

Site Visit 2

April 22, 2014
Beth Israel /the West Temple
Reformed Jewish Congregation
Rabbi Enid C. Lader
14301 Triskett Rd.
Cleveland, Ohio 44111

As part of an interfaith effort toward greater understanding and respect for each other's religion, Rabbi Lader lead a special Seder dinner as an effort to reach the greater community. She also generously took the group, mainly visitors, to view the Sanctuary and the Torah Scrolls. It was all a great privilege.

There were 51 people in attendance, including the Rabbi and five others from Beth Israel to help the guests.. There were only three children and two teenagers. The other 40 adults were visitors like myself and included pastors from two local Christian Churches. All were dressed in common street clothing, not quite dressy casual. The clothing was so casual, I could not tell if the Rabbi as wearing a ritual shawl or if it were simply a vest. The Rabbi and the Jewish men assisting with the group wore yarmulkes. The Rabbi mentioned that at a Seder held at the beginning of Passover, there were 100 people from the Temple in attendance of the 150 usual attendees. (They call it a temple, so I am using that terminology)

Our experience included a few modifications to help instruct a group unfamiliar with the tradition. We each had a small book that explained the history, the background preparations plus the serious and sacred nature of the evening. It was a special Haggadah published as a standard way for the Jewish community to use with their non-Jewish friends. We were able to follow along and recite or read as we progressed. The Rabbi began with a song. She played her own accompaniment on guitar. We used grape juice instead of wine and simply reused one glass instead of using the traditional four. The Rabbi was the only person who had matzoh wrapped according to tradition. but each table had matzoh and a Seder plate with representative items. We also had dishes of the actual items we would consume. The matzoh was to remember the bread made in haste as the Jews fled Egypt. We had parsley to represent the hope of freedom dipped in salty water that represented the tears shed in slavery. A beet was the 'vegan-friendly' alternative to the shank bone of the traditional paschal lamb. Horseradish was our bitter herb. We mixed that with a sweet fruit mixture and ate it as a sandwich. It was supposed to represent the mortar used by the slaves in Egypt. We also had boiled eggs, the universal symbol of life.

Not in order, but to summarize the activities: the Rabbi led us in song and prayer and recitations. Members of the group participated in the reading of the 4 questions for the children. We all recited the plagues on Egypt, the Hallel and some of the more lighthearted aspects of the evening (reading the goat poem and the 13 questions) it became apparent to me

how valuable all of this was in helping children (and adults) to remember and pass on the traditions. The Seder was in two portions, the first part before the meal dealt with the exodus from Egypt and the hope for the future. After the meal we spoke of the experience of the Holocaust. In each case we were also invited to remember all those who suffer in bondage or poverty or oppression. Early and at the end of the evening the door was opened, first to the poor and second to welcome Elijah. Each participant poured some of their wine (grape juice) into a glass for Elijah. We ended with the children finding hidden Matzo from earlier and a prayer for peace and all that was promised. The Rabbi gifted each of us a little cake symbolizing her own gratitude for life's little pleasures now that the time of Passover and remembering was done.

After the Seder, the Rabbi took us into the sanctuary area and entertained questions. This is a small congregation with a very simple building. She explained that though other places may be more ornate, each temple has few key elements. This group had a magnificent set of lecterns and candle sticks that were hand hewn by one of the members. One lectern was for the Rabbi and the reading of the Torah, it had special parts to aid in the reading. The smaller lectern was where the cantor would be. They cannot afford a regular cantor, only for the special holidays. On each side of the main worship area, there were two seven-point Menorahs on the wall and the flag of the United States in one corner and the flag of Israel in the other. I am glad the Rabbi Lader pointed out the significance of the lamp above the ark. It is called the Ner Tamid, or Eternal Light representing the lamp that burned in the temple and the eternal presence of God.

The Torah was kept in the Ark. Here the ark is in the form of two large wooden renderings of the Ten Commandments. The scrolls were behind a curtain. Stored with the scroll were a set of beautiful silver filial with bells that would be placed over the rollers of the scroll. In ancient times the bells would alert worshippers as the priest carried the scrolls to be read. To my mind the Torah was quite large (she said it was small in comparison to most) and weighed about 25-30 Pounds. It was covered with an immaculate hand worked cover. She explained that the needlework was done by all the women in their group, each would do a bit and pass it to the next. The scroll itself was made from animal parchment and written in ink by hand. Rabbis use a special instrument to point along as they read rather than damage the precious parchment. She said it takes up to a year for an experienced scribe to write the Torah. Any wearing of the writing would need to be reworked by a scribe. Size and style and number of scrolls for any synagogue may vary, but the words of the Torah are kept exact. I love zipping thru my smartphone for scripture and lessons, but I must say I appreciated the reverence shown for the scrolls. Rabbi Lader also discussed the books found in the Torah and many comparisons that we have made in class.

The building also houses an extensive library since perpetual study and contemplation of the Torah is important. Study for adults and especially for children is fostered on a regular basis.

Overall it was an enlightening and enjoyable evening. The members were pleasant and eager to explain and invited us to Torah study or the Rabbi's Interfaith Activities.

I did not feel there was any appropriate memento to show my attendance, but I think you know I couldn't have made all that up. ☺ My only thought was that you could check the website for the announcement of the activity. We all had to register in advance and they recorded our attendance. <http://www.thewesttemple.com/about/rabbi-religious-staff>. I also included a picture of the cake from the Rabbi.

Interfaith Seder

Location: BITWT

7:00 pm

Rabbi Lader leads from a specially written Haggadah.

Sponsored by the West Park Interfaith Council.

90 minutes (not a full meal),

An optional discussion will follow until 9pm.

A free will offering will be taken to cover costs.

You MUST rsvp to reserve your seat 216-941-8882