

A Shabbat Service at Congregation Albert in Albuquerque

I attended the Erez (evening) Shabbat service on Friday the 13th of February 2015 at Congregation Albert in Albuquerque, NM. This is a Reform Jewish congregation. The Sabbath is the way for Jewish people to start the Shabbat, they attend the service at the synagogue, and they do this every Friday. I made sure to arrive early, in case I needed to get permission to observe. When I walked into the lobby part of the synagogue, I was greeted by a friendly man. I explained that I was there to observe for a college class on World Religions. He called a woman named Marcia over to meet me. She introduced herself and I told her my reason for attending, and she told me that she would sit with me and explain all the parts of the service and I could ask her any questions I had. I was feeling very happy to have this opportunity to sit with someone who would help me to understand the service!

Marcia led me towards a small room called the Chapel. We each were handed a prayer book, it said Siddur on the back cover. She told me that the Shabbat is usually attended by only a small number of people, and we would fit in the chapel. I later counted less than 50 people in attendance. In the front of the room was a table, called a bima. Behind it was a large cabinet that I thought held the Torah. Marcia told me that the cantor was off that night and so the Rabbi would be conducting the service and also playing the music. I asked her what the purpose of the music was. She answered, "To get you in the mood for prayer!"

As people were entering, the Rabbi, Rabbi Rosenfeld, picked up his guitar and began to play and sing a joyful sounding song in Hebrew. He was wearing a black shirt and black pants and a yamaka on his head. All the men wore the yamaka, but none of the women. The Rabbi announced the page number of the song and we opened our books from the *back*, as Marcia pointed out to me, and progressed through from *right to left, back to front*. I noticed that the book was in Hebrew but it had English translations for some of the text. After the third song, the room was almost full, and the talking had quieted down.

The Rabbi said, "Shabbat Shalom" and everyone repeated that to him. Then he asked a woman to stand up and light two candles that were in glass holders on a lace doily on a small table. Her husband stood with her as she lit them. Marcia told me that there were a lot of Hispanic people in the congregation and that is why they light the two candles, I was not sure what she meant by that and I forgot to ask her about it afterwards.

The Rabbi announced the page number and the congregation went to that page and either sang the prayer or spoke the prayer. Marcia told me the songs were also prayers and were said or sung completely in Hebrew, then sometimes spoken in English. I wanted to read all the translations, but the service was moving pretty fast, or so it seemed to me. I also wanted to be polite and respectful so I tried to pronounce and sing or say the Hebrew prayers along with the congregation.

While I was trying to read the translations, I made mental notes of things to remember for this report. I noticed the word Adonai, and Marcia told me that means God, and she also pointed out the printed word, "God" in the text. She said that since they were Reformed Jews, they can say it and write it, but in Orthodox synagogues, they would not say it and would write it as G-d. Along with the use of the words Adonai and God, I saw, "Adonai, our God" often used with the words "sovereign" and "creator". I saw the words "praise" and "exalted" many times, too.

Next was the prayer I recognized from our text book, it was the Shema prayer. It was read in Hebrew and Marcia said it was their most important prayer. Then she told me that it is written on a scroll of paper and put in a mezuzah or scroll box and posted outside the front door on a Jewish home. I had read about this in our text, but I did not want to tell her that as she might think I was a "know-it-all"!

I looked at the words of the next prayers. They acknowledged the men from the first five books of the Old Testament, their names were in Hebrew but I could tell what they were, Moses, and Jacob and Abraham. Some prayers spoke of the exodus from Egypt and of being the chosen people. The prayers and the way they were sung were very upbeat. Sometimes people were clapping along with the singing. The prayers seemed to me to be about their gratefulness and how blessed they were. There were smiles all around the room, it was a very positive-feeling service and I was truly enjoying it.

I noticed a prayer translation about, "waking up and feeling the love and peace, and be glad you are the chosen people" I am not sure if that was exactly it, but it was very similar to what I wrote.

The next part of the service was written in English on the top of the page of the Siddur, it said Prayers for Healing. The Rabbi mentioned some names of people from the congregation in need of healing, then asked the congregation to name others who needed healing, and they did. Then the prayers for healing were recited. This was followed by the Prayers for Blessings, and the Rabbi asked if anyone had any blessings and several people responded with things like, "I am off my blood pressure medication" and, "My brother is out of the hospital", things along those lines. Then the prayers for healing were said.

At this point, the Rabbi put the guitar down and started what I would call a sermon. He spoke to us about a woman who was coming to Santa Fe in March to speak about the Western Wall in Jerusalem. She was the founder of the group, The Women of the Wall, and had made great strides in getting the rights returned to Jewish women to pray in a certain section of the wall. But she had been imprisoned for a while and so had a lot to talk about. Apparently back in the 50's and 60's women were allowed to pray there along with the men, but then for a long time they were not allowed to pray there. People in the congregation spoke to him and asked questions, the communication was very casual.

After the sermon was over, Marcia told me that every Friday at this time of year they speak the names of the people who had died, so we recited prayers and the people were named and their relatives stood for this part of the service. During the last line of this prayer, we all turned around and faced the entry way, I do not remember what Marcia told me why they do this, it was maybe to welcome Israel or to face in the direction of Israel.

Then a teenager, the only teenager at the service went up to the bima and took the braided loaf of bread (that was sitting there alongside a goblet of wine during the service) in his hand. The Rabbi took the other end of the loaf and they said a prayer and literally tore the bread in half. Then they passed the bread around and everyone who wanted to, broke a piece off and ate it. But the wine goblet was still on the bima, although I think the Rabbi drank it as we shared the bread. Then some last prayers were said and the service was over.

The entire service felt very celebratory to me, and I asked Marcia about this. She said we *are* happy and are celebrating the start of Shabbat, it is a joyous occasion. She then told me if I came on Saturday it would be a more solemn service, and they would actually read from the Torah. So I understood that this was a joyful service, meant to celebrate the start of Shabbat which everyone looks forward to, it is a break from the work week, a time to turn inward in prayer and a time to be spent with loved ones.

Marcia then introduced me to the Rabbi and he opened the cabinet and showed me the two Torahs inside, he actually opened the outside containers and I saw the scrolls. One was from the 1990's and the other he said was from Africa and was much older. The Rabbi told me that there are only consonants, no vowels, written on all the scrolls.

I was not expecting the service to feel so comfortable and friendly, or to be so casual and joyful, but the text did not talk about how it would feel to be attending a service. I was welcomed there, and felt very relaxed and happy during the entire service. There were some snacks in the lobby for people to eat after the service.

Marcia invited me to Purim, she said it was a fun event and was their fundraiser. She is the secretary of the Holocaust Museum in Albuquerque, she gave me her card and invited me there, too.

Overall this experience was wonderful for me, I learned a lot, and I believe I made a new friend in Marcia. I am going to write her a thank you letter for taking the time to explain things to me that night.

I am glad you gave us the option to attend a service in a different religion than our own. I would never have experienced this if it wasn't for your assignment!