

Texas church hosts services for synagogue damaged by arson

by [Egan Millard](#)

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Vestments for Jewish and Episcopal clergy hang together at St. Matthew's Episcopal Church in Austin, Texas. (Photo courtesy of St. Matthew's Episcopal Church)

When a synagogue in Austin, Texas, was left without a place to hold its high holy days services after its building was damaged in an arson attack, an Episcopal church stepped up to offer its sanctuary. In hosting the Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur services for [Congregation Beth Israel](#) over the last two weeks, [St. Matthew's Episcopal Church](#) was living up to the scripture passage inscribed on the outside of the building, said Katie Wright, rector.

“A house of prayer for all people,” the plaque reads—a quote from Isaiah 56:7.

The high holidays, the holiest time of the year in Judaism, include Rosh Hashanah—the celebration of the new year in the Hebrew calendar—and Yom Kippur, the somber Day of Atonement marked by fasting and prayer. Synagogues typically see the highest attendance of the year during this 10-day period.

But Congregation Beth Israel was unable to accommodate the large number of worshipers this year because of [a hate crime](#) that happened a year ago. Last Halloween, an 18-year-old Texas State Guard member, reportedly motivated by antisemitic and right-wing ideology, set fire to the building. He faces [federal arson and hate crime charges](#).

Initially, the damage was thought to be limited to the exterior of the building, but further investigation revealed damage in the main sanctuary that is proving more difficult to repair. Rabbi Steven Folberg [told local news station Fox 7 Austin](#) that repairing the building was like “peeling back an onion,” revealing layers of asbestos and other hazards.

Initially estimated at \$25,000, the repairs are now expected to cost nearly \$1 million, Folberg said.

Since the fire, Congregation Beth Israel has been temporarily using a smaller space in the building for services, but it isn’t big enough for high holy days attendance, so Folberg contacted [Interfaith Action of Central Texas](#).

To make the church more suitable for Jewish services, some easily movable Christian symbols like crosses were temporarily removed from the sanctuary or covered, and the clergy consulted on appropriate ways to use the space.

“I was so overwhelmingly happy to have all these people that I love in person and to hear them singing and to just be together. I mean, that was glorious,” [Folberg said](#). “The sadness and the tragedy and the ugliness of what happened to us . . . was overwhelmed by the graciousness and kindness that the St. Matthew’s folks showed us.”

The attack on Congregation Beth Israel was among [a string of antisemitic incidents](#) in Austin last fall, including antisemitic graffiti and banners hung over highway overpasses. Mayor Pro-Tem Alison Alter, a member of the congregation, [called the](#)

[arson](#) “an attack on all of Austin.”

Reported antisemitic incidents in the United States reached an all-time high in 2021, [according to the Anti-Defamation League](#). Violence, harassment, and vandalism targeting Jews had been declining in the US for about 15 years until 2016, when they started increasing sharply, the ADL reported. —Episcopal News Service