

Visit to a temple or a synagogue



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I spoke with Rabbi Avi Winoku at The Society Hill Synagogogue, and attended Friday night worship the day after Thanksgiving. As a Muslim, I was interested to learn something about Judaism. Through our discussion and my observation I feel I learned a great deal about the Jewish people and their faith, and also how their beliefs compare to my own. Although we have our differences, it was gratifying to also see similarities in our laws and customs. In dietary laws and methods of religious worship, it seems like Jews and Muslims really did once come from a similar tradition.

Observant Muslim eat halal meat, and I knew that Jews choose only kosher meat. Also, I knew that Muslims are allowed kosher meat if halal is not available, so I was interested to find out what it meant to be kosher. In Islam, we don't eat pigs, and animals must be slaughtered with a sharp knife by a cut to the throat. Also, any adult Muslim can butcher an animal, as long as they pray to Allah facing Mecca beforehand. Rabbi Winoku explained Jews don't eat pork, either, but they have a different way of determining what meat is clean. Islam forbids dead meat, blood, and the flesh of swine. Jews eat only land animals with a split hoof that chew their cud, and birds that are not scavengers, and fish that have fins and scales. One thing that is the same is that Jews use a very sharp knife and cut across the animal's throat to keep it from feeling pain. But one thing that is different is that, although the Jewish slaughterer must be a holy man, Jews do not require that he pray before killing an animal. I wonder how it is possible for kosher meat to be halal, but that is a question for another day (and another religious leader!). Also Jews do not mix milk and meat at all, so that Jews can't eat something like a cheeseburger.

I knew that the Jewish holy day is Saturday, not Friday as it is for Muslims,

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and the holiday starts the night before. The Rabbi said the Friday night service is a very happy one, where the congregation sings songs to welcome what they call the Sabbath Queen. The day of rest is like a gift that God gives to his people, so the Jews like to treat its coming like a visit from royalty. I also learned that this Friday night service is a little shorter than the Saturday ones, so it is considered very "family friendly" and there would probably be many children attending. However, they would say some of the most important prayers. I learned about the Shema, which is a prayer that announces there is only one God, just like in Islam. Another difference between Jews and Muslims is that Jews only pray three times a day instead of five, and sometimes they combine their afternoon and evening prayers into one longer service.

Inside the sanctuary, I found that Jewish people face Jerusalem when they pray; Muslims face Mecca, but as Americans we are both looking to the east! There is an ark with a beautiful door where they keep their Torah, the holy book. However, they did not take it out on Friday; it is usually read on Saturday mornings and on important holidays. Over the ark, there is an "eternal light" that should never go out, to symbolize the eternal light of their holy book. One really big difference is that men and women worshipped together; families would all sit together, which we don't do in Islam. This was because I was in a conservative synagogue. In an orthodox synagogue, the women would have to sit behind a barrier or in a balcony. Another important difference is that Jews never kneel or prostrate, although they still do plenty of standing up and sitting down. However, while praying in Hebrew, there is some similarity in how the congregation sounds!

The rabbi asked me not to write during the service, because writing is

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considered work and Jews do not work at all on the Sabbath. So, I could not take very good notes about what was going on! Also, I was asked to wear a yarmalke to cover my head in the sanctuary. I did not have to if I felt uncomfortable, since I wasn't Jewish, but they would like me to. After the service, everyone went out into the hall where tables had suddenly appeared covered with food! (They have non-Jewish helpers to do some of the work.) There was a benediction over the wine and all the adults had a cup to drink; however, I do not drink wine. Fortunately, they had grape juice for the kids. Then they said another benediction over the bread, which is a special braided loaf. After that, there were plenty of treats: brownies and cookies and little pastries. Some of the people were very friendly and wanted to know what I thought of their synagogue (it's beautiful) and whether I was thinking of converting (no). They answered all my questions.

All my life I have had some interest in how other religions act, and I have always wondered about whether Jews are very different from Muslims. I think that we probably are not so different, and that if we could look at the things that we all believe in (one God, for instance), that we should have an easier time living in peace together. This assignment gave me the courage to find out firsthand a lot of things that I wouldn't have really looked for otherwise, and I'm glad