

The Temple (My Synagogue Visit)

As you may already know, I was raised Roman Catholic and then on my own decided to become a Protestant. I had a few Jewish friends when I was a kid, and attended a few ceremonies. I never really paid attention to any of it but remember enjoying the bat mitzvahs and Jewish weddings I attended. I felt comfortable and felt that the Jewish community was very accepting and inviting to strangers that were not of the Jewish faith. This was when I lived in California.

For the last almost ten years I have lived in New Mexico. I have been around one Jewish person during the entire time I have been here. She is married to a friend of mine. I have never discussed religion with her so my exposure to Judaism during my adult life has been very limited. The only other time I have been around any other people of the Jewish faith was when I took an early child development class. Part of the class study involved us spending a few days with pre-school-aged children. I was given permission by Congregation Albert in Albuquerque to spend a few days with the youngsters and their teachers. These children are ages 3 and 4 so any talk of Jewish traditions and religion was minimal. Most kids don't have the attention span to absorb much about religion.

So I decided to give Congregation Albert another visit. Congregation Albert is a Reform Jewish congregation. They were founded in 1897 and they are the oldest Jewish organization in New Mexico. Their values are centered around Kedusha (spirituality), Kehillah (community), Torah Lishmah (lifelong learning), and Tikkun Olam (repairing the world). Congregation Albert has one Rabbi, his name is Harry Rosenfeld. He has been their Rabbi for almost a year. Congregation Albert has a cantor by the name of Barbara R. Finn. This rather excited me as I knew the cantor would get to share congregational duties with the rabbi and it was especially exciting to me because she is a female.

I attended the Shabbat service which took place on a Saturday. Reform Judaism attire for church is usually for a man to wear a yarmulke. I was told it was better to wear a long skirt and long sleeves. Women are supposed to wear hats or cover their heads if they are asked to open the Ark holding the Torah. I knew I wouldn't be doing any of that so I decided on a long skirt and long sleeved blouse.

The temple is a big room and I did not find that it was overly elaborate. Rabbi Rosenfeld and Cantor Finn were both in attendance. There is a pedestal called a bimah, the Torah is placed upon the bimah when it is being read. The service contained a good amount of liturgy and the majority of it was performed by Cantor Finn. I had no idea what was being said but it seemed very powerful. Although the majority of the liturgy was in Hebrew it was still very powerful and I found myself at peace. I felt quite comfortable being there. I don't think I had drawn much attention to myself so I got to be incognito and absorb what was around me. The service reminded me a lot of the Catholic services I went to when I was younger. The congregation stands when asked to stand, they sit when they are told to be seated. The good thing is that the rabbi and cantor would let you know in English when to sit or stand.

I met a young woman there by the name of A- who gave me a run down of other things I should do while at Shabbat service. She advised me stay in the room once the Torah has been opened. She said the rabbi would give the okay for you to leave to use the restroom once the Ark is closed. She also said to kiss anything considered holy if it has been accidentally dropped on the floor. A- also said that prayer books cannot be put on the floor because it is considered disrespectful and that books are meant to be left on your lap or placed in the book holders. This reminded me of the Roman Catholic services I attended. Speaking during service is disrespectful and being loud is a nuisance. I was glad to get the proper etiquette before the service.

The actual service was quick and fairly uneventful. Men and women were allowed to sit together. Other Jewish groups were seated by gender. I believe that Rabbi Rosenfeld read from Exodus and told the story of Moses. A- then explained that the rabbi would recite the mourner's kaddish which is a prayer of sanctification of God's name. The congregation all recited it together.

The last part of the service was a blessing. Challah bread (Jewish bread) and wine and grape juice were offered in another part of the temple. Challah is a mitzvah or commandment. Grape juice or wine represents God's never-ending provision for us. This reminded me so much of Holy Communion. I think my trip to Temple was successful. I felt very welcomed and it was a great learning experience.