Field Trip Report: Trip to a Jewish Synagogue

By

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 Trip to a Jewish Synagogue

In traveling to the synagogue, my first observation was that the Jewish community was extremely small, especially when compared to the larger Christian church that was next to it. It was so small that the Christian church completely obscured the synagogue. Upon turning around, I saw the Star of David and found where to go. Due to it being dark outside when I arrived, there was no real religious impression that I received in regards to the buildings architecture.

Inside the facility, it was similar to a Christian church; it had a foyer, an area for offices and childcare, a small fellowship hall, and the auditorium. As I entered the auditorium, the Rabbi greeted me with “Shabbat Shalom”, and handed me a copy of their hymnbook. As he continued to setup for the night’s service we talked briefly and he explained that he was expecting a light attendance as they had just finished celebrating the Jewish High Holy days, and that most people had been at the synagogue all week.

Being early I was able to spend time looking around. The auditorium had pews for the congregation and a platform for those that would be leading the service. The platform had two podiums, one for the Rabbi and the other for the Song Director. The Rabbi’s podium was large and unadorned, while the Song Directors was elaborately decorated with Jewish religious symbols and candles. At the back of the platform and centered between the two podiums was a closed case with two doors, which was referred to as the Ark, and contained more Jewish religious symbols.. The Arks significance would come into play during the service, when it was opened. Lastly, on one of the walls was a large symbolic menorah, which had the names of deceased congregation members listed on each of the candlesticks.

My attention turned to the hymnbook. At first, I was confused because all of the printed pages were upside down, until I realized that the book was printed in the old tradition of reading from back to front, and that I was holding the book backwards. Finally able to read parts of the book I began to flip through the pages, and found the introduction that explained that each page had a single prayer on it, and that each prayer was written three ways: in Hebrew, transliterated into English, and translated into English. As I continued to look at the book, I inquired if the service would be held in English or in Hebrew and was told that the service would be primarily in Hebrew, although there would be some parts in English and that I should be able to follow along.

As I waited for the service to begin, a few people began to arrive. As people arrived, I noticed that the Rabbi was counting only the men. This was because one of the Jewish beliefs is that there must be ten men present in order to hold service. This was foreign to me, because as a Christian the number of people in attendance should not make a difference on whether or not you hold service.

When the service began, it was extremely fluid. The Rabbi and song director alternated back and forth flawlessly, with the Rabbi occasionally giving instructions on what page to turn to, and whether or not they would be reading the odd or even numbered pages. While I was able to follow along most of the time, because I was unfamiliar with their practices it was not hard for me to become lost. The congregation switching from Hebrew to English unexpectedly and a lack of understanding in the Hebrew language caused most of these instances when it came time to change pages. When this happened, I would try to find the page that the congregation had turned to or just wait for that segment to end and the Rabbi to announce the next page number.

There was a sermon; however, it is not what I expected. They did not read from the Torah, and the topic of the message was political in regards to current Jewish politics in Israel and a speech that the Israeli Prime Minister had made to the United Nations. The Rabbi also focused on how the congregation should be discussing these issues with people outside of the Jewish community to help increase support for Israel. Throughout the message, I also noticed that the Rabbi referred to the congregation as if they were part of the nation of Israel rather than as if they were Americans.

The Rabbi ended his message and the service, by giving some weekly announcements. After the service had concluded, I realized another difference. There was no offertory, or even remote mention of giving financially to the synagogue. This may have been due to them just completing their High Holy days, but was very different from what I am used to, as in every service at my church, there is always an offertory.

When the service was over the congregation went to the fellowship hall and had a time of fellowship called Oneg. They shared some grape juice and wine, a loaf of Challah bread, and finger snacks. During this time, members of the congregation asked if I was new to the community, and if I enjoyed the service. Even though I could not follow along all of the time, being able to hear the language of Hebrew sung was extremely moving and awesome. As such, I was able to reply that I had enjoyed the service and explained that I attended church regularly elsewhere, and was there for a college assignment. They understood and commented on how they regularly got visitors from colleges, and were glad that I had enjoyed the service. In the future, I may visit again so that I can see a service that has a larger attendance, and hopefully a service that was not affected by their High Holy days just being completed.