

Remains of artifacts charred in Duluth synagogue fire burn again in garage

Charred Duluth scrolls withstand storage blaze, now will get proper burial.

By [Brooks Johnson](#) Star Tribune

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ALEX KORMANN - STAR TRIBUNE

Scrolls from the Adas Israel Congregation synagogue that were burnt by the fire hang out the back of the destroyed building in September.

TEXT SIZE

DULUTH – Members of the Adas Israel Congregation searched through the burned remains of their synagogue last week for any artifacts that, under Jewish law, still required a formal burial. After charred pieces of Torah scrolls and other sacred texts were found, they were stored in a nearby garage a congregation member was renting.

On Sunday the garage burned.

While the cause of the fire remains unknown, Duluth officials don't think someone targeted the artifacts.

“We have every reason to believe this is entirely circumstantial,” said city spokeswoman Kate Van Daele. “The fact those artifacts were in the garage doesn’t appear to have anything to do with the fire.”

Congregation leader Phillip Sher said that even if it were a deliberate act, “it wouldn’t make a difference. It’s something to be buried.”

David Sher, a congregation board member who was renting the garage, said that when the synagogue first burned, “we were devastated,” but the recently recovered remains were already ruined.

“This is unfortunate. It’s not earth-shattering,” he said. “You couldn’t even tell what they were.”

The nearly 120-year-old Adas Israel Congregation synagogue on East Third Street burned down after [a homeless man started a pile of clothes on fire](#) to keep warm and ran after the fire grew out of control early Sept. 9.

Damages were estimated at more than \$1.4 million and claimed many irreplaceable artifacts, including Torah scrolls brought from Europe. Eight of 14 scrolls at the synagogue were recovered in September.

The pieces that were recovered and stored in the burned garage, “You couldn’t even tell what they were,” David Sher said. “But we thought, we can’t leave these, they’re sacred documents.”

The Jewish faith places enormous value on its sacred texts. When they are no longer usable, they are placed in a container called a geniza and given a ritual burial.

“You bury the books with God’s name as a way of respect and keeping those documents whole,” said Rabbi Marcia Zimmerman of Temple Israel in Minneapolis. “With God’s name on it, it doesn’t get thrown away.”

David Sher said an Orthodox burial of sacred texts is similar to a funeral and requires a quorum of 10 men. What remains of the twice-burned texts will still receive a burial, he said.

Firefighters responded to the garage fire in an alley near the Essentia Health campus Sunday around 5:30 p.m. No injuries were reported. A neighbor’s relative said she believed there was a homeless encampment near the garage.

The cause of the fire remains under investigation, and more details are expected next week.

“As soon as we can provide more information we will,” Van Daele said. “This is devastating.”

Brooks Johnson writes about the Duluth/Superior region. He joined the Star Tribune in 2019. [Sign up to receive the new North Report newsletter.](#)