Student perspectives on worship services from Instructor Jennifer Garvin-Sanchez's Religious Studies 108 Human Spirituality undergraduate course at Virginia Commonwealth University.

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The Northern Virginia Hebrew Congregation is a non-denominational house of worship, meaning that it accepts every form of Judaism that people practice: this includes Reform, Conservative, and Orthodox Judaism worshippers. The Northern Virginia Hebrew Congregation is located in 1441 Wiehle Avenue, Reston, Virginia, which is about a twenty minute drive from my house. I attended the Sabbath at the synagogue on November 27 at 8:00 PM for family gathering and a leisurely and November 28 at 10:30 AM for the Sabbath service. The Sabbath service was led by Rabbi Monzelle Stanton.

The service I attended at the Northern Virginia Hebrew Congregation was far different from the previous services I had attended. Instead of one day designated for worship, such as Sunday for Christianity and Friday for Islam, the Sabbath service was typically a two day event, starting at the evening time on Friday and concluding at the evening time on Saturday. As I arrived onto the parking lot of the Northern Virginia Hebrew Congregation on Friday evening, my first sights were that I saw families gathering with each other and talking with one another before entering the building. Many parents would talk with one another while their kids would interact with one another as they pace themselves to get inside the establishment. This gave me the impression that the population was very close-knit, and that the synagogue promotes a family-orientated environment. The Northern Virginia Hebrew Congregation has a very basic architecture, low roof with a square shaped body. However, it gave off a house-like atmosphere to it, as it may help contribute the family-friendly environment it tries to promote. Inside the synagogue, it had two main rooms. One room was used for the Friday evening dinner and gathering. The other room was used for Saturdays for the service as well as reading and discussions on the Torah, the holy book for the Jewish people. The second room reminded me a lot of a typical Christian church setup, it had a podium for the Rabbi, and had booth-like seating arrangements for those attending the Sabbath.

The people in the Northern Virginia Hebrew Congregation was not as diverse as the other religious establishments I visited. It was predominantly Caucasians, in which the majority were from Israeli descent. They were all wearing formal or business casual clothing, as I was told that this was typical clothing worn on the day of Sabbath.

When I walked into the establishment, again I saw many families interacting with one another, sitting while awaiting for the food. I must have appeared lost because an elderly couple approached me and asked if I was observing the practices. After replying yes, they asked me if I would like to join them to eat, to which I agreed to. After informing them that I was a college student observing for an assignment, they decided to inform me of
the practices and what to expect during the Sabbath on Friday. On the Friday of Sabbath, you are supposed to clean the house and wear clean, formal clothing before leaving to the synagogue. Then, you eat the “nosh” provided, candles are lit, and songs are sometimes sang during this event. It is a great way for families to relax and enjoy each other’s company.

The following day, I attended the Sabbath service on Saturday at 10:30 AM. The service began with prayers, which followed by readings of the Torah. The Rabbi decided to read about the origin of life, discussing about the Jewish views of how life and the Earth was created. Following the readings, songs were sang, and many people passionately contributed. Lastly, the service concluded with life events, such as those who recently celebrated Bar Mitzvahs and Bah Mitzvahs. The service concluded with another feast in which families gathered to eat and talk.

In conclusion, attending and observing the Northern Virginia Hebrew Congregation was a very eye-opening experience. It gave me a new overall perspective of the Judaism practice and culture, in which I had very little knowledge about. The perspective of having leisure activities, such as dining and interacting with family and loved ones, is a very healthy practice. I feel like it’s a practice that everyone can participate, not exclusive to practicing Jews. The family-orientated atmosphere created by the Northern Virginia Hebrew Congregation was like the other institutions I have attended, in which I feel is very important for all religious establishments to have and enforce. The family-orientated environment and community practices the Sabbath enforces was very refreshing, motivating me to practice similar acts of my own. •