

DULUTH

## Duluth synagogue fire starter gets some jail time, treatment

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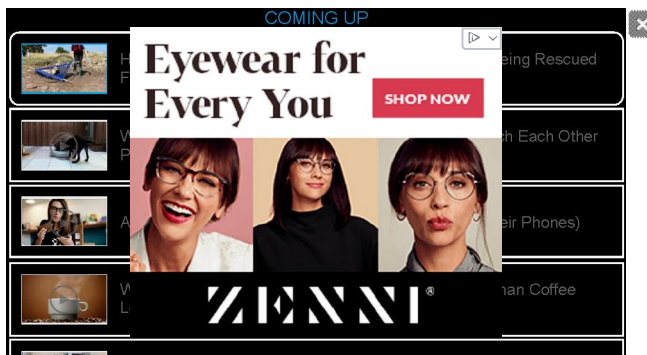
By Brooks Johnson (<http://www.startribune.com/brooks-johnson/558007041/>) Star Tribune |

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DULUTH — The man who started the fire that destroyed a historic Duluth synagogue will get a shot at redemption after he was sentenced Friday to a short term in jail and intensive mental health and drug treatment services.

That route, Judge Shaun Floerke warned, will be harder than prison.

"We're going to know very quickly whether it works or not," he said. And if it doesn't: "We have a cage."



Matthew J. Amiot sat silently in a St. Louis County courtroom as members of the displaced Adas Israel Congregation watched the judge try to balance a fitting punishment with rehabilitation and restitution.

Amiot, 36 and homeless, lit clothes on fire near the Third Street synagogue to stay warm early in the morning on Sept. 9. When the fire grew out of control, he tried to spit on it to put it out. As the fire continued to burn, he walked away.

He pleaded guilty last month to a felony and a misdemeanor for causing negligent fires.

Whatever the sentence, prosecutor Vicky Wanta said Friday, it will not solve the central frustration of the case.

"I don't think that question of why is ever going to get answered," she said.

Investigators had previously ruled out the possibility of a hate crime.

A letter from congregation leader Phillip Sher asked the court to consider Amiot's mental competency — which attorneys did not question in this case — and said that he "poses a danger to society."

Wanta said Amiot has shown apathy about his actions and their consequences. He did not speak when given the opportunity Friday.

The synagogue was the spiritual home for thousands over its nearly 120 years of existence. It also housed irreplaceable artifacts, some centuries old. The loss exceeded \$1.4 million, according to court documents. Amiot was ordered to pay \$66,000, which attorneys admitted would likely never happen.

A firefighter was injured battling the blaze.

Amiot will be in jail until a bed opens for him at a treatment facility, after which time he'll be enrolled in a court treatment program. He'll serve four years of supervised probation with four hours of community service a month, with a year and a day of prison hanging over his head should he violate the rules of his release.



Little remained of Duluth's nearly 120-year-old Adas Israel Congregation synagogue after it was gutted by fire early Sept. 9.



Matthew J. Amiot



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