

Brotherhood Way in S.F. lives up to its name at Sept. 11 service

San Francisco

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Cantor Henry Greenberg put the shofar to his lips and blew a resounding tekiah -- in St. Thomas More Church.

That was the scene on Tuesday evening, where about 450 people gathered at the Catholic church on San Francisco's Brotherhood Way to commemorate the victims of the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks.

The street truly lived up to its name as participants walked with candles from St. Thomas More to Congregation Beth Israel-Judea, to the Greek Orthodox Church, ending at the "Peace" statue across the street.

St. Thomas More was an ailing parish of 300 families until the Rev. Labib Kobti took over its leadership two months ago. A Palestinian-American, Kobti brought with him the Arab-American Catholic Community, which hosted the ceremony.

Wishing the Jewish guests a happy Rosh Hashanah, Kobti greeted all the participants as "Children of Abraham" and said, "God has called us together to build paradise on earth. He had no other vision for us.

"I believe that if we love each other, and share and cooperate, we can be a model for the many citizens of the USA. San Francisco can be a model," Kobti continued. "We can tell our home countries in the Middle East and throughout the world that they can do it, too.

"Noting it was the first time the Arab-American Catholic Community had hosted an interfaith gathering, Kobti said, "We suffered like all of you, because we are all Americans. Let this day bring us closer together.

"Rabbi Evan Goodman, spiritual leader of Congregation Beth Israel-Judea, which is St. Thomas More's neighbor, said the attacks fell at holiest time of the year for Jews.

After Greenberg blew the shofar, Goodman spoke of the lessons to be learned from the tragedy.

"We can become so focused on what is wrong that it's hard to remember there is a blessing for everything," he said, "and that every person is a blessing.

"Goodman then introduced a Torah of Beth Israel-Judea's that "was also a victim of terrorism," as it was rescued from Czechoslovakia in the Holocaust. Greenberg chanted the Ten Commandments from the Torah, followed by the El Moleh Rachamim, the prayer for the dead.

The Rev. Anthony Kosturos of the Greek Orthodox Church said the gathering of so many of different faiths was a "declaration of God's power, and who we are as Americans.

"And Minister Christopher Mohammed, of the Nation of Islam, said, "Peace is something every human being desires, but it's as elusive as trying to hold water in your hands.

"Hatem Bazian, an imam at the Islamic Society of San Francisco, chanted from the Koran and said that while God allows evil to exist, God does not condone evil.

"God holds people to righteousness," he said. And rather than belittle each other, all religions should "have a competition in righteous deeds -- in feeding the hungry and housing the homeless. We are here for a purpose.

"The service concluded with a 5-year-old Palestinian-American girl, Ariana Massis, singing a song in Arabic and English. Among the words: "I am a child who wants peace."

Looking a bit like a beauty pageant contestant in a poofy white dress, complete with white gloves, Ariana got resounding applause.

After she finished, a hymn was sung and candles were lit. Participants walked from the church to the synagogue to the next church, speaking in small groups along the way.

Sarah Davidson of San Francisco, a member of Beth Israel-Judea, said she wasn't going to attend any Sept. 11-related events, but this one especially appealed to her.

A senior at U.C. Santa Cruz, Davidson spent her junior year abroad at the American University in Cairo and was there on Sept. 11 last year.

"This is an incredible time of polarization between people of different religions," she said.

Palestinian-American Elias Botto of San Mateo said that "to see all the religions together gave me nothing but hope. All of our beliefs lead us to the oneness of God, and that's what we experience today. No matter what our denomination is, God is looking over us all.

"Another Beth Israel-Judea congregant, Jason Mass of San Francisco, said that he felt a real sense of extended community.

"Everyone expressed in their own tradition the same universal themes of peace and love," he said.

"Peace and love are what's going to get us out of this mess we find ourselves in, because every other approach outside of that hasn't worked. We really need to take this message to heart and out into the world and into our daily lives.

"Perhaps one of the greatest moments of interfaith cooperation though, was overheard in the foyer of Beth Israel-Judea, when Archbishop Franzo King of the African Orthodox Church approached Greenberg with a question about the shofar. "Where do I get one of those horns?"

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