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Adat Reyim: "The Synagogue"

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Adat Reyim

by Rachel Friske

I knew exactly which religion I was going to experience for my first field trip. I have a friend named Nathaniel who is Jewish and I wanted to learn more about his practice and culture. He told me that a good time for me to go with him is when he goes back to D.C. on the weekends to his synagogue (Jewish version of a church) at home. We went on Saturday, the twenty-sixth, at nine A.M. The synagogue we visited is called the congregation Adat Reyim and it is located at 6500 Westbury Oaks Ct, Springfield, VA 22152. He has been attending this service his entire life.

Nathaniel told me that his synagogue did not technically follow any of the mainstream denominations for Judaism. Instead, they practiced something called Reconstructionism. However, Nathaniel explained that it was a branch off of the Reform movement, in which they share several similarities. I knew very little about the Jewish practice; I have only heard the usual stereotypes: they are typically wealthy and tend to save more than they spend. Because of this, I expected to see this massive and beautiful building with luxurious cars in the parking lot. However, as we pulled up to the synagogue, I saw a very basic structured building that resembled a small school to me. In a calm and quiet neighborhood, the building is two stories high and is about a quarter of the size of VCU's Cabell Library. The outside is made up of a yellowish-looking stone that my friend later told me is called "Jerusalem stone"; it is imported from Israel.

To the right of the Jerusalem stone were large windows that gave view to the main auditorium. To the left of the building, I could see a children's play area along with a beautifully planted garden labeled with Hebrew letters. As I walked through the front door, my friend reached up, took his two fingers, kissed them and then touched this strange object that was nailed to the side of the door. He explained to me that on the door of any Jewish home or place of worship, there will be something called a Mezuzah nailed to the side of the door and each and every one contains a prayer called the Shema that Jews consider to be very sacred. Also, as we walked through the next set of double doors, Nathaniel grabbed out of a large basket a white round cap that he called a kippah. Many religious men will wear this their whole lives as a sign of respect to cover their heads from God.

It's was quite interesting to experience this kind of religious practice because this was nothing like a church at all. I have attended Catholic churches several times. We would have new people coming and going and we did not practice anything inside the church that compared to a synagogue service. When I visited Adat Reyim, almost every single person in that congregation came up to me and introduced themselves. They were very welcoming to guests and even invited me over to their next Friday night dinner. The Rabbi's name is Rabbi Bruce Aft and he went to rabbinical school solely for the Reconstructionism

movement. When rabbi Aft started the service, he stated “Everyone tonight is a very special night” and one of the voices from the congregation replied, “Why is it a very special night?” Rabbi Aft replied, “Because we have a guest here! And she came all the way from VCU with Nathaniel just to learn about our congregation. So I hope that you all get to meet her after the service and talk with her a little bit about what Judaism is about here at congregation Adat Reyim”.

In terms of the people there, the first thing I noticed was that there were not very many. Out of maybe hundred-and-fifty seats, there were maybe forty total, if that. I could tell by what people were wearing and by their behavior that everyone there was upper-middle class or upper-class. The congregation was a mix of a few white families with small children and many older white males that had seemed to come alone, but there was one Latino family and two African American families. I would say the average age was anywhere between fifty and sixty.

The unusual thing was the whole overall feel of the service. I came in having a lack of interest expecting to be sitting for two hours straight, listening to stories and singing with the chorus. However, it seemed as if no one at the service was taking anything seriously. The rabbi was continuously cracking jokes throughout his entire service and especially the sermon. It filled the overall experience with a lighthearted atmosphere; contributing to a more joyful and personal experience.

In terms of symbolism and rituals, there were many different things that strayed from Christianity. When the Torah is taken out, it is handled with extreme care. Nathaniel

explained that if the Torah falls everyone must fast for forty days. After one of the men was done reading from the Torah, he raised it above his head (still unraveled and heavy) while the rabbi said a prayer. Then, the man proceeded to carry the Torah around the entire room while everyone else came and touched it to their book of prayer and kissed the book. Once finished, the Torah was returned to its place of rest underneath a large ark located behind the rabbi in the center, back corner of the room. Also, above the ark was a big candle with Hebrew inscriptions on it that was lit during the ceremony. Nathaniel explained that the light never goes out and is called the eternal light. The rabbi concluded the service by asking the congregation to please name those who are in need of healing and in need of our prayers. Those who had names to say raised their hands and the rabbi went one by one and afterwards, a prayer was said in a mixture of part Hebrew and part English. In conclusion to my first field trip, I had a knowledgeable and memorable experience with congregation Adat Reyim. With little need for prior research, Nathaniel served as an excellent guide through for my venture into the Jewish practice and I greatly appreciate how welcoming Nathaniel and the others were during the entire service. •

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