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Our View: Synagogue fire remains a major blow

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

A collective exhale was unmistakable, even if not audible, in Duluth Sunday — and shared around the globe — when authorities announced that the blaze that destroyed the Adas Israel Congregation synagogue here was likely not the result of a targeted act.

“There is no reason to believe that this is a bias or hate crime,” Duluth Police Chief Mike Tusken told reporters gathered inside City Hall.

So, Duluthians can be relieved our community wasn’t added to a growing list of recent violent acts stemming from emboldened prejudice, revived racism, and hate — acts that often have targeted synagogues, mosques, and predominantly black churches. We didn’t become “just the latest.”

We didn’t escape loss, though, either. The synagogue, a fixture in the 300 block of East Third Street, was a Duluth landmark for nearly 120 years. It was a place of community gathering and a spiritual home for generations. Built in 1901, the structure was the last of its kind in the Northland. To those who worshipped there or just appreciated its presence, its loss is far greater than its structural value of \$117,000 or even the more than \$250,000 of religious artifacts that also burned.

All of us can join state Sen. Erik Simonson of Duluth in calling the loss of this synagogue “a major blow to our community.”



We also can echo Simonson’s applause for the police work and investigation that led to answers our community needed. The incident now appears likely to have been a terrible accident rather than anything intentional or sinister. Determining that required officers quickly canvassing the area and just as quickly tracking down surveillance video. An estimated 20 investigators from the Duluth Police Department, Duluth Fire Department, and U.S. Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives worked together. One firefighter, Ben Gasner, was injured by falling debris and suffered a concussion. May he make a full recovery.

“(The) response in Duluth is inspiring, and (the Anti-Defamation League) stands with the community,” the Midwest Anti-Defamation League in Chicago said in a welcomed statement.

True to our community and to Mayor Emily Larson’s pledge Sunday that Adas Israel Congregation “will not move forward alone,” almost immediately after the fire, at least two other congregations offered worship space. That included Temple Israel, one mile east, and Gloria Dei Lutheran, three blocks east, which suffered its own devastating fire in 2016 but was able to rebuild.

“It’s heartbreaking,” Gloria Dei Pastor David Carlson said in a News Tribune story.

Heartbreaking for an entire community — even if we were able to exhale with relief this time, that this moment wasn’t like the far-too-many others in recent months and years in our nation and around the world, that this incident didn’t contribute to an unease already felt “in this current political and

social environment,” as Steve Hunegs, executive director of the Jewish Community Relations Council of Minnesota and the Dakotas said in a statement to the News Tribune Sunday.

“The image of a house of worship ablaze is a searing reminder of the challenges we face with rising anti-Semitism and bigotry in this country,” he said.

It’s an image Duluth and the world oughtn’t soon forget, no matter what led to it.