

Congregation grieves after fire destroys synagogue in downtown Duluth

Members grieve loss of 117-year-old structure as cause investigated.

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SEPTEMBER 9, 2019 — 9:14PM

DULUTH — Chuck Cohen knew there was trouble by the sound of his mother's voice.

For decades, Nina Cohen, 80, has traveled to the Adas Israel Congregation here for all the high holy days. So when she called her son Monday morning with the news that the 117-year-old synagogue had caught fire hours earlier and had burned to the ground, "it sounded like a death in the family," Cohen said. "I could just feel it in her voice."

"There are no words right now," said David Sher, the 72-year-old vice president of the board at Adas Israel, addressing the loss.

As firefighters worked in the rain to put out the hot spots Monday afternoon, state and federal investigators were on the scene trying to determine the cause of the fire and whether it was set. Police had interviewed "several people of interest," they said, but by evening, investigators had yet to discover evidence that would suggest arson.

"Know that we are working in earnest on this investigation," said Duluth Police Chief Mike Tusken. "Buildings don't start on fire by themselves."

As investigators inspected the ruins, Gov. Tim Walz tweeted support to the now homeless congregation at a time of heightened insecurity for the Jewish community.

"I'm saddened to hear about the fire that destroyed much of the historic Adas Israel Congregation Synagogue," the governor said. "To members of the Jewish community — my heart is with you today."

Officials said there had been no known threats made against the congregation, and no one was inside when the fire started.

State fire investigators were on the scene, as were federal agents with the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives.

The blaze began just before 2:30 a.m., and the first to arrive on scene spotted a storage room on the east side of the synagogue ablaze, the Fire Department said. One firefighter was treated and released for injuries caused by falling debris.

Several scrolls saved

Sher raced downtown to save the synagogue's Torah scrolls but found "the whole place was in flames." Ultimately eight of 14 scrolls were recovered as the flames appeared to spare the lower level where they were stored.

Jack Haskovitz of St. Louis Park said his grandfather built the only Orthodox synagogue in Superior, Wis., and when it closed, "all the Torahs and scrolls and books were transferred to this congregation."

The fire comes as three significant observances for the Jewish faith draw near. Rosh Hashanah, the Jewish New Year, begins at sunset on Sept. 29. Yom Kippur, the faith's holiest day of the year, begins at sunset on Oct. 8. The harvest holiday of Sukkot begins at sunset on Oct. 13 and runs until sunset on Oct. 20.

The fire was the third at a place of worship around downtown Duluth in the past several years, though officials said that had more to do with the age of the buildings.

Community rallies

The Minneapolis-based Jewish Community Relations Council of Minnesota and the Dakotas has [established an emergency fund](https://give.jewishminneapolis.org/give/248685#!/donation/checkout) (<https://give.jewishminneapolis.org/give/248685#!/donation/checkout>) to support the Duluth congregation.

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An overnight fire engulfed and destroyed a synagogue in downtown Duluth and continued to burn many hours later Monday morning.

"As we approach the Jewish High Holy Days, we offer our full support to our fellow Jewish Duluthians," said Steve Hunegs, executive director of the council. "We are in close communication with the leadership of Adas Israel Congregation and law enforcement in the Duluth area."

The Adas Israel congregation was formed in 1885, and the cornerstone of the 7,900-square-foot location was laid in 1901 before construction was completed in 1902.

There is one other synagogue in Duluth — Temple Israel — which is located about 1¼ miles northeast of Adas Israel and is affiliated with the Reform and Reconstructionist movements.

"We at Temple Israel are devastated by this tragedy," Rabbi David Steinberg said in a tweet. "We offer our assistance to our friends and neighbors who belong to Adas Israel Congregation."

Cohen said his family helped found the congregation, and his parents Lawrence and Nina were married there in 1959 before they moved to St. Paul. He expressed confidence that "something beautiful is going to come of this."

"With great tragedy people come together in ways they didn't think they would."

Correction: An earlier version incorrectly said the building had been converted to apartments.

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Firefighters work the scene of an overnight fire that engulfed and destroyed a synagogue in downtown Duluth, Minn., Monday, Sept. 9, 2019.