with large windows in the front and the pointed roof many churches have, however there was no cross or symbol atop the roof of course. Walking in I was greeted kindly and without hesitation by an usher who handed me a guide to the prayers and songs that we would be using for the service that night. As I continued into the synagogue I noticed the windows I had seen outside were stain glass on the bottom, again similar to those I had seen in a church. There were rows of chairs all facing towards the windows where large wooden beams stood in front of the windows but behind several other chairs and podiums. The beams had writing on them that I assumed was Hebrew which I could not understand. On the walls on either side of the windows there were colorful paintings that I did not recognize, but made the room very vibrant and lively, even though it was very dark outside.

There was a good number of people present at that night’s service which surprised me for how late the worship was taking place. There were people of all types of backgrounds. Many different ethnicities and the social class was quite spread out from what I could tell as well as the age difference. There were more people over the age of 40 or 50 but still quite a few younger people and families were in attendance. It seemed as though anyone was welcome and I did not feel out of place, even though I had never been to a Jewish synagogue before.

I felt quite comfortable and sat near the middle of the synagogue. A younger family sat next to me and we passed some small talk back and forth but once the worship started they did not continue to talk to me. No one offered to explain anything to me but everyone around me was very polite and seemed quite welcoming if they knew I had never attended a service before. I felt very welcomed and not scrutinized or judged while attending because there were so many different types of people I blended right in. This made me feel at ease once the service began.

To begin the service there a short song as people finished sitting down which was sung in Hebrew. Once everyone was seated the Rabbi, Amy R. Perlin, greeted everyone and thanked them all for attending and addressed which prayers would be used and introduced the song to begin the service. The song was again sung in Hebrew but was very upbeat and almost everyone in attendance sang and was
these prayers, which I looked up following the service, were overall a recitation of the wonderful doings of God and praying for peace, good fortune, and to follow the path that is laid for them. I found this calming and comforting when listening to the English prayers I could understand.

Breaking up the songs and prayers, about halfway through the service, the Rabbi, Amy R. Perlin, spoke about treating others as it says in the Torah. She spoke referencing the holy text and relating that to everyday life. This speech, once again, reminded me of a sermon from a priest in a Christian church I had attended. She shared stories that brought the ancient texts and the values they put forth into the context of everyday. This speech continued for about 20 minutes, and I found this most interesting because I always enjoy seeing how religion and the beliefs of other religions can be applied into our lives rather than just recited and left in an abstract sense. The Rabbi left us with those stories to pray about before the service continued with song and prayers again from the prayer book. This break in the ritualistic sense of the service made the worship more spontaneous and relatable and therefore enjoyable.

To end the service, some announcements were made to the people there about upcoming events and services, which continued the casual atmosphere that the opening had held. A closing song ended the service and everyone continued to the refreshments and mingling that was laid out afterwards.

Overall, I enjoyed the service, however I had no idea how similar it would be to the Christian service I had attended earlier in the year. The casual opening and closing remarks very animated, and the song even involved some clapping which I had not experienced at the catholic service I had attended earlier in the year. I tried to follow along in the song book in the seat in front of me, but I more enjoyed just listening to the beat and watching how the attendants sang to it. I found this opening very casual and not dramatic. It was as though we were all a family and just gathering to be together without being tense or overdramatic. However, the rest of the service was very ritualistic which kind of went against the previous casual feel. The Rabbi announced every prayer and song that made up the majority of the worship. To go along with this, everyone knew most of the songs and prayers by heart leading me to believe that this was common and even more ritualistic than I had first thought. This also reminded me of a Christian worship service in the way the prayers and songs each had their timing and was very ritualistic. Despite the ritualistic feel, the people in attendance all seemed very emotionally involved and passionate while reciting the songs and prayers. The emotion was consistent throughout the crowd despite age, class, and race differences. The entire service mainly consisted of prayers and songs, intermixed at some points, which were recited from a prayer book available to all, with several spontaneous inserts from the presiding Rabbi.

The prayers that were in English I understood. They were mainly consisting of praising God and describing how he is beneficial to all and how he loves all those who follow his word. This, again, reminded me of a Christian service with the similarities in prayers. The tone of the entire worship was upbeat and passionate while the congregants seemed thankful to God and committed to worshiping God by engaging in the songs and prayers. The meanings of
were rivaled by the ritualistic feel of the songs and prayers sung. Despite the rituals though, the people in attendance were emotionally and passionately involved in showing their faith and participating in the service.

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