



Pueblo's Temple Emanuel: first a bomb threat, now an arson fire and attempted burglary

By CHRIS LEPPEK

IJN Assistant Editor

The social hall of Pueblo's Temple Emanuel was severely damaged in a fire last week that police have confirmed was started by an arsonist.

Sixty-two year old Patricia DeCesaro was arrested on March 11 at the synagogue by Pueblo police and jailed on charges of first degree arson and second degree burglary.

"The perpetrator was a homeless woman with a history of mental illness and has several felonies," Temple Emanuel president Michael Atlas-Acuna told the INTERMOUNTAIN JEWISH NEWS last week.

"She attempted to rob us as well as start the building on fire. She entered the building from the back yard after breaking down the fence and forcing the door open."

The forced entry, attempted burglary and arson — initiated when the suspect ignited crumpled paper — were recorded on the synagogue's new video camera system.

Atlas-Acuna added that he agrees with Pueblo police that DeCesaro's actions were not motivated by anti-Semitism — "just a drugged-out individual."

That's a touch of good news for the tiny Reform congregation which appeared in national and local news reports last November after a self-described former Ku Klux Klan member and skinhead threatened to blow up the synagogue and poi-



An arsonist set fire to the building on the left, Temple Emanuel's social hall. Pueblo police arrested and jailed the suspect.

Marc Schuman

son its water supply. The suspect in that case, Richard Holzer, was arrested in an FBI sting operation and is currently awaiting trial.

In last week's incident, Pueblo firefighters responded to reports of smoke coming from the building at about 2 p.m. on March 11. They extinguished the flames rapidly but not before the fire caused what Atlas-Acuna estimated to be about \$50,000

in damage.

"The building is our social hall, which sits next door to the temple," said Atlas Acuna, adding that the congregation's historic original structure, built in 1900, was not damaged in last week's fire.

"We use the social hall for religious school, adult Hebrew [classes], community seders, and other events," he told the IJN. "Since we

are a small congregation, we also conduct services in it, since the cost to heat and cool the sanctuary is much higher."

The 35-member congregation canceled its Shabbat services for Friday, March 13, but hoped to return to a normal worship schedule by this week, after a Pueblo businessman stepped for-

ward to help.

"The good news is that a good friend of mine and a good friend of the Jewish community in Pueblo, Gerry Montgomery, who owns Montgomery & Stewart Funeral Home, has offered his facility to us.

"He has a very nice hall, large enough for us to hold services and an *oneg*. He said we could use it until our hall is repaired."

Atlas-Acuna said that repairs on the damaged structure could begin as early as this week.

"I have been given the go-ahead by our insurance carrier to get started with the cleanup," he said.

In the wake of the fire, Temple Emanuel has been receiving expressions of support from callers and posts on its Facebook page, Atlas-Acuna said.

After last fall's threats, the congregation was amazed by the amount of attention and support it received from the Pueblo community as a whole, including enough unsolicited donations to purchase a new security system.

Atlas-Acuna called last week's fire "another incident and more challenges," but insisted that the community will be fine.

"We are the little shul that could," he said, quoting one of the synagogue's Facebook friends.

Chris Leppek may be reached at IJNEWS@aol.com.

Undeterred, couple plans wedding in less than 24 hours; guest list drops from 330 to 20 — who attend in shifts!

By JOSEFIN DOLSTEN & CNAAN LIPSHIZ

JTA

JERUSALEM — Nina Abrahams and Amit Bigler knew the coronavirus pandemic would have an impact on their wedding, which was already taking place in Israel, far from their home in New York.

But they didn't expect to have their guest list whittle down from 330 to about 20 — and for those 20 guests to attend the ceremony in different shifts, so that no more than 10 guests were present at the same time.

That's exactly what Abrahams and Bigler had to do, however,

typically hosts four or five wedding ceremonies every week. But on Sunday, March 15, with the coronavirus toll rising in France, its iconic, cavernous sanctuary had just one wedding — with just a few guests.

Rabbi Chalom Zana, a rabbi from the suburb of Bourget, said the couple had considered postponing but went ahead at his urging.

"I told them it's a matter of continuity and recommended they do the ceremony as planned, and just

One couple circumvented the 10-person rule by marrying in a supermarket

after the Israeli government temporarily outlawed gatherings of more than 10 people to combat the spread of the virus. They would put together their wedding in less than a day.

Couples around the world have had to downsize their wedding celebrations as countries impose strict rules to curb the spread of the coronavirus, which has killed more than 5,000 people worldwide.

In Israel, at least one couple gained attention for circumventing the regulations by holding a wedding ceremony in a supermarket, where 100 people are permitted.

More often, however, couples say they are shrinking their weddings in order to go forward with celebrations at a time of great uncertainty.

The Tournelles Synagogue in Paris

postpone the party," Zana said.

"At first there was some heaviness in the air, but I found it appropriate.

"After all, a rabbi's job is to explain the procedure to the couple and also the significance of the contract into which they are entering.

"The fact that the event was at all happening symbolized the Jewish people's commitment to continuity despite all circumstances."

For Abrahams, 26, and Bigler, 27, the choice to rush their wedding was easy to make.

"We just wanted to be together," Abrahams told JTA by phone from Israel a day after her nuptials.

But executing their plans was anything but simple. They had coordinated every detail for their March



How about a kiss? Not so fast, says Nina Abrahams to groom Amit Bigler

Nadav C.J.

23 ceremony and party with their venue, Ella, in the Israeli town of Ness Ziona.

They had stuck with those plans even as it became clear that their 70 guests from overseas, including Abrahams' siblings, would not be able to attend.

But on March 14, more than a week before their wedding date, Israel announced that it would ban gatherings of more than 10 people. The pair decided they couldn't wait longer.

Abrahams, who served in the Israeli army before returning to her native New York, rushed to the *mikvah* to do a ritual immersion done traditionally before Jewish weddings.

Then she and Bigler drove around Israel in the middle of the night in search of an outdoor spot. Ultimate-

ly they realized that Bigler's uncle, who lives in the town of Gedera, had a backyard that would do.

Catering and DJ arrangements were off the table, so as the pair filled out last-minute paperwork, relatives picked up fruit, cheeses, cakes and sandwiches at a nearby market.

Silver lining: They are shy, anyway

Bigler's mother found a saxophonist to play during the wedding ceremony.

The couple then rushed to get ready and take photographs before the ceremony took place less than 24 hours after they had decided to make it happen.

"Although so many were missed, the wedding was intimate, mean-

ingful and beautiful," the bride's mother, Miriam Abrahams, wrote about the experience.

She and her husband had arrived in Israel just days before the country began requiring a 14-day quarantine for anyone arriving from overseas.

Nina and Amit, she added, "have remained calm and positive and turned lemons into limonana!"

The couple, who met on the JSwipe dating app in 2018, indeed found a silver lining in the small attendance.

"We're both kind of shy people," Abrahams said, "so we were both also happy and a little relieved not to have something so big."