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HBO ORIGINAL

# *a Tree of Life*

THE PITTSBURGH  
SYNAGOGUE SHOOTING



NEW DOCUMENTARY  
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DISCUSSION GUIDE

# *a Tree of Life*

## THE PITTSBURGH SYNAGOGUE SHOOTING

On October 27th, 2018, a gunman opened fire inside a Pittsburgh synagogue, killing eleven people as they prayed, in what would become the deadliest antisemitic attack in American history. **A TREE OF LIFE: THE PITTSBURGH SYNAGOGUE SHOOTING** is a deeply personal portrait of the survivors, victims and family members, who share their harrowing first-hand accounts of the impact of the shooting on the community.

The film is rooted in a community in the aftermath of a violent attack, as they work to rebuild and heal. Despite core differences, they come together to determine what justice looks like and how to best move forward while honoring and learning from the past. The film sheds light on the collective trauma suffered by a tight-knit group and brings into sharp focus the hate-based rhetoric that surrounds many of the mass shootings today, threatening the fabric of our society.

The story of the attack is told through voices from the community, including Carol Black, Dr. Joseph Charny, Anthony Fienberg, Audrey Glickman, Daniel Leger, Hannibal Lokumbe, Wasi Mohamed, Rabbi Jeffrey Myers, Brad Orsini, Rabbi Jonathan Perlman, Michele Rosenthal, Diane Rosenthal, Augie Siriano, Ellen Surloff, Andrea Wedner, Stephen Weiss and Barry Werber.

**Run Time:** 81 minutes

**Director:** Trish Adlesic

**Executive Producers:** Michael Keaton, Marc Cuban, Billy Porter, D.J. Gugenheim, Geeta Gandbhir, Lauran Bromley, Elliott Joseph, Lloyd Myers, Michele Fetting, Charlie Friday,

**Producers:** Trish Adlesic, Susan Margolin

**Hashtag:** #ATreeofLife

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# Director's statement

"I always wanted to honor the sacred memory of the victims by giving agency to the family members and survivors that felt comfortable sharing their experiences and feelings. They are the only ones I felt should tell the story. It has been profoundly moving for me to bear witness to their stories and they will always be a part of me and live in my heart forever. It has been the greatest honor of my life to make this film. I believe that by sharing a lens into their lives, doors of understanding will open for everyone impacted by discrimination and identity based violence. This is the power of art and outreach committed to standing against antisemitism and identity-based discrimination and violence."

- Trish Adlesic, Director

# How to use this guide

Thank you for sharing **A TREE OF LIFE: THE PITTSBURGH SYNAGOGUE SHOOTING** with your community. This guide contains information about the film, resources for further learning, and discussion questions to deepen your understanding of the issues addressed in the film, while also providing an opportunity to process your thoughts, questions, and response to the film.

If you choose to address content warnings, you may inform audience members that the film includes themes of violence, guns, racism, antisemitism, pain, and human suffering.

Encourage your community, friends, family, and students to do what they need to in order to feel safe, heard, and supported before, during, and after their screening. Provide time for reflection and discussion following the screening and direct your audience towards resources (listed later in the guide) that can help them to continue to process and learn after the screening ends.



# Discussion questions

## INTERSECTIONAL COALITION AGAINST HATE, RACISM, & VIOLENCE

- I. Have you noticed a rise in the number of incidents of hate crimes and hate-based violence, as well as mass gun violence incidents in the US in the last few years? If yes, then what can we do to prevent antisemitism and all other forms of hate?
  - Most mass shootings are a result of hate. How do we work as a society to counter this phenomenon? What individual action or change would you make? Can you come up with any policy or culture changes? Share them on social with #ATreeofLife
  - How do we view victims and perpetrators of gun violence in our country? How can we come up with solutions to decrease and eliminate gun violence in the US? And importantly, how do we intervene without glorifying perpetrators of gun violence?
  - How do we work within our communities to prevent mass gun violence? How does this feel different from other attacks targeting a specific group?
- II. What measures can you and the general public take to prevent hate-based violence? What can our government, community leaders, representatives, and educators do?
- III. In the documentary, Wasi Mohamed, who was then Executive Director of the Islamic Center of Pittsburgh states:

***“I think people were a bit surprised to see the Muslim community of all communities step up and help the Jewish community, and I think that it’s because of misconceptions about both of our communities that people were so surprised. But our religions are similar, our traditions are similar, our values are similar.”***

- Have you noticed an intersectional movement against hate, racism, & violence building in the US in the last few years? Specifically, groups, organizations, and people coming together to counter hate and harmful differences - you can [learn more here](#).
  - How can the general public be more informed on how to bring communities together and work to ensure that such incidents do not happen again?
- IV. Have you seen an increase recently in resources and media coverage regarding anti-hate and togetherness? What are they? Can you share on social with #ATreeofLife?
  - V. What role should political and community leaders play in the aftermath of a shooting or violent incident? Have you seen any leaders rising above and bringing their community or country together? Discuss how they did that.
  - VI. What is the media’s role in bringing communities together and dispelling harmful stereotypes?
  - VII. Let’s discuss legacy - how does one move ahead while still honoring the past? What do communities do with places or buildings that have been struck by hate-based violence?

## EDUCATION AND DISMANTLING STEREOTYPES

- I. What are stereotypes and how have you seen stereotypes, particularly as they relate to culture and identity play out in your life?
- II. What do you think the government, civic and community leaders, and individuals can do to dismantle harmful stereotypes and racist practices, beliefs, and systems?

## NON-VIOLENCE & ACTIVE SHOOTER SAFETY TRAINING

- I. Currently, do you feel you'd know the best action to take if you found yourself in an active shooter situation?
- II. Do you think you'd feel safer in schools, at local community centers, and in other spaces if you had participated in active shooter safety response training?
- III. Do you feel that non-violence and active shooter safety training should be mandatory at all schools and places of worship? Where are some other places that you think this type of training is particularly important?

## HUMANITY

- I. Audrey Glickman has a beautiful quote in the film, ***"We have to cause peace to happen, it's an active thing we have to do."*** How do tragic events like the Pittsburgh synagogue shooting bring people closer, and bring out the best in humanity?
- II. Anthony Fienberg makes a beautiful statement in the film, ***"We can change other peoples lives in a positive manner because that is what the victims would have wanted."*** Discuss moments from the film where you noticed something positive that came out of such a devastating event?



## **COURAGE, INDOMITABLE SPIRITS, & DETERMINATION**

- I. Can you recall a moment in your own life where you needed to be particularly courageous? What helped you muster up that courage?
- II. What do you admire most about the individuals who shared their stories and experiences in **A TREE OF LIFE**?

## **ANTISEMITISM**

- I. When did you learn about Antisemitism? If it has, how has Antisemitism affected your community? How can people work to counter Antisemitism and hate?
- II. This was the deadliest attack on Jewish people on US soil. Discuss the fear that could now exist within the Jewish community as a result of the attack. Do you think Jewish lives have changed in the aftermath? How have your views about the safety of Jewish people and Antisemitism changed?

## **CELEBRATION OF JEWISH CULTURE & VALUES**

- I. In what ways can all communities become more consciously inclusive of the celebration of Jewish culture & values and those from groups different from their own?
- II. How can communities create a more well-rounded and inclusive society by acknowledging and honoring Jewish culture, alongside all other religions and cultures?





# Learning & action

This heartbreaking and personal film confronts the current political climate which engenders such hate-based violence and explores the effects on the greater Pittsburgh community while telling a universal story of a community coming together to rise up against hate.

Whether you are a student looking to push back against Antisemitism and promote learning about different religions and cultures on your campus, an activist seeking to change your community for the better, or if you're simply ready to learn more about these issues, we have curated action items to help you get started. If there are programs at your school, place of work, city, or town already doing this work, or if you have additional ideas for ways to get involved, we encourage you to be creative and utilize any ideas you might have.

## LEARN MORE ABOUT THE FILM

- Visit the [film page](#) to learn more and share it with friends and family. Be sure to share it on your social channels and discuss how you felt after watching the film using #ATreeofLife

## DEEPEN YOUR LEARNING AND UNDERSTANDING

- [Learn more](#) about hate-based crimes via the US Department of Justice.
- The Victim Connect Resource Center provides helpful and important resources regarding hate crimes. [Learn more here.](#)
- History has shown that in times of increasing political violence and democratic decline around the world, diverse movements have formed to protect democracy, stand for nonviolence, and demand peace. [The Horizons Project](#) recognizes the need for this kind of movement in the US. Learn more about their work and take advantage of their [helpful resources here.](#)
- 3GNY is a nonprofit founded by third-generation (3G) descendants of Holocaust survivors dedicated to educating diverse communities about the perils of intolerance and providing a supportive forum for descendants of survivors. **Build Empathy through Living Links to Holocaust Testimony:** Invite a [3GNY](#) volunteer to share their family testimony with your community. 3GNY's We Educate (WEDU) program trains grandchildren of Holocaust survivors to share their grandparents' stories in school and community settings. As the population of survivors wanes, it is more important than ever that 3Gs (third generation descendants) act as a living link to this history and carry forward the lessons of the past to ensure we live up to the vow of "Never Again."
- Are you an educator? These [detailed resources](#) promote effective teaching about antisemitism and the Holocaust from the [United States Holocaust Memorial Museum.](#)
- We love [these inspiring stories](#) that will make you eager to engage with your community.
- People often feel that they can't make a difference on their own. These stories show how people defied these doubts and took a leap of faith to make a difference in their own community. Do the same in your community!

## TAKE ACTION

- Are you in the Pittsburgh area? Check out the work of **Center of Life**, which supports their community as they strive to be strong and to make their neighbors strong. With its roots planted deeply in the community and supported by extraordinary partners, COL serves Pittsburgh communities with rich academic out-of-school programs and outstanding experiences in music and arts. Not in Pittsburgh? They also have a variety of online resources available **for free here.**
- Antisemitism impacts millions of Jewish people and people of all backgrounds in the U.S. and around the globe, tearing the fabric of societies wherever it spreads. ADL is a leading expert on antisemitism and is on the front lines, shining a light on all forms of antisemitism and empowering individuals and communities with tools to address this age-old hate. Here is a **list of impactful tools** via ADL to fight antisemitism in your community and nationally.
- Work to report and end AAPI Hate (as well as anti-Black, Asian, Muslim, LGBTQ+ incidents) in our country, **more resources and information here.**
- **Find out** how hate crimes can be prevented in your community.

