

Department of Justice

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Mobile, Alabama, Man Indicted on Federal Civil Rights and Weapons Charges Related to Desecration of Synagogue

WASHINGTON – The Justice Department today announced that a federal grand jury in Mobile, Ala., has returned a three-count indictment charging Thomas Hayward Lewis, 24, of Mobile, with violating and conspiring to violate the civil rights of congregants of the Congregation Tree of Life Messianic Synagogue in Mobile, as well as possession of an unregistered firearm.

The indictment alleges that on or about the night of Jan. 3, 2009, Lewis spray painted the Tree of Life Synagogue with anti-Semitic graffiti and neo-Nazi markings. The indictment further alleges that prior to the incident, Lewis and a co-conspirator, Christian Rodney Ice, conspired to deface and desecrate the synagogue. Lewis's co-conspirator has already pleaded guilty in federal court in Mobile to one count of violating the Church Arson Act by placing threatening graffiti and neo-Nazi markings on the Congregation Tree of Life Messianic Synagogue.

"Religious freedom is a basic civil right, and threats against religious institutions and their members will not be tolerated in this country," said Thomas E. Perez, Assistant Attorney General for the Civil Rights Division. "This case should send a clear message to others who would carry out similar criminal acts that we will vigorously pursue all responsible parties and all will be held accountable for their actions."

"The United States Attorney's Office is committed to the protection of our citizens' civil rights. The United States Constitution's guarantee of freedom of religion is one of our citizen's most sacred civil rights," said U.S. Attorney Kenyen R. Brown for the Southern District of Alabama.

An indictment is merely an accusation, and the defendant is presumed innocent unless proven guilty. If convicted, the defendant faces a maximum penalty of 10 years in prison on the civil rights charges.

This case was investigated by the FBI and the city of Mobile, Ala., Police Department, and is being prosecuted by Assistant U.S. Attorney George May of the U.S. Attorney's Office for the Southern District of Alabama and Trial Attorney Donald Tunnage of the Civil Rights Division's Criminal Section.