

Interfaith Thanksgiving Iyyun
Tribute to Victims of the Tree of Life Synagogue Shooting

Good morning everyone and welcome to our communal Thanksgiving service! I'm so delighted to be here today, surrounded by such a supportive interfaith community. While building bridges between communities of diverse cultures, beliefs, and religions is always of the utmost importance, it is especially fitting that we should all gather together to celebrate Thanksgiving. Thanksgiving provides a unique opportunity for people to rally around a unifying idea. Unlike most holidays that are specific to a particular cultural or religious group, Thanksgiving has long been detached from its religious roots and regarded as a secular holiday focused on gratitude for the blessings and good fortune we have been so privileged to receive. So, in the spirit of this holiday, we gather together to sing, pray, and proclaim our joy as a united community.

Amidst our gratitude and celebrations, it is also vital to acknowledge that not everyone has been fortunate enough to evade hardship. Indeed, most of us have encountered personal challenges that have shaped our worldview and relations to our fellow beings. The world can be frightening and unpredictable—filled with hatred, distrust, greed, and violence. Despite the consistency of this reality, the news, historically, was limited in its reach. With the advent of the 24-hour news cycle and modern technology, however, the news is now inescapable, constantly inundating us with reports of humanity's most heinous acts. As a result, the future of civilization seems perilous.

When, however, was the last time a breaking news story included acts of heroism, integrity, bravery? Something that might encourage and inspire society? My pointing this out

is not to diminish the necessity of reporting crime and corruption, but to shed light on the good that we are too preoccupied to appreciate.

Inevitably, we have all heard about the tragedy that struck the Tree of Life Synagogue in Pittsburgh, PA last week. This violent attack, motivated by hate, resulted in the untimely deaths of 11 innocent individuals. Difficult as it may be, it is perhaps all the more necessary in times of peril to seek those rays of light; to appreciate and acknowledge what is good, inspiring, and hopeful, when we come across it. The support that the Jewish community has received is overwhelming. Countless blood drives, vigils, and crowdfunding campaigns have been organized; Muslim organizations have raised upwards of 1.5 million dollars to cover medical and funeral costs for victims; numerous sports teams have observed moments of silence preceding their games; Pope Francis condemned the shooting as an "inhumane act of violence"; and the Iranian Minister of Foreign Affairs denounced the attack, saying that "extremism and terrorism know no race or religion, and must be condemned in all cases".

Amongst the pain in the world, we must remember that "even the smallest light shines bright in the darkness." We must better appreciate what we have, while we have it—taking nothing for granted. With this intention, I ask us to take a moment to acknowledge our own influence. We are that spark of hope. Our presence here, as an interfaith community, demonstrates the very best that society has to offer. I am grateful that there are good people in the world, and I am truly thankful to be surrounded by them in this moment.