

REL 402 - Judaism - Synagogue

I had the opportunity to live overseas shortly after I graduated high school and this opportunity proved to be extremely beneficial. I gained life experience as well as being exposed to different cultures and religions. I met a Jewish girl while living overseas, who happened to be the first Jewish person I had ever met. In the town where I grew up, there was not a Jewish temple and no Jewish people that I was aware of. I was intrigued to meet someone of a different religion, but even more intrigued to meet someone Jewish. I had heard all of my life that the Jewish people were God's chosen people and I was interested to know why and what the religion was all about.

One day while we were at the college, a group of us had a discussion about what being Jewish actually was. C- explained being Jewish was more than just a religion and that many people were Jewish by birth. I told her that she was incorrect because your ethnicity or race could not be Jewish because it was a religion and had nothing to do with a bloodline of people. She said that I was wrong and that it was not true. We debated back and forth for a while until finally she said, "I didn't realize you knew so much about Jewish people and Judaism, you sure had me fooled." I stopped and thought about it for a moment and realized she was absolutely right. I had never been Jewish, studied Judaism, or even had Jewish friends. Therefore I probably needed to learn a bit about the culture before I opened my mouth.

There is only one way that I could actually have any room to talk or have an opinion about the religion, and that was to learn about it. After our heated debate, I asked C- if she would teach me about her religion and she agreed. She said the best way for me to learn would be to go to Temple with her, to which I reluctantly agreed. I was worried that everyone at the Temple would know that I was not Jewish and would not be happy I was there. C- explained that everyone would welcome me and be excited to share their religion with me. She informed me that the Jews were not a pushy people and that they would not try to get me to stray from my religion or convert.

C- reminded me of something I already knew, that the Jews were known as God's Chosen people. She explained that there are people who practice the Jewish religion, but there are also people who are Jewish by birth. I did not understand this concept because to me Judaism is a religion. I used the analogy that Mexicans come from Mexico, so where did Jewish people come from? She told me that Jewish people originated from a certain location just like Mexicans do, and that was the area where the land of Israel is located. I always thought these people from Israel were referred to as Israelites, but C- told me that they were essentially the same thing. The original Israelites were Jewish; therefore many consider it a bloodline, ethnicity, or race.

After our discussion, I felt as if many things were clarified, and I was now ready to go to her place of worship with her. She informed me that it would be a little different from the services I was used to at my church. The leaders of a Jewish church are not referred to as priests, they are referred as rabbis. First of all, the place we were going was called a synagogue and was technically not a church. We would be attending on Saturday morning, which was different to the traditional Sunday morning or evening Mass I was accustomed to growing up in the Roman Catholic Church. I asked C- if it would be necessary for me to wear a kippah, since that is what I had seen in the movies. She said that it was up to me, but that she would be wearing lace over her hair. I decided that if I was going to go and participate, I might as well get the full experience and wear the kippah.

Saturday morning came and we headed to the synagogue. The inside of it was simply one of the most beautiful things I have ever seen. It had art on the wall and the one thing I specifically remember is the picture of Noah's ark. It was one of the most intricate and detailed pieces of art I had ever seen. There were giant pillars in the middle of the room and pews down the sides of the aisle (the one thing similar to the Catholic Church). The men were wearing kippahs and the women were wearing lace (some wore more of a net material) over their hair. C- whispered to me that it was a more conservative, traditional synagogue and so pretty much everyone wore them. I was so happy I had opted to wear a kippah. The rabbi occasionally said prayers and little sayings in what I later found out was Hebrew. There was a large meal afterward where everyone got together and enjoyed food and one another. Many people brought different dishes and some of them were traditional Jewish plates. The Catholic Church does this potluck tradition as well, so it made me feel at home. C- told me that they only do the meal and fellowship afterwards once a month because it is quite a few people to feed.

This was one of the most interesting things I have ever done and experiences I have ever had. I was thankful that my classmates and I from the university got into the debate that day because it led to me going to the synagogue. Although I am still Roman Catholic and believe strongly in the religion in which I was raised, these types of experiences are eye-opening and make you appreciate the diversity of the world all the more.