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Duluth synagogue fire under investigation

'People of interest' interviewed, Chief Tusken says

Written By: Brady Slater | John Lundy | Sep 9th 2019 - 1pm.

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Smoke still rolls out of a window after fire destroyed the Adas Israel Congregation synagogue Monday in Duluth. Jed Carlson / Forum News Service

As Duluth firefighters worked in the rain on Monday afternoon to stabilize a synagogue destroyed by fire overnight, officials were holding open all possibilities about the fire's cause.

"Any investigation that we do, we look to make sure (whether) there is a crime or the absence of a crime," Police Chief Mike Tusken said at a City Hall news conference.

Firefighters responded at 2:23 a.m. Monday to the fire at the 120-year-old building that was the home of the tiny Adas Israel Congregation, and police investigators were on the scene soon after, Tusken said. Two "people of interest" were interviewed, Tusken said, although he didn't characterize them as suspects.

Fire Chief Shawn Krizaj said there was no sign of an accelerant. Both Krizaj and Tusken said they weren't ready to comment on where the fire originated.

"At this point, we're really boots on the ground at the scene," Tusken said. "There's only one opportunity to do this investigation and do it well."

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There was no indication an explosion had occurred, Tusken said. The Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives was participating in the investigation. Tusken said that's the ordinary protocol when a place of worship burns. "They do have resources beyond our own," he said.

There was no record of anyone making threats against the congregation, he said.

The first signs of hope came mid-morning Monday, as members of Adas Israel's leadership guided Duluth firefighters as they extracted artifacts from the basement.



Duluth firefighter Ben Johnson delivers scrolls to synagogue members after a fire destroyed the Adas Israel Congregation synagogue on East Third Street Monday morning. (Jed Carlson / jcarlson@superiortelegam.com)

"This is a huge deal," assistant fire chief Dennis Edwards said. "There are some things that are not replaceable."

Mike Baddin, a board member of the temple, later said he'd been about to leave the scene when firefighters told him they thought they could safely get into a corner of the basement. He was asked if there was anything the congregation wanted and if anyone had a pickup truck.

"Well, I own a pickup truck, so I went home and got it, then they started pulling out some artifacts, some things of value," he said.

At the news conference, it was reported that eight of the synagogue's 14 Torahs were saved, although Baddin later said there was some uncertainty about the number. But he placed half in storage and half in someone else's home, Baddin said.

Firefighters carried them out in plastic containers to protect them from water, Baddin said.

"The miracle was that they were found intact," he said. "Everything else there was wet, and they were in a cabinet, and the cabinet apparently was sealed on the top."



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The Torahs — scrolls containing the first five books of the Hebrew Scripture — are integral to Jewish worship, Baddin said, and particularly to the upcoming high holy days.

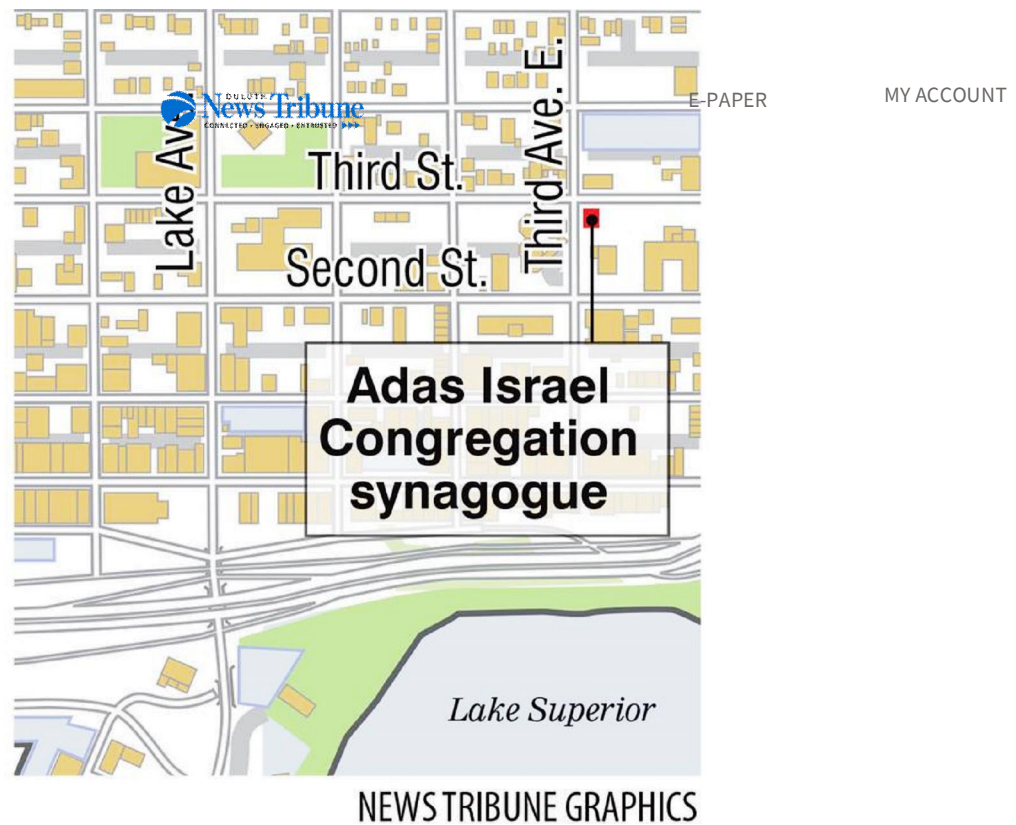
In the midst of firefighting operations, one firefighter was struck by falling debris and required a rescue from the balcony level, a city of Duluth news release said, as "fire conditions rapidly changed" during a search of the facility. The firefighter was treated and released from St. Luke's hospital. No other injuries were reported. Remaining crews were ordered to exit the building and "upon their exit, a portion of the roof collapsed," the city said.

At the news conference, Krizaj declined to name the injured firefighter, saying not all of the individual's relatives had been contacted.

He said various portions of the building had collapsed during the day. "Right now our biggest concern is public safety," he said. "We've got a very unstable building."

The 300 block of East Third Street was closed off as firefighters worked on the scene, leaving traffic snarled in the immediate area. Krizaj said traffic would be allowed through as soon as the building was stabilized.

Firefighters initially responded at 2:23 a.m., finding fire emanating from a storage room on the east side of the synagogue and also "smoke and visible fire at the eave level," the city said.

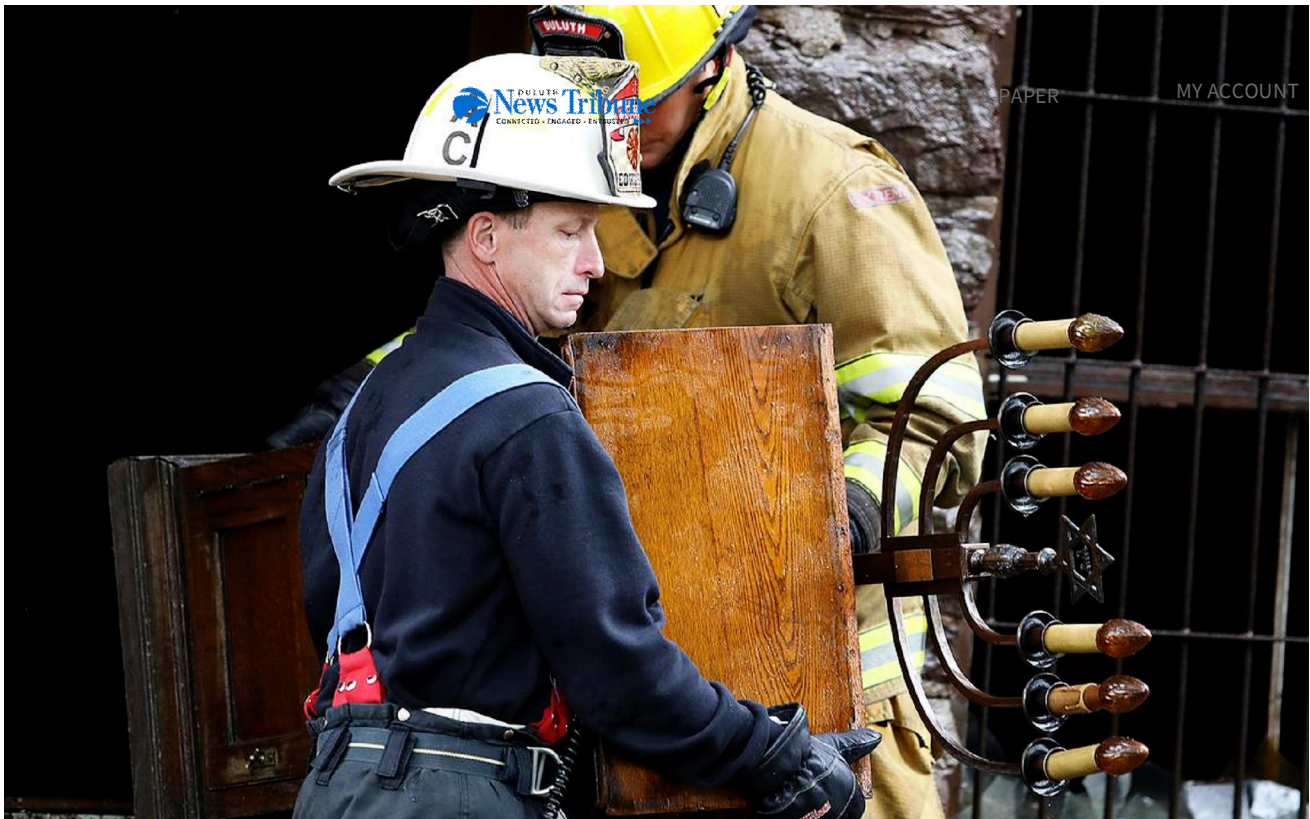


Steve Hunegs, executive director of the Jewish Community Relations Council of Minnesota and the Dakotas, issued a statement regarding the fire. "The Jewish Community Relations Council of Minnesota and the Dakotas is deeply saddened by the devastating fire that appears to have destroyed much of the historic Adas Israel Congregation in downtown Duluth," he said. "The congregation dates back to the late 1800s and the building's cornerstone was laid in 1901."

Niah Chatierlays woke to the smell of the fire in the nearby Tri-Tower Apartments.

"I looked out the window and it was so foggy," Chatierlays said.

Her partner, Devin Garner, recorded the fire as it burned uncontested and bright during the night. Smoldering in the morning, firefighters used a grinder to get through steel bars on the basement windows in an effort to reach the artifacts and contents.



Duluth Assistant Fire Chief Dennis Edwards (left) helps Duluth firefighter Ben Johnson extract artifacts from inside the synagogue after a fire destroyed the Adas Israel Congregation synagogue on East Third Street Monday morning. (Jed Carlson / jcarlson@superiortelegam.com)

The stone basement stood in contrast to the charred and collapsed wood structure above it. Still, the basement was submerged in water, which poured out of the building and ran down the length of Third Avenue East, chunks of charred debris surfing on the channel of water that continued hours after the blaze.

"This has been a cultural icon for as long as I can remember," said longtime Central Hillside resident Joel Heller, one of the observers attracted to the scene.

Rob Shablott is the president of Temple Israel located one mile east of Adas Israel Congregation in Duluth. He called leadership at Adas Israel to offer worship space. The Jewish New Year, Rosh Hashanah, is on Sept. 30. Shablott described the Jewish community in Duluth as small and well-known to one another.

"We've all known each other our whole lives," he said. "(They're) heartbroken."

[Photo gallery: Fire at Adas Israel Congregation synagogue](#)

Pastor David Carlson of Gloria Dei Lutheran Church, three blocks east, empathized with the immediate plight of Adas Israel Congregation, and also offered space for the congregation to worship. Gloria Dei reopened this year, following a fire in 2016 that gutted the sanctuary and required extensive renovation of that church. The Jewish communities and the Islamic community in the Twin Ports reached out to Gloria Dei after its fire, and Carlson was extending the same gesture.

"It's heartbreaking to see fire destroy a neighboring house of worship and we stand in solidarity and prayer with the people of the synagogue," Carlson said. "As I said to the people of the congregation, it may seem like a journey into the wilderness, but God is faithful to those in the wilderness and God was faithful to us. We pray and know God will be faithful to them."

Baddin said the board hadn't had the chance to meet to determine where they'd worship next. He speculated that they probably wouldn't gather for worship this coming weekend.

The building was insured, Baddin said, but he didn't know how much would be covered. The present congregation only needs about one-quarter of the space that their synagogue held.

Congregation members said the synagogue was home to roughly 40 families — some descendants of the originators of the synagogue.

At the news conference, faith and governmental representatives assured the people of Adas Israel Congregation of the community's support.

"I want to assure you that your struggle is our struggle," Mayor Emily Larson said. "For people of faith in this community, this is often when we do good work together, by sharing struggles."

Fire destroys Duluth synagogue



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1 / 10 Duluth Assistant Fire Chief Dennis Edwards looks over debris at the scene of the fire at the Adas Israel Congregation synagogue Monday morning Sept. 9 in Duluth. Jed Carlson / Forum News Service

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