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Burning synagogue 'a most terrifying image'

Prior to a 4 p.m. press conference today, Jews associated with Adas Israel Congregation synagogue wait to hear and hope to avoid a 'nightmare' scenario of a hate crime. As for the future: "The plan moving forward is uncertain and probably a long way off," board says.

Written By: [Brady Slater](#) | Sep 10th 2019 - 12pm.



The Adas Israel Congregation synagogue burns Monday morning. (Submitted by Devin Garner)

When the only remaining Modern Orthodox Jewish synagogue in the Northland burned to collapse on Monday, it struck chords around the world — appearing on nightly newscasts and gaining an outpouring of support on social media.


“Thinking of our friends in the Duluth Jewish Community today,” tweeted Sen. Amy Klobuchar in the wake of the fire that claimed the Adas Israel Congregation synagogue but spared more than half of its sacred, handwritten Torah scrolls.

For New York author Sarah Rose, the event hit her at her core. She calls Duluth her ancestral home. Growing up she spent holidays at the synagogue around a slew of “spinster-aunties,” cousins and other relatives from the Twin Ports to the Iron Range. She took to Twitter, saying her great-great-grandfather built the synagogue.

“I was absolutely devastated,” Rose said. “The most terrifying image to any Jew anywhere is a synagogue on fire. It is what our nightmares look like.”


The Duluth Police and Fire departments along with the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives are conducting an investigation into the cause of the fire. Police Chief Mike Tusken confirmed two people of interest were interviewed Monday.

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A press conference has been called for 4 p.m. Tuesday by the city of Duluth to further discuss the fire.

The Adas Israel Congregation issued a statement through a board member on Tuesday, addressing a cloudy future.

“The plan moving forward is uncertain and probably a long way off,” board member Mike Baddin said in the statement.

The synagogue warned of grassroots efforts to raise money for the synagogue amid concern for false crowd-funding pleas.

“Nobody affiliated with Adas has set up any type of GoFundMe page nor have any steps been taken to solicit contributions,” a news release said.

“The Adas board has not convened but I have knowledge that no requests for financial donations have been solicited and I do not believe that will happen,” Baddin said. “Generosity is always appreciated especially now.”

The surest way to send monetary support is by mail directly to the synagogue at 302 E. Third St., Duluth, MN 55805.

Even the notion of possible criminality unbalanced Rose.

“We felt very welcome in Duluth, never an unkindness towards us at all,” she said. “That’s part of why it’s so terrifying for me. I see it as a touchstone for everything good — being a Midwestern Jew.”



Sarah Rose @thesarahrose · Sep 9, 2019

My great grandfather built this synagogue

twitter.com/jca_mn/status/...

Rose grew up in Chicago, visiting Adas Israel Congregation synagogue with her family multiple times a year. She's cousins with the synagogue's president, David Sher.

Together with Rose's 87-year-old mother, Helen Cohen Rose, the story of the Adas Israel Congregation came into view from its origins four generations ago. Helen was raised in Superior and lived in Chicago until moving to assisted living closer to her daughter in New York.

"I was happy to hear they saved the Torahs," Helen said. "We're Jews, we go on and we rebuild. We're fortunate to have the Torahs to build around."

To hear Rose and her mother tell it, the 120-year-old synagogue got its start with Helen's great-grandfather, Sholem Kaner, one of the first Modern Orthodox Jews to settle here. The story is that Kaner, a determined man with a temper, was doing well in Lithuania until he was chosen for the military service.

"He didn't like the idea and he decked a member of the armed services," Helen said. "You don't do that, so he came over with his pregnant wife."

The first generation of Lithuanian Jews to join him were builders and merchants. Kaner built a home on East Second Street in Duluth and his family included 10 children. He and others who settled in the Northland paid for others to come from Lithuania.

"They brought over all sorts of families to marry into them," Helen said. "The family tree is enormous."

Later generations, Rose said, became doctors and lawyers who left the Northland, dispersing to places across the country. The Adas Israel Congregation synagogue that once had been a hard place in which to find a seat, began to decline in numbers. Still, it survived as other synagogues of its kind closed.

"It was an easy place for us — we felt like Minnesotans," Rose said. "There was no place kinder and more welcoming for Jews than the Upper Midwest. The thought this might be intentional and a hate crime is horrifying. We're waiting to hear. We hope it's not our worst nightmare."



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Religious books and stained-glass windows inside of the Adas Israel Synagogue in Duluth. (photo by Bob Wolfe)

