

Arsonist Targets Historic Mississippi Synagogue

Members and leaders of a historic Mississippi synagogue say they are determined to rebuild after a devastating fire tore through their building over the weekend—an incident authorities declared an act of arson and for which one individual is now in custody.

The blaze erupted just after 3 a.m. Saturday at Beth Israel Congregation in Jackson, heavily damaging the structure, officials reported. No members of the congregation were hurt.

Images from the scene showed a burned administrative wing and the synagogue's library, where several Torah scrolls were either badly damaged or destroyed.

Jackson Mayor John Horhn confirmed that a suspect had been detained following an investigation involving local authorities as well as federal agencies including the FBI and the Joint Terrorism Task Force.

"Acts of antisemitism, racism, and religious hatred are attacks on Jackson as a whole and will be treated as acts of terror against residents' safety and freedom to worship," Horhn said in a statement.

City officials have not yet disclosed the suspect's identity or specific charges. A spokesperson for the Jackson FBI noted that the agency is "working with law enforcement partners on this investigation."

Beth Israel, founded roughly 160 years ago, is Mississippi's

largest synagogue and Jackson's only one. It previously survived a Ku Klux Klan bombing in 1967 related to its participation in civil rights efforts, according to the Institute of Southern Jewish Life, which also operates from the site.

"That history reminds us that attacks on houses of worship, whatever their cause, strike at the heart of our shared moral life," wrote CJ Rhodes, a well-known Black Baptist pastor in Jackson, in a Facebook post responding to the fire.

Anti-Defamation League CEO Jonathan Greenblatt also condemned the incident, saying, "This wasn't random vandalism – it was a deliberate, targeted attack on the Jewish community," adding, "That it has been attacked again, amid a surge of antisemitic incidents across the US, is a stark reminder: antisemitic violence is escalating, and it demands total condemnation and swift action from everyone."

Despite the damage, Beth Israel leadership announced that Sabbath worship will continue as scheduled, likely hosted temporarily by one of several local churches that offered space.

"We are a resilient people," said congregation president Zach Shemper. "With support from our community, we will rebuild."

A synagogue representative noted that one Torah scroll that survived the Holocaust had been encased in glass and was untouched by the flames. Five Torahs located in the main sanctuary are currently being evaluated for smoke damage, while two kept in the library—where the fire burned most severely—were lost.

Inside the sanctuary, soot covered walls, floors, and ceilings, and the congregation expects to replace carpeting, upholstery and other furnishings.

Chief fire investigator Charles Felton reflected on the impact

the attack has had on the community: "A lot of times we hear things happening throughout the country in other parts, and we feel like this wouldn't happen in our part. A lot of people are in disbelief that this would happen here in Jackson, Mississippi."

Prepared by Charisma Media Staff.