

Intro

For this opportunity, I decided to attend virtually a morning Shabbat at Congregation Ohev Shalom. As I was unable to attend in real time, I watched a recording which gave me the possibility to replay until I could understand better.

Observations

The service began with the customary “Shabat shalom”, and a very short welcome before beginning right away. Thankfully Ohev Shalom provided a copy of the Siddur Lev Shalem, the book they used for the service where all the songs and passages were, at least the pages that were used in that Shabbat.

In contrast with many other religions, where the sacred texts are read, Jews chant it. After some research, I found it’s called Hebrew cantillation, trope, trop, or te’amim. The video focused only on the rabi, so I was not able to see the singers, but it appears that there were several and they took turns singing, as the rabi told them to rise or sit. The rabi from time to time would also participate in the singing, though he wouldn’t lead it. The singers would from time to time oscillate between loud singing and almost complete silence, while I could still listen to some people singing, but as if reading for themselves in a low voice.

The chanting, which was the biggest part of the service, was in Hebrew, and the rabi continuously moved from page to page, skipping from time to time. He also mentioned on which page he was every now and then.

The Siddur Lev Shalem is divided into four columns which contain the Hebrew text with the trope symbols, the same text in English (which sometimes includes the Hebrew text written in the Latin alphabet), as well as annotations in English on both margins (the ones on the left being commentaries or small messages, and the ones on the right giving deeper insight into what the congregation was singing). As Hebrew is a language written from right to left, I saw the rabi turning the pages in that direction. The book contains a mixture of songs, psalms, verses, and stories. It contains things textual from the Tanakh, and things based on the Tanakh.

After almost an hour of chanting, the rabi began the service in English, speaking about the book of Exodus, specifically about the construction of the Tabernacle, and how the specificity of God giving the instructions to the Israelites was a display of love in the form of him preparing them as explicitly as possible. The reading of the book of Exodus chapter 26 was also done in Hebrew. Apparently, the congregation took turns reading the sacred texts.

In the middle of the reading, they paused for a moment to pray for the ill doing the Mi Sheberach prayer in a mix of Hebrew and English. After that, they prayed for those in Gaza and the IDF. Then, they continued for a while reading, until they paused to pray for the prosperity of the U.S. and its inhabitants (in English). After that, they continued normally.

They closed with some announcements, some worship songs, and the customary “Shabbat Shalom”.

Opinions

I, being a Christian, was expecting something along the lines of a worship moment, a reading of the scriptures, and a farewell. So naturally when I began listening to music, I assumed that it was some sort of hymn or psalm, so I waited for the reading of the text, which I hoped was in English. It wasn't until 25 minutes in that I realized that the whole thing would be like that, and as a result, that that had probably been the reading of the scriptures all along. I remembered there were some links below the video, and there I found the Siddur Lev Shalem for the morning Shabbat, where the first "passage" had the Hebrew text in the Latin alphabet, confirming that I was reading the correct part. After that realization, everything became more clear.

I was not expecting at all that the service would be in Hebrew. The chanting was fast, and as I hadn't prepared beforehand (as I know suppose Jews do, or I assume they already know by heart some part of this), it was hard for me to follow the reading in English while hearing the chanting in Hebrew.

It was really interesting to see (or better said, to listen to) the chanting of the sacred texts. It was interesting hearing parts or derivatives of the Old Testament of the protestant Bible being sung.

The service was full of things I didn't understand because I had no prior knowledge of Judaism. For instance, almost at the beginning of the service, they asked those observing Yahrzeit (I got the name from the Lev Shalem) to raise and take part in some sort of blessing for the congregation. Also, as not all parts of the Lev Shalem include the Romanized Hebrew text, it was hard to follow the service not knowing Hebrew.

Another aspect I didn't understand why it happened, was why sometimes they appeared to stop singing and instead seemed to read in a low voice.

In the beginning, I thought that the whole service would be done in Hebrew, something that discouraged me from watching the rest, but thankfully I could skip to that point. When the congregation began the reading of the scriptures, I wondered whether they all had the exact same book (the rabi and someone from the congregation specified the page number), and why there was an "ask and response" dynamic from time to time. I grabbed my Holy Bible and read along in English.

I found the chanting a very interesting way of improving the remembrance of the law of God. However, I found the requisite of knowing Hebrew incredibly limiting, as even trying, I found it had to keep track of what they were reading and where they were.