

# Congregants mourn loss of synagogue and 'so much history' in fire

**Dan Kraker** Duluth September 10, 2019 2:00 a.m.



Smoke still rolls out of a window after fire destroyed the Adas Israel Congregation synagogue on East Third Street Monday morning. Jed Carlson via Duluth News Tribune

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Law enforcement officials are still investigating the cause of [the fire that destroyed](#) the 120-year-old Adas Israel Congregation synagogue early Monday.

"The instant I saw it, I realized it was a total loss," said Mike Baddin, a member of the small congregation's board.

Speaking Monday afternoon after a news conference, he said many of the congregants have parents, grandparents and even great-grandparents who helped build the synagogue.

"The first thing that went through my mind is, 'I'm grateful my parents weren't alive to see this,'" Baddin said. "I hate to say that, but it would have just killed them on the spot."

The synagogue was built in 1899 on the hillside on the eastern edge of downtown Duluth, at a time when the city's Jewish community was thriving. The Jewish population has dwindled over the years. Now the congregation is home to about 40 members, including Jack Seiler.

"It's just heartbreaking to see so much history go away," Seiler said. "It's almost surreal."





Duluth Assistant Fire Chief, Dennis Edwards, left, helps firefighter Ben Johnson extract artifacts from inside the synagogue. Jed Carlson via Duluth News Tribune

### **Monday** [Duluth synagogue destroyed in fire; investigation underway](#)

But Seiler added that there is a silver lining. Firefighters were able to rescue eight of the congregation's 14 Torahs from the synagogue's flooded basement — they're irreplaceable.

"They're handwritten, and they have the entire five books of Moses, which is the cornerstone of the Jewish religion," he said. "So, monetarily they're invaluable, and of course from a biblical standpoint, invaluable as well."

Both Seiler and Baddin said they could not help but contemplate the possibility that the fire was intentionally set — that maybe it was an act of hate.

Duluth Police Chief Mike Tusken said investigators have interviewed two people of interest who were near the scene of the fire when officers first responded. But he said it's too early to say how or exactly where the fire started.

"We have an idea," he said. "But we don't have enough facts right now for us to be absolutely sure as to what happened."

Tusken said there was no record of any threats against the congregation.

Duluth firefighter Ben Johnson delivers artifacts to Phil Sher.

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ws Tribune | Duluth firefighter Ben Johnson delivers artifacts that were saved inside th

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Firefighters did not find anyone in the building when they arrived. One firefighter was injured when debris collapsed on him in the synagogue's balcony. He was treated at a hospital and released.

This is the second devastating fire to a place of worship in Duluth in recent years. In 2016, just three blocks from the synagogue, a fire caused major damage to Gloria Dei Lutheran Church. Pastor David Carlson came to watch firefighters extinguish the fire at Adas Israel, and said it brought back painful memories.

"You hold each other up, and you realize that there is so much history that is being lost, all the marriages, and the bar mitzvahs and the funerals that took place within these walls," he said. "You can't replace that."

Carlson has offered his sanctuary as a temporary place of worship. Jack Seiler said Temple Israel, Duluth's other, larger synagogue, where he is also a member, has made the same offer.

Mike Baddin said that because they saved some of the congregation's Torahs, the members of Adas Israel will be able to conduct services on the Jewish High Holy Days approaching. They'll just have to figure out where.



