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

By CHRIS LEPPEK
LIN Assistant Editor

T he social hall of Pueblo’s Tem- ple Emanuel was severely damaged in a fire last week, which police confirmed was started by an arsonist.

Sharon Vale and Patricia DeCure- saro were 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 home- less woman with a history of men- tal 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 bur- glary 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 DeCure-saro’s actions were not motivated by anti-Semitism — “just a drugged-out indi- vidual.”

That’s a tough call 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-

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after the Israeli government temp- orarily outlawed gatherings of more than 10 people to combat the spread of the coronavirus pandemic, as they can- cer their wedding in less than a day.

Couples around the world have had to downsize their wedding cel- ebrations 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 unique permission for circumventing those reg- ulations by holding a wedding cer- emony in a supermarket, where 100 people were present.

More often, however, couples say they are shrinking their weddings in order to go forward with celebra- tions at a time of great uncer- tainty.

The Tousmolos Synagogue in Paris postponed the party,” Zana said.

“At first there was some heavi- ness in the air, but I found it appro- priate.

“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.

“arbit Chalom Zana, a rabbi who lives in the town of Gedera, had who had to do, however, on 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 2:30 pm on March 11. They extin- guished 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, a place next door to the tem- ple,” said Atlas Acuna, adding that the congregation’s historic original structure, built in 1900, was not dam- aged in last week’s fire.

“We use the social hall for reli- gious school, adult Hebrew (class- es), community seders, and other events,” he told the LIN. “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 Mont- gomery & Stewart Funeral Home, has offered his facility to us.

“He has a very nice hall, large enough for us to hold services and an oven. 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 start- ed with the cleanup,” he said.

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

After last fall’s threats, the con- gregation was amazed by the amount of attention and support it received from the Pueblo community as a whole, including enough unexpect- ed donations to purchase a new secu- rity system.

Atlas-Acuna called last week’s fire “another incident and more chal- lenges,” but insisted that the com- munity will be fine.

“We are the little shul that could,” he said, quoting one of the syna- gogue’s songs.

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

by JOSEFIN DOLSTEN & CNAAN LIPHSHIZ

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

But they didn’t expect to have to scrap their wedding just before it was to happen.

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

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,” she said. “We’re happy and a little relieved not to have something so big.”

The couple then rushed to get out last-minute paperwork, relatives and a rabbi to play during the wedding cer- emony.

“We had to do it,” said Bigler’s mother, Miriam Abrahams, 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.

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F or Abrahams, 26, and Bigler, 27, the choice to rush their wed- ding 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 plan was any- thing but simple. They had coordi- nated every detail for their March 23 ceremony and party with their venue, Ella, in the Israeli town of Neve Zana.

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, Israeli announced that it would ban gatherings of more than 100 peo- ple. 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 mili- tary 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 Gederah, had a backyard that would do.

Abrahams’ siblings, would not be able to attend.

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