

On February 21, 2015, I made my first visit to a Jewish Synagogue. The facility of my choice was Congregation B'nai Israel, which translates as "Sons of Israel."

The Congregation B'nai Israel has a mission statement that I printed from their website (<http://www.bnaiisrael-nm.org>) and it reads, "to create an environment in which all who enter our doors can be enriched and inspired by Conservative Jewish life, values, and spirituality."

As I entered the facility I was greeted by a gentleman named Ben. He was passing out the Torah Service and the Talmud along with a copy of the day's activities. I introduced myself and explained to him the purpose for my being there. At first I think he was a bit taken aback and not quite sure how to proceed with me.

I was very concerned that I was following the appropriate etiquette specifically regarding my head being covered. He politely told me that what I was wearing would be fine, or if I wanted I could wear one of the yamakas they had in a community bin next to a pile of prayer shawls. Needless to say, I opted to wear my hat. (Which was most definitely out of place, as it was a ball cap.)

Ben then escorted me into the actual synagogue and introduced me to a gentleman named Larry. Larry escorted me to a seat in the back row, sat me down and immediately began to give me information on what was happening.

For this service on Shabbat there was the Torah reading: Terumah - Exodus 26:1-30 and *Haftarah* - I Kings 5:26 - 6:13. I was immediately blanketed with the feeling that I had stepped back in time or was in another place. I am not accustomed to such a ritualized event.

As the Torah reading began, my guide, Larry, explained that there were seven readings to be read by seven different members who are flanked by two individuals whose duty it is to ensure the correct translation. But, as the reading began I found that all of the prayers and reading are led by a Cantor in Hebrew. Additionally, I was unaware that the Torah service and Talmud were read right to left. I quickly corrected myself as I am sure the momentary look of befuddlement on my face was apparent.

Throughout the service there were intermittent times when the Rabbi (Arthur Flicker) walked through the congregation with the Torah. People would pay homage by touching their prayer shawl to the Torah and then kiss it. All the while, Rabbi Flicker was shaking hands and being pleasant (until he walked by me and I got an odd look from him. Maybe it was my hat?)

Once they completed the readings, they handed the Torah to the Rabbi who very purposely turned it towards the congregation so that the writing was visible. Larry explained to me that this is done because in older times many people could not read and that this practice was to produce evidence that there were words actually written.

During the *Haftarah*, one of the first female Cantors (JoAnn) performed this portion. She had a nice voice and sang through the entire reading. Immediately after, Rabbi Flicker began to speak about a marriage of two people in the congregation. At first I had no idea to whom he was referring. But, my trusty guide informed me that the woman who had just given the *Haftarah* was getting married to the woman next to her. Once again, I must have had a very perplexed look on my face because he immediately explained that the sanctioning of same-sex marriage within the Jewish Orthodox is really at the judgment of the Rabbi. In this case, this was only the second same-sex marriage sanctioned in the history of the Congregation B'nai Israel (Albuquerque).

After an hour and a half I decided it was time to go. From this point on they essentially begin repeating the entire service. As I explored the lobby, I was met by a lady named Jennie who had spoken with me the previous week. She was quite pleased to see me and to learn that I had participated - as much I could any way.

They invited me to stay for a *kiddush* lunch, but I had to decline. Overall, I would say that my visit was very pleasant and I was impressed with the level of devotion. I ended my visit with a handshake and a 'Shabbat Shalom' to both Larry and Jennie.