

Visit to a Synagogue

This essay will be a recounting of my visit to a Reformed Synagogue in Albuquerque. The name of the synagogue that I visited with permission is Congregation Albert. Congregation Albert was founded in 1897 and is the oldest continuing Jewish organization in New Mexico. I went to a Friday Erev (evening) Shabbat service because I had to work Saturday morning. As a result, the succession of events might unfold a little differently than typical Shabbat service on Saturday morning.

Upon arrival, I was promptly greeted with "Shabbat Shalom", which I probably heard at least twenty times before even sitting down. I was not instructed to wear a head covering (kippah) of course unless I wanted to. There was a big basket full of them next to the sanctuary door. The greeter basically convinced me that it was of little importance to a visitor to wear one so I did not. Probably about half of the congregation was wearing them, and that is including the women, also having the freedom to wear one if they wanted to. Even the rabbi wasn't wearing one. I also had complete freedom to sit where I wanted, not being limited by gender segregation, as more traditional forms of Judaism I'm sure would require. I was given a songbook that read right to left and opened the same way. This took some getting used to and totally caught me off guard even though I knew before hand that Hebrew read that way.

The first event that started the service was the lighting of the Shabbat candles and then song. As it was described during a telephone conversation I made to the synagogue earlier that day, this service's purpose focused vastly of worship. The musicians consisted of three guitarists, a pianist, and an accordion player, who varied in gender and with ages ranging anywhere from twelve to sixty. They also had a choir, which was probably fifteen people again with a huge variation in ages, with a female worship leader to lead the lyrics of the songs. They sang many songs in Hebrew with about four of the twenty song they sang being in English. All the songs pointed to God and His sovereignty with references to the mitzvot, setting them apart from all nations, His creation of the universe and the Shabbat, and the Exodus. Not all songs were sung to the accompaniment of instruments and thus had a fluctuation of tempo as well. During some songs people slightly bounced up and down while others there bent sharply at the waist in a brief and repeated bow. As a result, a mixed range of emotion with anything from cheer, to contemplation, to reverence was given a chance to capture me. For some songs the congregation sat while for other songs they were happy and excited to stand up and participate. Thankfully, I was able to follow along with the English translations in the songbook.

There were occasional interludes with prayers and elaborations for the meaning of songs. Sometime in the middle of the service the worship leader stopped for a quick processional that included a prayer and the drinking of wine. At the end of the evening, a large homemade challah (type of bread) was passed around at just the front of the sanctuary.

In terms of understanding the whole service, I would say that I was able to stumble along. There was a huge amount of unfamiliar and Hebrew terms that were used that I had a hard time following. I felt like that was the only real barrier that prevented me from truly allowing me to fully understand and partake in the service fully. My experience will help understand the difference between a Reformed synagogue and Orthodox synagogue, with the Reformed being far less 'religious' in their rules, rituals, and ceremonies. I value the equality that this version of Judaism understands and practices. I was very encouraged to see the vast range of ages of the members as well. Although I enjoyed seeing the diversity in age, I even more enjoyed the interaction that male and female couples were experiencing.

I really liked similar aspects in which they see and recognize God. The Adonai used heavily during the service was pleasing and enlightening. Although it is an Old Testament reference to God, I rarely use it when I pray or worship. I find that using different terminology helps me better relate to God and describe Him in different attributes. Overall, I think I would have quite a few more questions if I went to an Orthodox service because there would be a reason or significance behind everything conducted in a service. During this service I was able to relate to quite a bit of the events because of all the background religious experience that I have personally. If I ever wanted to start learning Hebrew, this would be a good place to practice both the reading and pronunciation. Otherwise it felt like a very typically church service that you might find at conservative Christian church just with a different focus of course. If I had time I would love to visit both an Orthodox synagogue and a Messianic Judaism Synagogue to compare the differences between all three.