

### Visiting a Jewish Synagogue

For my week three essay, I chose to visit a local Jewish Synagogue. I have never been to a church service for any other church or religion besides the one I was raised in, so I was very excited for the opportunity to experience a different culture and set of beliefs. I am in Albuquerque right now, and I went to the Congregation B'nai Israel. I went to their online website and found their address, phone number, list of services with dates and times, and the overall spiritual message of their congregation. I went to the Shabbat service on Friday night. One thing I thought was very interesting was that on their program that they give you as you walk in, they list the day of each Shabbat service, and instead of writing the date as September 9, 2011, they wrote it as 11 Elul 5771.

The Synagogue building itself was very interesting. From the outside, there was a portion of the building that was completely round, with a very high pitched roof, and then off one of the sides of the round part was a long two-story building. Once you entered the building, there was a long entryway with couches and tables at the far end, and on either side of the entrance were display shelves, protected by glass, that showed off interesting and spiritual items of importance. In the center of the entrance, on a table, was a large Menorah. One of the sides that had the display shelves had a door next to it that said "Sisterhood Gift Shop" and in the windows were some of the items that could be purchased. There were silver dishes, such as chalices and serving dishes, utensils etc., as well as many different kinds of Menorahs. There was a small basket containing yarmulkes in varying sizes and colors. There were also serving dishes that had different compartments that were labeled with different foods, one compartment was labeled meats, and another herbs, and another dairy etc<sup>1</sup>. Once you walked into the building a little further there was a set of double doors with a label saying "Temple" and then on the other side of the couches was a small staircase leading down to the chapel where the service was held. Next to that were staircases going up and down leading to what looked like offices or classrooms.

When I first entered the building I was very nervous and unsure of where to go or what to do until a man walked up to me and introduced himself as Rabbi Flicker, and asked me some questions about myself and told me what was going to happen. He showed me the staircase to go down for the service, and where to find the program and the book they use during services. He was extremely friendly and inviting and made me feel very welcome. I also noticed that he was very social and interactive with the other members who had come for the service. Before everything started, he talked and joked and made sure that he greeted everyone who came into the building. I was very impressed that such a busy and important man made the time to greet and talk to everyone who came, and made them feel welcome and told them how happy he was that they had come. I also thought it was funny that the Rabbi and some of the men he was talking to were laughing and joking about a Jesus statue from a Christian church that had been struck by lightning recently.

When I came to the service I dressed conservatively in a knee-length skirt with a nice shirt and nice jacket over it, with closed-toed mary-jane shoes. I was a little surprised to see that everyone else was dressed so casually! The Rabbi wore a nice suit, but besides that, men came in dressed in regular jeans or cargo shorts with T-shirts and tennis shoes. One younger man was even wearing a baseball cap inside the building. The women were dressed in similar casual clothes. On one hand I thought it was strange because I was raised with the idea that you wore clothes that showed respect for the building and to God; but at the same time, it may be just as important for people to come and feel comfortable and welcome, rather than to nit-pick at the clothes that they are wearing.

I was also very happy that so many of the people that came were kind to me, and introduced themselves to me and asked me questions about who I was, and was I taking a religions class etc. All of them also told me "Shabbat Shalom" when they passed by me or introduced themselves. I felt very included, even though I was a guest, when they included me with telling me the Shabbat Shalom.

The Chapel Room was on the smaller side, holding about 80 people. There were two lines of chairs with an aisle down the middle, much like Christian churches, and in the front of the room was where the Rabbi stood and there was an altar behind him. Behind the altar on the wall was a large ornately carved wooden cabinet, which a lady told me after the service is where the Torah was kept. Upon entering the chapel room you were given a book called the "Likrat Shabbat: Worship, Study and Song." It was fascinating because the book opened backwards and was numbered backwards also. I had never seen a book like that before.<sup>2</sup> Throughout the entire service songs and verses were read out of the book, and on each page the songs were written in Hebrew, then in English. Each of the songs was sung aloud, being led by the Rabbi, and one difference I noticed from their songs compared to most Christian songs was that they sang without music. There were no instruments in the room, and the Rabbi and the rest of the congregation simply knew the music and melody that went along with each of the songs and sang them like that. All of the songs were sung in Hebrew, but I was able to follow along by reading the English portion. I thought it was great that Jewish children were taught to sing and

read Hebrew and be able to read it aloud or sing it in their service. In the early part of the service, we were all told to stand and then we turned around and faced the door, still singing the songs, to welcome the Shabbat Bride. I am still a little confused by this. I don't know if the Shabbat Bride is simply welcoming the presence of God into the service, or if they are referring to an actual female, or who she is<sup>3</sup>. After this, we turned back around and faced the front, and as they recited the next song, they bowed down to the altar and the rabbi spoke some words in Hebrew and bowed to the altar again. After singing more songs, (the Rabbi told you what page to turn to and what song to sing) the Rabbi instructed the congregation to read a certain number of pages. Everyone was standing and reading quietly and the men were reading and bowing repeatedly towards the altar as they read. After a certain amount of time, the Rabbi joined in by singing aloud and everyone joined him and sang songs and said prayers to the altar.

After that, the Rabbi, in English delivered a small message, or devotional you could call it. He talked about how it was "our job" to safeguard the message and the Jewish faith for others that are not here. He talked about how even though many Jewish people did not attend the Synagogue, those who did come needed to keep the faith and belief and culture going, so when these people did finally return, the Jewish faith would still be there for them. After his message, he mentioned all the people in the congregation or relatives that had passed away, or ones that are sick and they read a blessing for them that was printed on the back of the program, called "Mi Shebeirach." At the end of the service, we all joined hands in a sort of circle, and the Rabbi and congregation sang and repeated "bim bim" over and over and while they were singing, everyone swung their arms and every so often in the song everyone would raise their arms high in the air. It reminded me of the dances they do around Chanukah, and it ended the service on a very joyous happy note that I really liked.

I think that the people related to God through the Rabbi. He led the service, decided on the songs and the verses that were going to be spoken, and was obviously their spiritual leader. Because it was Friday night there were only about 12 people, including me, who had come to the service, and because of that it seemed much more intimate and sacred. Sometimes I think in large congregations with crying babies, and so much noise etc., it is not as intimate or profound as it can be with a smaller group of people.

Music in the sense of using instruments did not have a role in the service. However, almost the entire service was singing verses, and so I think that music plays an enormous role in their services. I think the feeling of the meeting was solemn yet joyful at the same time. I did not understand most of what they were saying and singing because it was in Hebrew, but I was able to read along with the songs and in that way I was able to know what was being said in the meeting. I sat next to one woman who was very eager to explain things to me after the meeting and she let me know when we were supposed to stand and sit etc. so I really appreciated her help, it made me feel more like part of the service rather than a visitor who had no idea what was happening.

I think that actually participating in a meeting allowed me to understand what I read in the textbook, simply because I was able to participate in the things that I had read. I got a much better understanding of their culture and beliefs by participating in a few of them, with them in a service. I have a Jewish uncle, and though he does not attend services regularly, we always went to his house for Chanukah and he also had a Menorah and kosher food, and it was so special to me to be able to participate in something that is so integral to who he is, and I fully enjoyed experiencing new ideas and beliefs.

I do still have some questions. For one, many of the men who attended the service wore Yarmulkes that were very colorful, with intricate designs and patterns and some of them were very large, and I was curious about that, since all my life I had seen Yarmulkes as simply being black, so I do not know if the colors mean or represent anything, or if it is simply a personal preference. Another question I had was that one woman who sat in front of me had a piece of lace on her head throughout the service, and I wasn't sure what that was. I asked my mom later and she wasn't sure but she mentioned it could have been a sign of respect to keep her head covered, and that sounds right, but I am still not sure<sup>4</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> These were probably Seder plates for Passover, with depressions for "bitter herbs", chopped apples and nuts, etc. (Dr. Shirley)

<sup>2</sup> Hebrew is written and read from right to left, so it makes sense to print the books to be read that way. Hebrew and Arabic WebPages often have the scroll-bar on the left-hand side rather than the right (Dr. Shirley)

<sup>3</sup> The Shabbat Bride - the Sabbath is welcomed as if she were a bride - the Sabbath is regarded as feminine. (Dr. Shirley)

<sup>4</sup> Most Orthodox Jewish women cover their head for worship. In some communities they shave their heads, and wear a wig as a head-covering. Only their husband is supposed to see their hair. (Dr. Shirley)