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FYS: Religion and Stuff

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Spatial Analysis: Temple Beth Shalom

The space that I decided to visit for the spatial analysis assignment is Temple Beth Shalom, a Jewish temple located in the South Hills of Spokane. Temple Beth Shalom is a liberal Conservative Jewish congregation that strives to connect and inspire the Jewish community. Temple Beth Shalom was founded in 1966 when two congregations merged together and then together they built the synagogue, which is still used today, in 1969. Temple Beth Shalom offers a variety of services from Thursday to Saturday. On Thursday, Erev Simchat Torah Service is the practice. On Friday, there is a service to celebrate the beginning of Shabbat. Also on Friday, five times a year they hold a service called Tot Shabbat that is for the younger members of the temple to get involved in celebrating the Shabbat and once a month there is another service called Shabbat Shirah that focuses on music and the joy that music brings. On Saturday, there is Shabbat service, which is the one that I attend with Annie and Norah. This is where they hold the conservative and reform services reading from the Torah and the Siddur. The population served at the temple is Jewish people of all ages from the Spokane area. There are two different types of services, mentioned before, the conservative and the reform, so there are appeals to different intensity of the practice. After speaking to multiple people who attend the temple, this is a typical space for Jewish tradition. Besides some research and speaking to people of the congregation, it is hard for me to tell if it holds some significance or difference, but the people of the congregation believe that it is typical and standard for the Jewish faith.

As we pulled into the parking lot of Temple Beth Shalom, my eyes were immediately drawn to the complex shape of the building. It is bare, gray, has so many angles, and reminds me of the LA cathedral. When we were driving to find it, I wasn't expecting what I saw, I kept searching trying to find the temple, so when we pulled into the parking lot I was confused. I was used to big and grand churches. After we got out of the car and made our way to the doors, I noticed a security guard. I immediately made note of that and thought about how there have always been targets on the Jewish communities back and took some time to think about the hardships they have all gone through and are still going through to this day. When you first walk into the building, you are in this sort of alcove/waiting area. The first thing my eyes went to was the flag of Israel and multiple posters and boards talking about saving the people and their land. I know that Israel has a huge Jewish population but I was still taken aback by the profoundness and loudness of the posters. There wasn't a distinct smell to the room, no incense or anything. As I walked around the first room, I noticed the beautiful Torah that was placed behind glass on a wall. It was beautiful. I had never seen a Torah in person before and my breath was taken away. It was huge, sacred, beautiful, timeless, it seemed fragile but so powerful at the same time. I thought about the impact and importance that it holds for so many people, and I was excited to be a part of this tradition, even if it was just for a few hours. After, the three of us talked with a congregation member and he explained that we are not allowed to write in the areas of worship, that there were two practices going on, and just to sit and stand when everyone else does. This man was very nice and she really helped us find our footing for the day.

When I stepped foot into the conservative portion of worship, the first thing I saw was everyone kissing the Torah. I was astonished because in the catholic faith, only the prosider touches the holy book in mass. We found a seat in the back, careful not to disrupt anything or be

a distraction. As my eyes scanned the room, I began to take in my surroundings. I heard Hebrew being spoken, people from the crowd went up there to say a prayer before the readings from the Torah, there were words being sung but also spoken in a way. There was full participation from the crowd. Everyone was enthralled and engaged, making it a true sight to see. A few minutes went by and a man came up to us and explained the different books and how to follow along in service. There was the Siddur, a prayer book that contains daily prayers, prayers for Sabbath, and prayers for holidays. Alos, there was the Torah but in book form, the Torah is the Law that God revealed to Moses and is the first five books of the Old Testament. I was grateful that he explained the differences since most of it was in Hebrew and we couldn't understand. When one of the prosiders was telling the story, which was 14:21 and I don't remember the book, but I remember the numbers. I was struggling to keep up and understand, but there was an English translation, so I was able to follow along in a way. Next I noticed what covered the walls. There was a flag of Israel and America, there was an art piece of two lions on the wall closest to us. There was a pillar in the way of that which made it hard to see but from what I could, it was beautiful. Finally, the altar. While the worship space was smaller than I thought it would be, the altar was grand in its own way. There was beautiful colored glass, all wood and a table for the Torah to stay when in use. It was beautiful, simple, but beautiful. It allowed for people to focus on what was truly important, the Law and word of God. The way the room was laid out allowed for people in the congregation to see each other, interact with each other, and appreciate each other. Which, I appreciated coming from Catholicism where everything is just rows and rows of pews all facing forward. We learned that in the conservative side of the temple, you were supposed to typically stay the whole time and it was more rigid and was held to a higher

standard. No phones, no distractions, only prayer. After about 30 minutes, we decided to check out the other side.

Before fully making our way to the reform side of the temple. We ran into someone who was a congregation member, but also helped lead services. We were in a gathering room with chairs, tables, and food. We learned that after services on the Sabbath, they have a gathering where they eat and come together as one. We asked her a few questions about services and the temple itself, but shortly after, we went into the reform section. This space was a lot smaller and you entered in the front, opposite of the conservative section. There were about 20 people there and we made our way to the back. Everyone that we interacted with was so lovely and nice and were willing to help us understand their faith. Some people brought us the Siddur, others helped us find pages, it showed me that they cared and were wanting to help people learn. While this one was a little bit more uncomfortable with it being such a small space, I enjoyed this one more. The people leading the service were both women, which I loved and thought was really inspiring. They interacted with the congregation, people spoke to each other, and it was more relaxed. From what I could tell, this side was the same process and practice as the conservative side, but it felt different, more real. This time, my eyes went to the people. To their yamakas and how each person was different, a representation of themselves and who they are. It was beautiful. My eyes went to the two old women next to us who had a genuine smile on their faces. My eyes went to the family sitting in front of us, the mom helping the young ones find their way and guiding them. There was much decor or anything on the reform side, but I enjoyed that. I enjoyed the humbleness and the focus on the Torah and ultimately on the people. How there was an emphasis in community and each other, rather than saints or icons. That is what faith is about, people. There would be no faith without people. I realized there, that faith/religion is people and

community. People could move about freely, there were toddlers playing with toys, some side convos, there wasn't a strict order for people besides the readings.

After visiting the temple I had a lot of questions. The first question I have is, what all is the Temple doing to support Israel? I know that they say prayers and have lots of ways of remembering people, but do they donate money or what else? I couldn't find anything about donations going to the war, but they have joined global memorials for recent and past attacks on Israel. I tried to look at the donations tab for any information on the Temple Beth Shalom website, but the only thing was a place to put card information. My next question is if someone wanted to join Judaism at 18 years old, how long would the process take? Is it even possible to join now? After some research, I found that yes people can join Judaism at any age and that the process takes around a year or a little longer than a year. It all depends on the person's commitment and the Rabbis requirements (Posner 2024). My last question is why are there two sections of the Shabbat? I found that this allows people of different levels of the religion to participate in the same Shabbat service while aligning with their beliefs (Feldman 2020). I honestly really enjoy the fact that there are two different variations for people, because it allows probably more people to participate in the service.

When I first heard about this project, I knew that I wanted to do something that wasn't tied to the catholic faith because that was something that I was comfortable with and new a lot about. So when I looked at the list of places, I saw the Jewish Temple and immediately jumped at it. I have a few Jewish friends, but never really took the time to fully understand their religion and I felt that this was an opportunity to do so. After talking to Annie and Norah, we all decided that this was the place we wanted to go. Before going to the temple, I looked at their website and did my own research on the Temple and the service we would be attending. Besides that, I didn't

do much research because I wanted to be shocked and wanted to take everything in when I got there. The morning of, I centered myself and reminded myself of why I was going to learn. I reminded myself of what ways were respectful to observe. As we were on our way to the temple, I was very nervous. I didn't really know what to expect and I was worried that the congregation was going to think that we were intruding or judging them. I kept asking myself questions. Was the space going to be small? Big? How many people were going to be there? Was everything going to be in Hebrew? My mind was racing. While I was nervous and anxious a good chunk of the time there, everyone was very nice and willing to help and teach us. I learned that religion is more than just belief. It is the people, the community, it is a reason for people to live. Without people, religion would not be a thing. I also learned that it's okay to be uncomfortable. It is the only way that we will learn new things and grow as humans.

Works Cited

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