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Local View Column: Tragedy of Adas Israel fire hard to even talk about

Written By: Sanford S. Baddin | Sep 14th 2019 - 10am.



The Adas Israel Congregation synagogue burns Monday morning, Sept. 9, in Duluth. (Submitted by Devin Garner)

When Gloria Dei Lutheran Church in Duluth was damaged by fire a few years ago, I felt very badly, even though I had never set foot in that church. This was because I would go by Gloria Dei every time I went to services at Adas Israel a few blocks away, and I realized Gloria Dei was a place where thousands of people over many generations worshiped. Gloria Dei was in the same neighborhood and of approximately the same genre as Adas Israel and attended by fellow Duluthians who only happened to pray differently.

I am happy Gloria Dei was able to come back from its fire. Family, faith, and tradition were restored.

So when Adas Israel burned down, I greatly appreciated the generous and encouraging words from the Rev. David Carlson of Gloria Dei, about coming out of the wilderness, something he knew about from personal experience.

As Gloria Dei congregants know as well as anyone, a house of worship is much more than just a house that can be rebuilt. No amount of money can replace precious lost contents nor ease the pain of such a complete and devastating loss.

Inside Adas Israel were many irreplaceable pieces of secular and religious art, as well as 19th century books written in Polish, Russian, Lithuanian, and Yiddish. Adas Israel's Torahs (highly revered parchment scrolls containing the Old Testament's five books of Moses in biblical Hebrew). Each with their 304,800 letters meticulously handwritten, the Torahs were works of art in themselves, inked by scribes more than a century ago. In an instant, a number of them were lost forever.



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Today, one new Torah takes a year to write and costs in the six figures, and there is no longer that school of Eastern European scribes who wrote the lost Adas Israel Torahs.

Even though I have not lived in Duluth for many years and have attended numerous synagogues throughout the U.S. whose styles of prayer have varied greatly, I considered Adas Israel my personal synagogue. I always made a point of going there when in Duluth.

When I saw the flames on the internet, I felt I was losing my youth all over again and those of my great-grandparents, grandparents, and parents. I know current Duluthians and many former Duluthians feel the same way and have a hard time talking about this tragedy.

In the spirit of Rev. Carlson's inspiring words, I hope there is a phoenix in the northern Minnesota wilderness ready to take flight.

Sanford S. Baddin is a Duluth native who now lives in North Hollywood, Calif.

