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Tikvat Israel Messianic Synagogue

by William Van Deusen

I visited the Tikvat Israel Messianic Synagogue at 2715 Grove Ave, Richmond, VA. I visited on Saturday the 28th for their 9:30 am Shabbat service. The service was presided over by Rabbi Benjamin Shull.

The synagogue was a fairly large red – brick building. It had a large tower in the middle flanked by two smaller wider portions of the building. The two side buildings both had large circular windows with a large Star of David inlaid into the glass. The inside of the building looked very similar to a standard church. There was a wide center isle and rows of pews on each side all facing towards an “altar”. The floor was covered in blue carpeting.

The visitors weren’t greeted in any special way. There was someone at the main door shaking everyone’s hand and smiling but that was about it. As for the demographics of the service, the majority of the people were white and middle class looking. Also, almost everyone was there in family groups so there were all ages present. There were about 500 or so people present at the service.

I actually convinced my friend Sam to take me to this synagogue last Saturday because he’s Jewish so I was very comfortable being there. He’s actually not that dedicated to his religion but I did buy him Chipotle for taking me so he agreed to sit with me and explain everything as best as he could.

I didn’t really enjoy the service very much to be honest. It seemed like you really had to know about Judaism to know what was going on so I just sat back and payed attention the best that I could. Most men were wearing yarmulkes and a few women were wearing head shawls. Everyone was dressed up very nicely but there was still a casual nature to the service. The overall tone was very uplifting. There was music throughout the service highlighted by a big finale at the very end. The opening was fairly casual and began with music leading into some prayer. After that, the rabbi got up onto the front altar and led more group prayers and did a couple readings from the Torah.

Eventually he gave his sermon and it was actually pretty cool to listen to even for someone who isn’t very religious like me. He talked about the importance of family and giving to back to the community during the holidays and not getting distracted by all the consumerism that highlights this part of the year. The rabbi also spoke about the importance of adhering to the values of Hanukkah and how it’s about so much more than just buying and receiving gifts. Even though I don’t really follow a religion, I had to agree with him completely because for me, the holidays are really about family and not just gifts. I think we all tend to get wrapped up in the materialistic mindset of this part of the year and tend to forget the things that really matter.

The congregation was very involved and wasn't reserved at all. After the sermon the rabbi actually had a short group discussion and everyone seemed eager to participate. The overall service seemed pretty spontaneous. There wasn't much ritualism throughout the service besides the readings from the Torah. The service ended with another prayer and a short reading from the prayer book leading into an uplifting musical performance by the musicians. Following the service there was actually a bunch of food in one of the side rooms. Everyone went in there afterwards and ate and socialized. Sam and I didn't want to go and eat anything since we aren't members of the synagogue and don't contribute to anything.

There wasn't much art or symbolism throughout the service. This seemed like a very modern synagogue and was more focused on the message instead of the rituals that came with it. There was an entrance procession where the rabbi carried the Torah in but that was about it. Sam was telling me that this particular Synagogue was a different kind of Judaism than what he grew up in. Apparently, this branch of Judaism actually views Yeshua, also known as Jesus, as the Messiah of Israel. This is strange to me because it sounds a lot like Christianity and I thought Jews weren't supposed to believe in the Messiah. Apparently this is not the case though as evidenced by the existence of this branch of Judaism.

Overall I found myself to be pretty fond of Judaism. I liked how down to Earth everything was. There wasn't a whole lot of extravagant ritualism or pageantry and everyone seemed genuinely interested in what was going on. The congregation seemed to view the Rabbi's message as the most important part of the service which I agree in. It was a very

modernized and relatable message even for a non-Jew such as me. All in all I had a good experience with my first Sabbath service. •

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