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Temple Beth-El

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On Friday October, 23rd at 6pm I attended a Jewish Shabbat service at Temple Beth – El located on 3330 Grove Avenue, Richmond, VA 23221. The presiding official was Rabbi Michael Knopf, who was named one of “America’s Most Inspiring Rabbis” by The Jewish Daily. It was a very unorthodox service as when we arrived all of the members were standing outside while police vehicles blocked the road alongside the synagogue and the alley behind temple. I felt more comfortable once my boss showed up; he is Jewish but is a member of a different synagogue that is located in Petersburg, Va. He recognized a few of the members of this temple and asked them what was going on. A gentleman approached us and explained that a back pack was found in the alley that locked suspicious. The police was called and a bomb squad was sent in to ensure there was no danger. The service was pushed back about 25 minutes due to this setback and the Rabbi decided to hold the service outside, it also happened to be a young lady's bat mitzvah.

Grove Avenue is known for being a very nice area around the Fan. The temple is located in the middle of a very higher middle class community. It is a brick building with more of a rectangular body, stairs leading up the main entrance. There is an older building next to it which is the older temple. Having been there for only about an hour I was able to see a good amount of the outside of the temple and its surroundings, from what I was able to observer the temple grounds are very well taken care of, I did not see a single piece of trash on the floor.

As I approached the crowd of members gathered outside the temple I immediately noticed how they were all dressed up. The men wore suits, nothing less casual than khakis with a button up shirt and tie along with a Yamaka. The women wore nice dresses or a long skirt accompanied by a nice top. The crowd was a majority older people and younger kids, not many teenagers or college age members. Amongst the crowd I mainly saw Caucasian members, all seeming to be part of the middle or upper middle class. Compared to my visit to a Catholic service, these members were not as approachable. They all seemed to look over and then look away when they saw my new face at the service.

Having my boss with me did make me feel more comfortable being surrounded by all of these active members of the temple, he explained to a few of them the reason why I was there and soon after the service began.

As the day grew darker and entrance to the temple was still not allowed due to the on-going investigation by the police, the Rabbi decided the most appropriate thing to do was hold the service on the temple steps. This Rabbi was very full of excitement and he was very good at interacting with the crowd. I observed at how all the members were
very enthusiastic and very engaged with his presence. He stood at the top of the stairs alongside the cantor, Hazzan Marian Turk and the young lady who was celebrating her bat mitzvah that weekend. The Rabbi began the Shabbat Service with a prayer (Berakhah) and before starting he explained the reason of Shabbat, which from my understanding was to honor and worship God as the one and only God. After the Berakhah, a scripture from the Torah was read, being outside did make it difficult to understand but it was very similar to how a church service is run. Soon after there were songs that began to be sung, and everyone sang outside as the neighbors came out to watch and the police began to slowly move out. The Rabbi noticed myself and a classmates who were there and it was as if he knew why we were present. He began to breakdown the service and give a more detailed explanation as to what it was everything that took place in this service represented. Overall I felt that this service was restricted from showing the full Shabbat experience due to the unforeseen circumstances. If I ever get the chance to, I would definitely return. The Jewish community does have a very strong bond and it is very apparent due to the way the members as a whole behaved, everyone knew everyone and even though the service was not going to be held inside everyone was willing to stand the entire time while the elderly were offered seats. Because the service began later than expected, I had to leave due to a prior commitment that evening. •

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