Friday Shabbat Services at Beth Ahavah Synagogue, Philadelphia

A PAPER
PRESENTED TO
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by

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On November 1, 2002, I attended the Friday evening Shabbat service at Congregation Beth Ahavah in Old City Philadelphia. Beth Ahavah is a synagogue which was founded in 1975 to serve the gay and lesbian Jewish community in Philadelphia, and is a member of the Union of American Hebrew Congregations, the central body of the American Reform movement.¹

The synagogue is relatively small, occupying “storefront” space in a small street between Front and 2nd Streets, just below Market St. I hung my coat in the vestibule and, since I was early (the third person to arrive) I spent some time looking at the Judaica the synagogue had for sale – a pretty menorah shaped like a tree, jewelry, *mezuzot*, and other items. I then crossed into the room we later used for *kiddush*, and spent some time looking at the photos they had posted from throughout their history.

A friend of mine from work, David, then arrived and took me under his wing. He and his boyfriend put on their *kippot* and I asked whether I needed to wear one or not; I remembered from our reading that the Reform tradition places less emphasis on halakhah and often violates the traditional interpretation of halakhic norms regarding gender patterns, but I didn’t want to assume that this was the case.² David, who knows I’m Christian, answered with a maxim from my church – “None must, some should, all may,” confirming my guess that this was a matter of personal choice for this congregation. I opted not to wear one as I didn’t want to make myself any more self-conscious than I already was. We got our copies of the *siddur* and found seats in the worship area.

Beth Ahavah uses a prayer book popular in the Reconstructionist movement, *Kol Haneshama*. This book uses gender-neutral language when referring to both God and to people. Feminist theologians and scholars have posited that patriarchal language affects our perceptions

of God, people and especially of women, and that this effect is often negative, resulting in
oppression and misogyny. Influenced by these theories, as well as by the complaint of many that
they have difficulty relating to a solely masculine divinity, gender-neutral language is currently
very popular in both Jewish and Christian gay and lesbian liturgies. This particular siddur also
provides transliterations and translations for all the Hebrew, which was a great boon for me,
since I cannot read Hebrew quickly enough to sing songs written in it.

The worship space was comfortable and not big; there were chairs for about 60 there. A
large wooden Torah ark in the shape of the Star of David was situated in the front of the worship
space; it had sliding wooden doors, which were closed. The bimah, a simple wooden table with
a reading stand, stood in front of that, and hanging above both was the eternal light, which was a
sort of stained glass globe in the shape of a flame, lit from within by an electric light. To the
right – stage left, you might say – was a table set with two candles, and the walls had Jewish art
on them. On the wall to my left was a large brass board with name plates on it; from the names
and dates I assume these were for deceased members of the synagogue. Each nameplate had a
light bulb next to it, and some of these bulbs were lit; I guessed that these represented those
people whose jahrzeits were being observed, but I later forgot to ask what the significance was.
The room also contained a piano, which we never used.

The service leader, Megan Doherty, arrived; she is a student at the Reconstructionist
Rabbinical College in Wyncote. I was able to spend some time chatting with her at the oneg
shabbat (what we’d call “coffee hour” at my church) after the service; Beth Ahavah does not
have a full-time rabbi, so she shares the duty of leading services with a rotation of other people.
I watched as she put on her tallit with the appropriate prayers, which she spoke under her breath
as she put it on, first wearing it as a shawl, then moving it to her shoulders.
When we got ready to begin, we sat down in the chairs in the worship space. There were approximately twenty people in attendance. Ms. Doherty, who was standing behind the reading stand, asked for a volunteer from the congregation to come up to light the Shabbat candles on the small table. After a little cajoling, a woman accepted and went to the small table, lit the candles, waved her hands over them, and said a short prayer in Hebrew, to which we all responded “Amen.”

A great deal of the rest of the service was sung; this surprised and delighted me. I do not remember all of the songs we sung, but the first was Lehah Dodi, which we sang in what I could describe as a “rollicking” fashion, occasionally slipping out of unison during the refrain into a sort of two-part round. The siddur describes this song as a “hymn to honor and escort the Shabbat.” At the last verse, we rose and faced the entrance to the synagogue as we sang the final words of welcome, which in the English translation read:

Oh, come in peace, O divine crown,
with joy, rejoicing, and with mirth,
amid the faithful, loved by God,
come in, O bride, come in, O bride!4

The Hebrew words of the hymns and the very Jewish flavor of the music and the wordless chant that often continued the singing beyond the words printed in the siddur gave me a sense of the importance of song in the Jewish liturgy while emphasizing the distinctiveness of the Jewish tradition.

After we sang a few psalms, Ms. Doherty stood at the bimah and delivered the d’vrei Torah, a short exegesis on the Parsha Chaye Sarah (Genesis 23:1 – 25:18), which describes the death and burial of Sarah and Abraham, introduces Isaac’s wife, Rebekah, and describes the

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4 Teutsch, Kol ha-neshamah, 46.
descendants of Ishmael. Part of the d’verei Torah was a short discussion of relationship and the importance of interpersonal relationships to human beings; rather than being a monologue, the congregation was encouraged to add their input to the interpretation of the portion of Torah allotted to the day.

We then moved on to the ma’ariv, the central part of the service. This began with the recitation of the shema, the statement of the Jewish faith, and continued with a few blessings, which we sang together in Hebrew. The heart of the ma’ariv seemed to be the amidah, the central prayer of the service, which we each said silently and individually, having been instructed to sit down once we were finished. In keeping with the innovative Reconstructionist mindset that emphasizes the need for liturgy to be relevant to the participating individual, the siddur offered a variety of ways to pray the amidah, including some guided meditations alongside traditional and contemporary prayers. As this was my first time in a synagogue, and I was worried about not holding things up, I decided to do what was familiar, and pray through the traditional amidah in its English translation, which came first in the book.

The amidah that I prayed was divided up into sections. The first section was an invocation of God’s presence that I recognized as having been appropriated by Christianity as the opening lines of the Eucharistic prayer:

Open my lips, BELOVED ONE, and let my mouth declare your praise.6

I continued with a section devoted to the Ancestors, in which God was invoked as the Ancient One, the God of a line of Jewish forebears populated by many familiar names from the Bible, and remembering him as the savior and protector of the Jewish people throughout their history. The third section was “Divine Power”, remembering God’s power as manifested

6 Teutsch, Kol ha-neshamah, 90.
through the natural world; the fourth was called “Naming the Holy”. In this section, I could hear
the source of Jesus’ Jewish teaching when he instructed his followers to pray, in part, “Hallowed
be thy name” (Matthew 6:9). I then was instructed to pray for “The Day’s Holiness”, recalling
the basis of the Shabbat tradition (the seventh day of rest described in Genesis) and blessing God
for providing the Shabbat. 7

“Worship”, “Thanks”, and the “Blessing for Peace” were the final three sections, and they
focused on blessing God and asking his blessing for ourselves as individuals, for Israel as a
people, and for the entire world.

After the silent prayers were completed and everyone was seated again, we sang the Magen
Avot, a song that summarized the amidah and allowed us to communally celebrate the part of the
worship that we had just individually celebrated. 8 After that, we sang a final song of blessing to
conclude the service.

After a few moments of reflection and wishing each other “Shabbat shalom,” we moved into
the room where the oneg was to be held. There we performed the Kiddush ceremony, in which
we all took a cup of wine or juice and said a Hebrew blessing, with which I kept up as best I
could. We toasted with the cups – “l’chaim!” – then we placed our hands on the challah and said
a blessing for that too, tearing chunks of it afterward to eat. The remainder of the oneg was
given to eating and talking, much as happens after almost every Christian service I have ever
attended.

Overall, the service left me feeling very peaceful and with a much greater appreciation of the
Jewish faith and of my own traditions. As a Christian, I know that the roots of my faith are
almost entirely Jewish, but seeing those roots in action was illuminating. Finding that several of

7 Teutsch, Kol ha-neshamah, 90-96.
8 Teutsch, Kol ha-neshamah, 110.
our Christian prayers were taken directly from the synagogue services was particularly
interesting, and it gives me an increasingly deeper sense of continuity to know that those words
go back even farther than the nearly two thousand years that they have been used by Christians.
I particularly appreciated the singing; the music, which was not printed in the *siddur*, hinted at
the traditional nature of the service, since all the Jewish attendees knew the proper tune to sing.
This gave me the impression that even the songs were a tradition to be passed down the
generations to each new participant in welcoming the Shabbat. I was left with a better
understanding that while the Reform and Reconstructionist Jews are re-examining the function of
tradition and particularly its relationship to halakhah (and the authority that determines that
relationship), they are obviously not rejecting tradition entirely.
Bibliography

*Beth Ahavah website.* Online: [http://www.bethahavah.org](http://www.bethahavah.org).

