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Congregation Beth Ahabah

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Congregation Beth Ahabah

by Jennifer O'Connell

On Friday, November 13, 2015, at 6:15 pm I visited Beth Ahabah a Reform Jewish synagogue, located in the heart of Richmond, at 1111 West Franklin Street. This sanctuary, also known as the Franklin Street Synagogue, was dedicated in the early 1900's and houses the united Beth Ahabah and the Union of American Hebrew Congregations. Rabbi Martin P. Beifield, Jr. was the presiding official, along with Ramona Brand, the Director of Education, Natan Berenshteyn, the Music Director and Accompanist, and Sara Beck-Berman, Cantorial Soloist.

The beautiful, Neoclassical, domed building was designed to resemble the Pantheon in Rome as well as Monticello and the Rotunda at the University of Virginia, created by Thomas Jefferson. The interior of this sanctuary has an elaborately painted proscenium arch- the arch that frames the stage, and glorious stained glass windows. The sanctuary also boasts a prominently placed pipe organ with some pipes over 6 feet tall!

Each visitor is greeted with a warm and friendly welcome. I was greeted by a gentleman who explained that the service that night was not a traditional service, it was a Family-Friendly Shabbot consecration service. This is a celebration of Jewish learning for the kindergarten and first grade children of the congregation. I asked if it was alright for me to come in as a student observer, and he quickly replied that at Beth Ahabah all visitors are welcome then

he handed me the evening's bulletin and asked if I had any questions prior to the service. He then told me that guests are invited to join the congregation after the service for an opportunity to have any additional questions answered and to enjoy refreshments and socialization. Although, I was slightly uncomfortable attending this very special and intimate service, I also felt welcome and was very comfortable sitting among the congregation.

The service was casual but, ritualistic and began with beautiful music from the children's choir, the cantorial soloist, and the pianist. There was excitement and anticipation in the sanctuary from the children and their families for all of their hard work. Following the musical introduction the congregation was asked to stand for prayer and song, in Hebrew. In this beautiful sanctuary, observing this congregation I was keenly aware of how persecuted Jewish people have been throughout history and even currently in this city. I thought to myself these are just people, sweet, loving, children and their families. I wondered why humans can't just let each other believe what they want, if I brings them peace and comfort. How could anyone intentionally harm others (including children) for their beliefs? At that, I turned my thoughts back to the service and the sound of the heavenly singing. The rabbi discussed the importance of the Jewish connection with God and a connection to learning, their capacity to pray and study in the community, and the importance of bringing

their children into a culture of learning in a place of learning, the hope of the future. The children of the consecration class were then introduced, wearing their golden robes they came forward and sang, with their proud families watching. The children's parents were then asked to join their children at the front of the sanctuary to present their child (ren) with their copy of the Siddur, or prayer book, Mishkan T'filah, the new prayer book of the Reform movement and any words of wisdom they have prepared for the children. The service ended with the congregation clapping in song and the congratulatory, Mazel tov!

As I was walking out of the service I thanked Ken, the gentleman who offered to answer and questions, I asked him about the symbols on the bulletin and he showed me that you read them from right to left and he told me that they were prayers in Hebrew. The families were going to share their meal or were heading out of the sanctuary. A woman was collecting the bulletins for future use and she did not want me to keep the one I had been using. After I had said good evening to both of them, I left feeling as though I had learned just a little bit more about religion. Religions are similar in that they bring contentment and hope to the individuals who practice them and they are different in their rituals and symbols, how they are practiced, and the secret texts used. •

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