



נפלאות הבר'אה

**Montreal Jewish community
fears antisemitism**

Editor: Sam. Eisikovits

Eisikovits1@gmail.com

הגיליון מופיע באתר 'לדעת' וכן ניתן לקבלו לאימייל מדי שבוע על ידי שליחת בקשה. eisikovits1@gmail.com,

058-4852-443

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264-year-old Montreal Jewish community fears antisemitism becoming the new normal

Latest incidents further fuel heightened anxiety over crisis in Canada's second largest city as Jews face troubling questions about their community's future

By **ROBERT SARNER**

TORONTO — The recent spate of antisemitic and anti-Israel incidents in Montreal has deepened an already strong malaise afflicting the city's Jewish community. Amid continuing political fallout from violent rioting outside a NATO meeting on November 22, led in part by the Divest for Palestine group, Jewish Montrealers are grappling with the impact of this latest eruption of hate and the response of public authorities.

Over the span of several days, students held anti-Israel strikes and large protests; rioters torched cars, smashed windows of businesses, ignited smoke bombs, and burned an effigy of Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, after which Montreal's mayor and police chief insisted the riots weren't antisemitic.

Extensive media coverage drew international attention to a problem Montreal Jews know well.

All this followed disturbing antisemitic events a few weeks earlier – including five people who were arrested with incendiary devices near a synagogue and Jewish institutions; part of the most sustained, intense antisemitism in Montreal’s history.

With no let-up in sight, many Jews worry this fraught reality could be the new normal, at least for the foreseeable future, for their 90,000-strong community established in 1760, long before Canada was founded.

In recent days, The Times of Israel spoke with Jewish residents about their community, which is increasingly on edge.

“Jews have been in Montreal and successful for 264 years and will still be here 264 years from now,” said MP Anthony Housefather, who represents the Montreal district of Mount Royal in Parliament. “I speak to Jewish leaders and elected officials worldwide and Montreal is the same as any other North American city. We have incidents on campus and demonstrations and incidents of hate that are scaring us because we’ve not experienced anything like this in our lifetime.”

Housefather, a Jewish member of Prime Minister Justin Trudeau’s Liberal Party caucus, was appointed the federal government’s Special Advisor on Jewish Community Relations and Antisemitism last July amid surging anti-Jewish hate in Canada, which began several years ago.

“Montreal is far better than most places in the world,” Housefather said. “The only thing distinguishing us from other cities is the municipal administration and the police handling these incidents

poorly. It's causing the community to fear that the lack of law enforcement emboldens those who hate us and leaves us unsafe. But no, Jews don't need to change or leave."

Deborah Lyons, Canada's Special Envoy on Preserving Holocaust Remembrance and Combating Antisemitism, feels for Montreal Jews.

"Montreal's Jewish community has faced 14 months of antisemitic harassment, intimidation and violence — from fire-bombings at synagogues to shootings of schools, from Nazi salutes in the streets and hateful rhetoric at universities to the vandalizing of the Montreal Holocaust Museum," Lyons, who's not Jewish, told The Times of Israel.

"While Montreal police statistics confirm Jews are, by far, the group most targeted in local hate crimes, the city of Montreal released an anti-racism report without mentioning antisemitism," she said. "It's no surprise the Jewish community feels abandoned, considering the reluctance of municipal leadership to speak up, to acknowledge the very valid fears of the community, and to enforce the law."

Dramatic rise in reported hate crimes

To be sure, Montreal has witnessed a dramatic increase in hate crimes and hate incidents targeting Jews since the Hamas-led massacres in Israel on October 7, 2023. In the ensuing year, as Israel continued an offensive against the Hamas terror organization in the Gaza Strip, police reported 212 antisemitic incidents, compared to 49 in 2022.

This trajectory riles Yair Szlak, president and CEO of Federation CJA, Montreal's main Jewish community organization. Speaking a week after the rioting outside the NATO meeting, Szlak was still angry.

“While general anarchist anti-NATO sentiments played a major role in the incident, so did a significant pro-terrorist, parasitic contingent, which has been engaging in antisemitic rhetoric and actions for more than a year,” said Szlak.

“Burning an effigy of a Jewish political leader [Netanyahu] clearly invokes antisemitism. We need political leaders at all levels to provide strong moral clarity and stronger measures to ensure the safety and stability of our community,” he said.

Szlak said that since the October 7 Hamas onslaught on southern Israel, the community has been hit with 14 months of “hateful demonstrations, violent actions, shootings at schools, and Molotov cocktail bombings.” said Szlak.

“These actions are attempts to intimidate us and force us to sever ties with a key part of our identity, the centrality of Israel. Those behind these attacks won’t succeed,” he said.

Local religious leaders are also speaking out. Rabbi Reuben Poupko, longtime spiritual leader at Beth Israel Beth Aaron Congregation, decries what he sees as chronic inaction and a fear of being labeled Islamophobic for identifying the source of much of the violence and invective against Jews in Canada.

“A lot of the problem stems from the passivity of those in positions of authority, like the mayor and others, such as university administrators refusing to do their jobs and the reluctance of police to make arrests during violent demonstrations which only emboldens the mob,” said Poupko. “This has created a lawless atmosphere and the widely-held view it’s open season to target Jews.”

In early November, Poupko and Rabbi Adam Scheier, head of Congregation Shaar Hashomayim, co-authored an open letter, titled “The Jewish Community Demands Action,” saying “the anti-Jewish mob has successfully intimidated the police, the prosecutors and the mayor.” (Montreal Mayor Valérie Plante has repeatedly condemned antisemitism.)

Their letter was prompted, in part, by an incident the night before outside Shaar Hashomayim, the Orthodox synagogue founded in 1846 and made famous by the late Leonard Cohen, who was a member. Despite an injunction prohibiting protests within 50 meters (about 164 feet) of Jewish institutions, masked, anti-Israel demonstrators gathered outside the synagogue, harassing people attending a presentation by former Israeli government spokesman Eylon Levy.

“I was very disturbed by what I witnessed at the pro-Hamas rally outside Shaar Hashomayim,” said Tel Aviv-born family physician Aline Levi, who was a child when she moved to Montreal with her family after the Six-Day War in 1967. “Despite a court-ordered safe zone around synagogues and Jewish day schools, police did nothing to enforce the law, allowing this hate rally including the berating of attendees. This felt like a significant betrayal by the police.”

The incident also made a strong impact on community activist Joanne Shiller.

“I’ve never seen or felt such antisemitism in my lifetime and many friends told me the same,” said Shiller. “It’s part of an escalation of aggression and violence in the pro-Palestinian/anti-Israeli movement

including both covert and overt expressions of antisemitism. Their hate and anger are palpable. I feel it in my gut.”

Gerald Batist is a professor of medicine and oncology at Montreal’s McGill University, long a hotbed of antisemitic and anti-Israel actions.

“There’s some worry, some stress and distress in the community,” said Batist. “Life isn’t normal for us, but it isn’t normal for Israelis or for Jews anywhere else. We’re anxious and a bit uncertain of the day-to-day, but as a community, we’re strong and confident. It has consolidated us. We’re closer to one another than before and more firmly connected to Israel. We’re united, determined and unbowed.”

Closet antisemites come out in the open

Living in the restive French-Canadian province of Quebec, Montreal’s Jewish community is unique in North America, consisting primarily of an English-speaking, largely Ashkenazi majority and a sizeable French-speaking, mostly Sephardic minority. David Sasportas belongs to the latter, coming from a Moroccan background.

He too lauds the solidarity of the Jewish community and sees last month’s riots as consistent with what’s been happening in Montreal since October 7, similar to the antisemitism crisis in Toronto, home to Canada’s largest Jewish community: “It’s a reality we must face every day that we need to be vigilant simply because we are Jewish.”

“My response is one of pure disappointment at what our city has become,” said Sasportas, an automotive sales manager since 2011. “I always knew I was living amongst closet antisemites but now having it out in the open is shocking. Jews have reason to worry about their

future in Montreal but we can't give in to fear. Otherwise, our days in this country are numbered.”