

## Essay 1: Judaism

When I first started reading about Judaism I was intrigued. I remember attending a Bat Mitzvah ceremony for a childhood friend when I was young but I don't really remember much about the synagogue itself. I remember that when I was at the ceremony it seemed like a somber yet happy time. I decided this week to visit a synagogue instead of adopting one of the spiritual aids/methods. I attended a Sabbath service at a local temple on Saturday morning.

When I first entered the temple, I was surprised to see that there was nobody there. I took my wife with me for moral support and to have an extra set of eyes and ears. The service for the Sabbath is called the Shabbat service. This particular synagogue had services on Friday evening as well as Saturday morning. The Saturday morning service was scheduled to begin at 9:30 am so we arrived early at 9 am hoping to see some people there and talk with them before the services. Some people joke about Mormons being late as saying they run on "Mormon Standard Time" - which is usually about 15 minutes late. I noticed that the people at this Jewish Synagogue also ran on that particular time schedule. Yes, there were a few people who were there early but most people were right on time or a little late.

When we got there, the building was open as if somebody came to prepare things then went back home to finish getting themselves ready. There was a small sitting area in the lobby as well as a closet-sized gift shop. In the main entrance there was a wall dedicated to the victims and survivors of the Holocaust, complete with lanterns using light bulbs instead of oil. The building had a small room that was used for services when the attendance was low as well as a large chapel like room called the Sanctuary. There was also a banquet room with a kitchen attached.

We were first greeted by a couple of older gentlemen who were very helpful to us. We let them know that we were there to observe for a college class and they seemed very happy to help and explain things. They gave us a small tour of the Sanctuary and explained a little about how this particular synagogue worked. This synagogue was a combination of progressive and conservative practices. The Friday night services were more progressive than the Saturday morning services. The gentlemen showed me the yarmulkes and asked if I wanted to wear one. In the spirit of getting the most of my experience I accepted. The whole time we were walking and talking with the men, my wife helped by taking notes.

Once we went to the smaller Sanctuary my wife was asked to put away her pen and paper as it was breaking the Sabbath to be doing any creative work - this included taking notes. She seemed a little taken aback but complied. I thought that it was a little extreme not to be allowed to do any "creative" writing but that is their tradition and we were there to observe not interfere. The service was led by a Cantor who led the group - also called a community - in the prayers and songs. I found it interesting that all the songs and prayers were sung without the use of any instruments or song books. The books that we were given to use were a copy of the prayer/blessing book and a copy of the Torah. They were also kind enough to give us a book that included a phonetic reading of some of the more-often used prayers.

There were many prayers and songs that were recited. It seemed like that was all we did. Whenever there was an actual prayer to be recited everybody stood up and faced east. The beginning portion of prayers and songs took almost an hour. Once the Torah was brought out of the Ark - a special cabinet that held it - everybody stood and people touched their prayer scarves or Torah book to it and then kissed the scarf or Torah book. They read from the Torah and rotated helpers and readers. Before and after each section was read a special blessing was said. After the readings from the Torah more prayers and blessings were said as the Torah Scroll was returned to the Ark.

After the service was over there was a luncheon in the banquet room that we did not stay for. Overall I liked the people at the synagogue, they were friendly and very understanding that we were out of our element and unsure of what to do. Throughout the service one of the first gentlemen to greet us, who was sitting next to us, would give us little whispers of what to do or expect next. I liked the friendliness that these people exhibited and I am glad that I chose to visit the synagogue for this class.