

Religion

A 117-year-old synagogue burned to the ground. Police say they've charged a man with arson.

By Deanna Paul

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A 117-year-old synagogue in Duluth burned to the ground Monday. Four days later, police arrested a 36-year-old man for allegedly setting the fire that destroyed the oldest modern orthodox synagogue in northern Minnesota.

Matthew J. Amiot was booked on first-degree arson Friday after allegedly setting the historic house of worship ablaze. No one was inside at the time, though six Torah scrolls — sacred Jewish texts handwritten on parchment paper — were destroyed.

At a Sunday news conference, Police Chief Mike Tusken said, “There is no reason to believe this is a bias or hate crime” at this time. Authorities have not determined the motive.

According to Duluth Fire Chief Shawn Krizaj, firefighters responded to the Adas Israel Congregation at 2:30 a.m. Monday. Krizaj explained at the news conference that the fire initiated outside the building but “quickly spread through voids in the wall space and spread throughout the synagogue.”

The structure was consumed by flames until dawn, when it collapsed. It took five hours of hosing down the building before the fire subsided, leaving behind charred debris in what Duluth Assistant Fire Chief Brent Consie called “pretty much a total loss.”

Local police and fire departments and the U.S. Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives have collaborated since Monday to determine the fire’s cause. The investigation is still ongoing.

Rabbi Phillip Sher, who leads the Adas Israel Congregation, called the firefighters “heroic.”

“They went into a building that was still burning to save some of our artifacts,” he said. “The bravery of these men is just incredible.”

Police said they arrested Amiot on Friday but postponed until Sunday a news conference so the Jewish community could observe the Sabbath.

At the news conference, Amiot, who is not Jewish, was unknown to the Adas Israel Congregation. He is being held in the St. Louis County jail and will appear at court in Duluth on Monday.

The Adas Israel Congregation, built in 1901 and founded by Lithuanian Jewish immigrants, held 40 families or approximately 75 members.

On Sunday, Sher said he was consoling and reassuring his members, noting that “true Judaism is in the heart, not in the building.”