

Essay #2

My friend had invited me on more than one occasion to join her at service at the synagogue. Being a naïve teenager with a wildly skeptical view on the world I would consistently refuse outright. Looking back upon it now I wish I had taken the opportunity to find out more about her cultural heritage. It has been almost two years since her passing, but there is still a lot of emotion I carry about the subject. Though I was terrified about how I would react, I took the opportunity of this assignment to explore untouched ground.

My visit to the synagogue was complicated from the very beginning. I traveled to Albuquerque to visit the Congregation B'Nai Israel. Due to some unexpected complications I arrived in Albuquerque too late on Saturday to attend service. Looking online I saw on a schedule there was a lesson at 9:30 the next morning, so I stayed the night to try again the following morning.

The building itself had an interesting architecture. Walking up to the front of the building I felt extremely self-conscious. I was dressed professionally, but I had no idea if there was any specific attire worn at this place of worship. I was fairly early so I stood rather awkwardly outside the front door looking at a decorative headstone on the side of the building. The Hebrew lettering was beautiful and I enjoyed looking at recent examples of the language. I saw a mother and her young daughter walking in, the woman smiled at me and I decided I had spent enough time loitering and proceeded to follow them inside.

Coming through the doors I think I was most surprised by how ordinary it looked. I don't know what I was expecting, but it had the same feeling as any other church I have ever attended. There were colorful schedules of events for the children, and the carpet had the smell of that generic carpet cleaner that you smell in all churches and commercial offices. The only real difference was that as opposed to the crosses found about most Christian churches, there were Jewish symbols such as the star of David and a bronze Hanukkah statue in a glass case.

After standing and gawking for a minute I approached three people conversing at the entrance to a hallway. I stood waiting politely for a decent enough gap in their conversation to inquire what was going on. On a side note I think it is funny to mention that the topic of the conversation was green chile, just like what people were debating at the Baptist service I had attended a week before. When I introduced myself and explained why I was there I was met with a rather confused look. The woman I had addressed checked a calendar and informed me that the only thing scheduled for that day was a sort of Sunday-School-like teaching on Yom Kippur for the children. They told me I was welcome to observe and write about that.

As we were talking there were children excitedly running around, all the boys were laughing as they donned kippas and one girl donned a pretty prayer shawl. I wondered if that was something my friend had done when she was a little girl. The woman with whom I was speaking began to explain that mostly this was just an excuse for the children to practice their Hebrew. She explained that literacy was held in high regard because then the children would be able to go out and study anywhere that had their sacred text. It was interesting to note that throughout our exchange this woman and those around emphasized heavily words like "we", "us", and "our", which to me was a perfect example of how strong a family dynamic there was in the Jewish community.

Unfortunately I did not get the full experience of a service during this trip. I am looking forward to trying again to go and learn more about the customs and beliefs in this particular portion of Jewish faith here in New Mexico. I am hoping I will get a chance to talk with the Rabbi (who is female) and see if I can ask politely if she faced any issues coming to her prominent position in the synagogue. All in all it was a unique experience for me and I would recommend anyone who enjoys religions or new cultural experiences to try a similar endeavor.