



## The United States Department of Justice

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE  
[WWW.JUSTICE.GOV/NEWS](http://WWW.JUSTICE.GOV/NEWS)

April 7, 2023

---

### **Texas Man Pleads Guilty to Hate Crime and Arson for Setting Fire to Synagogue**

WASHINGTON – A Texas man pleaded guilty today to a hate crime and arson in connection with a fire he set at the Congregation Beth Israel synagogue in Austin, Texas, on Oct. 31, 2021.

According to court documents and admissions made during the plea hearing, three days before the arson, on Oct. 28, 2021, Franklin Sechriest of San Marcos, Texas, drove to the synagogue's parking lot outside its sanctuary. According to journals recovered from Sechriest, he went there to "scout out a target." Sechriest admitted that he targeted the synagogue because of his hatred of Jews, and his journals were replete with virulent antisemitic statements and views. Sechriest also possessed several decals and stickers expressing antisemitic messages.

The night of the arson, Sechriest drove to the synagogue and was seen on surveillance video carrying a five-gallon container and toilet paper toward the synagogue's sanctuary. Moments later, multiple surveillance videos captured the glow of a fire from the direction of the sanctuary. A security camera captured Sechriest jogging away from the direction of the fire and toward the open driver's side door of a vehicle. A concerned citizen reported the fire, and the Austin Fire Department responded quickly to extinguish it. In Sechriest's journal, in an entry dated Oct. 31, 2021, he wrote "I set a synagogue on fire." In the days following the arson, Sechriest's journal noted that he was actively monitoring media reports to track the progress of the investigation into the arson.

"Antisemitism has no place in our society, and hate-fueled violence will not be tolerated," said Assistant Attorney General Kristen Clarke of the Justice Department's Civil Rights Division. "By targeting a house of worship, the defendant attempted to intimidate and disrupt the Jewish community. The Department of Justice is

committed to aggressively prosecuting antisemitic violence and will continue to hold accountable the people responsible for these deplorable incidents.”

“These hate-filled crimes not only caused damage to a Jewish place of worship, but they were intended to intimidate and undermine the well-being of the entire Jewish community,” said U.S. Attorney Jaime Esparza for the Western District of Texas. “Antisemitic violence and violence against any person or group on account of their religion will not be tolerated. My office will remain vigilant in bringing to justice criminals who engage in hate crimes.”

“One of the FBI’s highest priorities is to protect the civil rights of all Americans,” said Special Agent in Charge Oliver E. Rich Jr. of the FBI San Antonio Field Office. “Hate crimes such as this one devastate and terrorize communities. The FBI remains steadfast and committed to working with our partners to prevent violent incidents like this one, which was motivated by bias and hate. We also urge the public to report any suspected hate crimes to the FBI and local law enforcement.”

The sentencing is set for June 23. Sechriest faces a maximum sentence of 20 years in prison and a \$250,000 fine.

Assistant Attorney General Clarke, U.S. Attorney Esparza and Special Agent in Charge Oliver made the announcement.

The FBI and Austin Fire Department investigated the case.

Assistant U.S. Attorney Matthew Devlin for the Western District of Texas and Trial Attorney Andrew Manns of the Civil Rights Division’s Criminal Section are prosecuting the case.

###

CRT

23-385

Do not reply to this message. If you have questions, please use the contacts in the message or call the Office of Public Affairs at 202-514-2007.