

DULUTH

Fire destroys synagogue in downtown Duluth

A fire official said the building is "pretty much a total loss." Fate of the Torah scrolls are unknown.

By Paul Walsh (<http://www.startribune.com/paul-walsh/10646171/>) Star Tribune |

SEPTEMBER 9, 2019 — 9:45AM

An overnight fire engulfed and destroyed an early 20th century synagogue in downtown Duluth, burning for hours Monday morning and leaving its several dozen congregants without a faith home.

Firefighters were called to the blaze about 2:20 a.m. at Adas Israel Synagogue of Duluth at 302 E. 3rd St., said Assistant Fire Chief Brent Consie said.

Firefighters had to fight the flames strictly from outside the 117-year-old synagogue, where no one was inside at the time, he said.

The building of roughly 7,900 square feet is "pretty much a total loss," Consie said.

Fire investigators have yet to give a preliminary indication of how the blaze began. In the meantime, several blocks around the building remained closed through the morning commute as firefighters worked to bring the smoke and flames under control and monitored for any potentially troubling hot spots.

The first firefighters to arrive spotted a storage room on the east side of synagogue ablaze, the Fire Department said. Smoke and fire also were visible from the building's eaves.

Falling debris struck and injured one firefighter, the department said. He was rescued from the synagogue's balcony level, taken to a nearby hospital for treatment and released.

David Sher, a vice president on the congregation board, said he raced to the synagogue on a mission to save the Torah scrolls, but "the whole place was in flames" and proved too dangerous to enter in pursuit of the holy scriptures.

As for the scrolls, Sher said, "We'll have to see what's going on in the basement to see if they are there."

There is some hope that the Torah scrolls, kept in an ark on a wall in the mostly brick basement, have survived, Sher said. However, it could be up to a week before it's safe enough to venture downstairs and learn their fate, he added.

Sher said he was at the synagogue Sunday to take out the garbage and tend to other tasks, and "everything was OK at 3 p.m."

Adas Israel has been the 72-year-old Sher's faith home "my whole life, basically. ... It feels like one of your family members passed away."

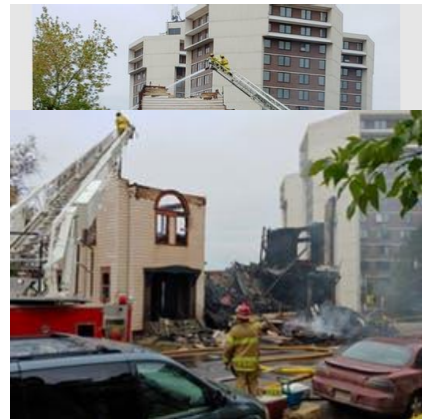
The congregation totals 45 to 50 members and also welcomes regular attendees and visitors, Sher said.

The fire comes as three significant observances for Jews draw near. Rosh Hashanah, the Jewish New Year, begins at sunset on Sept. 29. Yom Kippur, the faith's holiest day of the year, begins at sunset on

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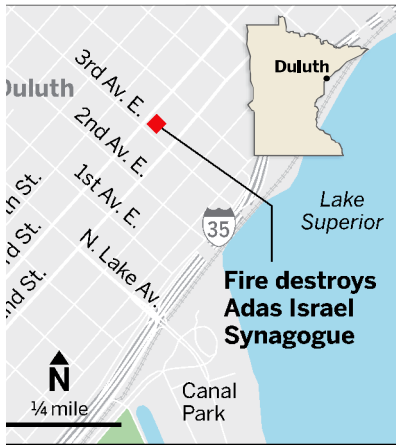
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An overnight fire engulfed and destroyed a synagogue in downtown Duluth and continued to burn many hours later Monday morning.



Oct. 8. The harvest holiday of Sukkot begins at sunset on Oct. 13 and runs until sunset on Oct. 20.

As for what's next for the congregation's future, Sher said, "We have no idea what we are doing. ... There are no words right now."

The Adas Israel congregation was formed in 1885, and the cornerstone of this location was laid in 1901 before construction was completed in 1902.

There is one other synagogue in Duluth. Temple Israel is located about 1¼ miles to the northeast of Adas Israel at 1602 E. 2nd St. and is affiliated with the Reform and Reconstructionist movements.