

REL 402 - Judaism

A Visit With Judaism

Judaism is possibly one of the most misunderstood religions in the world today. I am probably one of the most confused people on the subject and this is the reason that I decided to actually visit a synagogue. I wanted to see for myself what actually goes on during a Jewish religious service and I chose to visit Congregation Albert in Albuquerque, NM. The service was filled with singing and prayers in Hebrew along with ritualistic movements and actions. To my surprise, the service was not as strange or different than what I am used to experiencing at a Christian worship service; however, there were still many differences. The members of the congregation were extremely friendly and eager to know and help us in any way they could. I can definitely say that a visit to a synagogue can help one better understand the Jewish religion and open a path to religious tolerance.

When I called Congregation Albert to inquire about service times, I was told that I should attend the Saturday morning service in order to get the "full effect." Upon arrival my husband and son were each given a yarmulke to wear during the service and I was given the option to wear one if I chose to. We were also given prayer books to use in the singing and prayers during the service. We were allowed to sit together wherever we wanted to, so we picked the inner end of a back row. The cantor (a female) began the service and led the congregation in prayer and song for more than one and a half hours. The service was long but it was still beautiful and enjoyable. It might have been even more enjoyable if my family and I were able to sing and pray along with everyone.

As expected, all the prayers and singing were done in Hebrew. The prayer books did include the English version of all that was being said, but our English stood out terribly among the Hebrew language prayers and songs. There were physical movements cued by certain words or phrases such as bowing, heel to toe rolling, touching of one's own face, knee bending, and touching of the Torah scrolls as it passed through the rows of worshipers. The prayer books were read from back to front which is the complete opposite of all other books I have ever seen. I have to say that this was one of the most curious aspects of my Jewish experience. Even though most of the service was new to me there were portions that are similar to my Catholic faith.

Some rituals practiced during the Jewish service reminded me of some of those practiced in a Mass. During Mass on Good Friday adoration of the cross is practiced and the parishioners touch, kiss, or bow to a wooden cross. The facing and touching of the Torah scrolls reminded me of this ritual. Also, the bowing, heel to toe rolling, and knee bending are similar to the kneeling and bowing during a Mass. The gestures to one's face at the mention of a specific word in the Jewish service are also similar to making the sign of the cross at the mention of the Holy Trinity during a Mass. At the end of the service the Cantor leads the worshipers out for Kiddush, where the congregation takes and consumes wine (grape juice for the children) and light cookies, bread, and dried fruit. This reminded me of receiving the "Body and Blood of Christ" during a Mass. The one thing that I found to be noticeably different at the Jewish service was that I was never asked for money or anything else of value other than my time and attention. I found this to be a very noble attribute. This says to me that faith and spiritual union are the priorities of this religion and not financial gain. This was the sense that I got throughout my visit at Congregation Albert.

My visit to a local synagogue was an eye-opening experience because it helped me to see for myself what the Jewish people value most. It also showed me that good people come in all faiths and should not be judged based only on their religious beliefs. The people of this Jewish community sang and prayed joyfully throughout the entire service showing how proud they were to worship their God. The Jewish worshipers I met on Saturday were friendly, courteous, helpful, and inviting. Even though there are some major differences in the Jewish and Christian faiths, the Jewish people are not that different from any other faithful, spiritual persons of any religion. The practice of goodness and graciousness crosses all religious lines.