

## **Visit to the Synagogue - REL 402**

On Friday, February 8, 2013, I had the opportunity to visit Congregation Albert, a Jewish synagogue, as part of a class assignment to expand my knowledge of Judaism. I had called the synagogue earlier and explained to them the reason for my proposed visit.

I was met by Ben, who had volunteered to be my guide, when I arrived at the synagogue that night. He introduced me to his family and some of the members of the congregation in the lobby. Ben pointed out the gift shop full of religious stuff and showed me to a table that had brochures and the synagogues programs for that day and the week. He explained to me that Judaism comes in the forms of Orthodox, Conservative and Reformed.

Orthodox is the most extreme with Reformed being relaxed. Ben explained to me that Congregation Albert is Reformed Judaism and very relaxed and that anybody is invited to worship at any time.

### **Lobby**

Out in the lobby, they had racks of white shawls with blue stripes at each end hanging on them. Thanks to the chapter on Judaism, I knew that was a tallis and that I needed a tallis and a kippot to be able to enter the synagogue. I had seen some of the congregation putting them on and heading into the sanctuary, so I watched and followed suit, which seemed to surprise Ben. I reminded him that I had read a bit about Judaism, but had never experienced it. Since Ben already had a kippot on, he threw the tallis, which he had been holding, around his shoulders and we followed the others into the sanctuary. Ben drew my attention to the two strings with lots of knots hanging at the corners of the tallis, and explained to me that they are called the tzitzits and that they represent the awesomeness of God for caring for his people through all their trials and tribulations.

### **Sanctuary**

In the sanctuary, I noticed that there were rows of benches on the left and right sides of the room, with an aisle between. I was surprised to see men and women sitting together, which is not what I had learned in class. I asked Ben about that and another gentleman who overheard my question answered laughing, "that is why we are reformed." He explained that the men and women used to sit separately so that they would not have impure thoughts in a holy place, but they believe that if one is going to have an impure thought, they will, and when they sit will not affect it. It is up to the individuals to keep their thoughts pure. Up front, there was a podium, a stage with chairs, and on the front wall was a curtained opening which Ben confirmed to me was the Ark where the Torah is kept. If Ben had not mentioned the light above the Ark as being the "eternal light" that has to be on at all times, I would not have paid any attention to it. At that moment, I realized that everything with Judaism is symbolic.

### **Service**

The Rabbi walked up to the podium and said "Shabbat Shalom". The congregation answered and the Rabbi welcomed everyone to the service. He explained the significance of why we were gathered. He then took a long curly horn and went outside and blew it. Ben told me the horn is called a shofar and that blowing it announces to the world that the time has come to enter into a holy appearance with Hashem (God). The rabbi then lit three candles to welcome Shabbat, the Shekinah of Adonai. Then he started singing in Hebrew. There were prayer books and red books known as the chumsah tucked in pockets behind the benches. From what I had learned from class I knew that the chumsah contained the five books of Moses. When I opened the chumsah, I saw that the right side was written in Hebrew while the left side was written in English. There were readings, singing, and praying. Depending on what was going on, sometimes we had to stand, sit, or cover our heads with the tallis. I was surprised to see that they had musical instruments like guitar and upright bass, but then I remembered that this is a reformed synagogue. The rest of the service was singing, readings, prayers and preaching in both Hebrew and English. The service ended with a prayer for the dead known as kaddish, prayer requests, announcements and the Shabbat Shalom song.

### **Conclusion**

It was an interesting experience and very different from the Baptist Church which I sometimes attend. I was disappointed that the Torah was not brought out, but Ben just laughed and promised me the Torah would be brought out the next morning if I could make it to church. I let him know I could not make it the next morning since I was scheduled to work, but I promised to visit again on a Saturday so I can see the Torah. I thanked Ben and we said our byes. I would like to acknowledge Ben for his patience and the knowledge he imparted to me. The congregation was really nice and the experience was an eye-opener. I hope to visit again on a Saturday so that I can see the Torah.