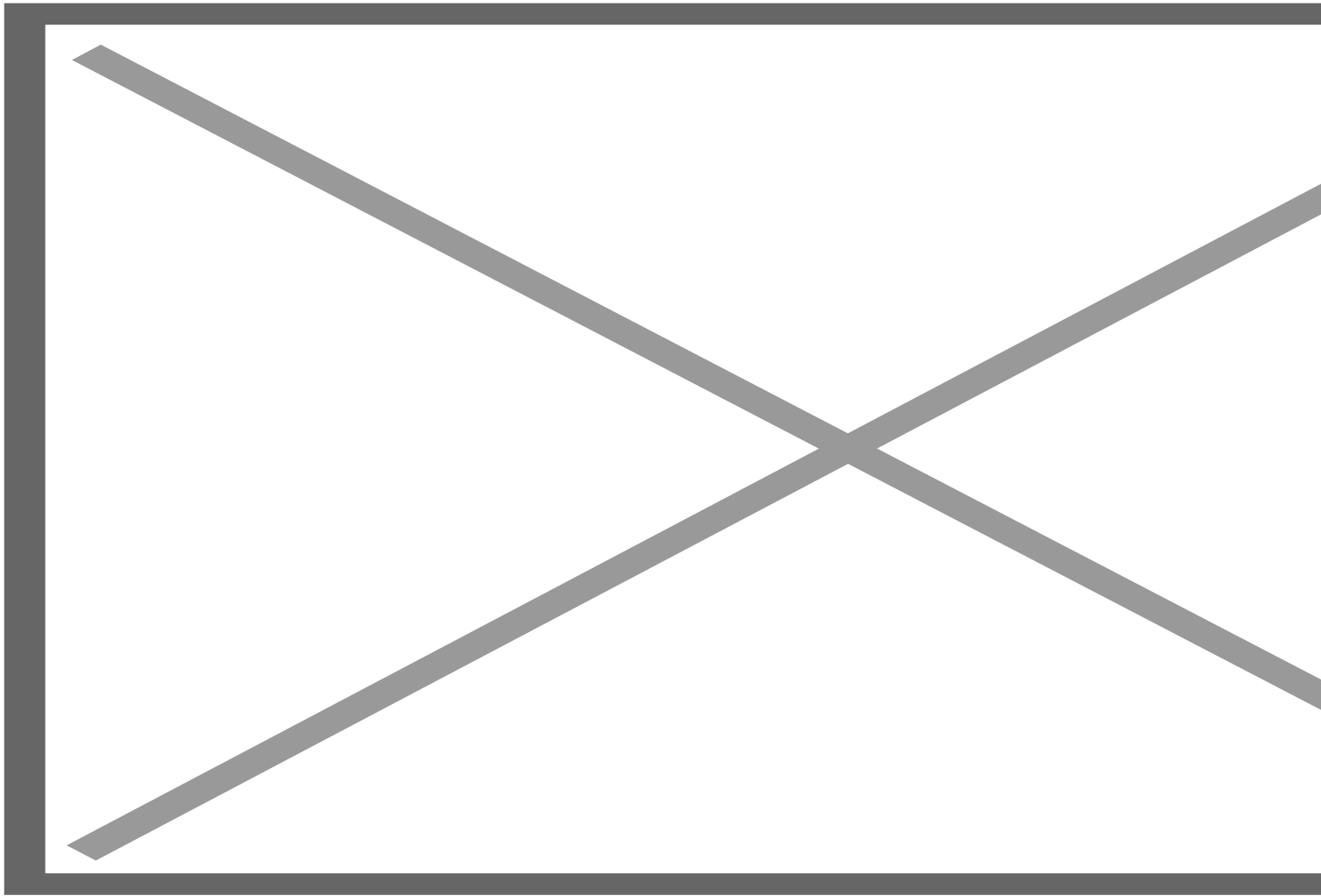


Suspected arson guts Montreal's trendiest kosher restaurant. The city's Jews say they saw it coming

by [Benyamin Cohen](#)

August 6, 2026



A fire burned down Nöam, a popular kosher restaurant in Montreal. (Photo courtesy of Howard Szalavetz)

Howard Szalavetz's phone buzzed around 3:15 a.m. on August 1, startling him awake. It was news no landlord wants: a retail building he owned was on fire. Nöam, the kosher restaurant that anchors it, was burning.

He threw on a pair of shorts and a t-shirt and hopped into his daughter's Ford Bronco. The drive was only five minutes, but each one felt like an eternity. Police and fire crews had cordoned off several blocks around Montreal's Décarie Boulevard, forcing him to abandon the car and run the rest of the way on foot. Eventually, they let him through.

"It was insane," he recalled in an interview the next day. "There were 80 firemen." The building he's owned since 1987—home to a car wash, an auto repair garage, and Nöam—was engulfed. The restaurant's section, a wood-frame extension, "went up pretty quickly."

By the time the fire was under control around 8 a.m., the restaurant was gutted top to bottom. The car wash and auto repair suffered less damage.

Szalavetz and police were able to pull footage from a security camera mounted to the exterior of the auto repair shop. In it, a figure appears on the restaurant's wood deck, bends down and lights a fire with what looks like a can of accelerant. The man's face wasn't hidden, but the footage was too poor in quality to make out much more.

Szalavetz's father survived three concentration camps and lost much of his family in the Holocaust. He died in 2021. "Thankfully he didn't see this," Szalavetz said, "because this is how Europe started."

The Nöam fire is the latest in a rapid drumbeat of attacks on Jewish targets in Canada. Last week, in Toronto, a [gunman fired at the windows](#) of one branch of Kiva's Bagel Bar, a Jewish-owned bakery chain, about an hour after vandals had shattered the glass front of another location. In June, a man smashed a window at Temple Emanu-El-Beth Sholom, a Reform congregation in Montreal, and [tried to start a fire inside](#).

That same month, Canadian Prime Minister Mark Carney acknowledged that two-thirds of all religion-motivated hate crimes in Canada are directed at Jews. "Canada's civic compact," [he said](#), "is failing Jewish Canadians." B'nai Brith Canada [recorded 27 violent antisemitic incidents](#) in the first six months of 2026—nearly triple the count for all of 2025.

[Deborah Lipstadt](#), the noted Holocaust historian and former US special envoy to combat antisemitism during the Biden administration, said the Nöam fire was "utterly predictable." Carney, she said, "does not have the chutzpah" to stand up and declare, without qualification, that antisemitism has no place in Canada.

"If this is not a wake-up call, I don't know," Lipstadt said. "Do more people have to die for it to be a wake-up call? How much more do you need? Spare me your pious sympathies and sincere regrets."

After the fire, Szalavetz said he'd fielded some 150 calls—more, he said, than he gets on his birthday. Montreal is home to an [estimated 90,000 Jews](#), but Szalavetz said it still has the feel of a "shtetl," and word traveled fast: a vigil drew a crowd outside the burned restaurant, and the community [launched an online crowdfunding campaign](#) to raise money for the two owners and roughly 30 employees, since insurance can't cover the full scope of the loss.

Brothers-in-law Meir Azerad and Ynon Cohen opened Nöam in August 2024, transforming what had been little more than a car wash's waiting room into a polished, sit-down kosher restaurant. They named it for Cohen's brother, Noam, who had died years earlier and had dreamed of opening a restaurant of his own.

They turned out wood-fired pizzas at 1,000 degrees, two minutes a pie. Expanding the menu to include Mediterranean and Italian, Nöam grew to a following that surprised even its owners, and had a waitlist most weeknights. The partners had just spent a year renovating a second floor to keep up with demand.

Among the social media posts circulating the morning of the fire was one from Francine Goldberg, a lifelong Montrealer, that quickly went viral. The fire broke out on Shabbat—the one day, [she wrote](#), "we are forbidden to kindle a flame. Somebody kindled it for us."

Politicians were quick to respond. Anthony Housefather, a Jewish member of Parliament who represents the area, demanded the fire be investigated as a hate crime. Police say they have not yet established a motive.

But for many Montreal Jews, official statements have started to feel beside the point. Goldberg calls them "the typical Hallmark pleasantries: 'Oh, it's horrible, and it should never happen.'"

Goldberg, who works at a medical clinic in downtown Montreal, said she's received more hate mail this year than at any point in her life. She doesn't think Carney is an antisemite—just a politician counting votes. “There are far more of them than there are of us,” she said. Jews make up [approximately 1 percent](#) of the Canadian population.

Jesse Brown, a Canadian Jewish journalist who has [tracked the country's antisemitism surge](#) since the October 7, 2023, Hamas attack in Israel, the deadliest single day for Jews since the Holocaust, sees the same pattern from a different angle.

When Carney [announced a new council](#) to combat hate this summer, Brown called it “disingenuous”—the council had already existed for months, under a different name, and [included members](#) with histories of anti-Israel advocacy. More pointedly, Brown said, Carney has refused to name the actual cause.

“This is happening because of this global movement against Israel,” he said. “Jews in Canada are being targeted in the name of targeting Israel.” Naming antisemitism, he argued, is easy. Naming anti-Zionism as its engine is the part no Canadian politician has been willing to do.

Goldberg sees this dynamic playing out beyond Canada's borders. In New York, Mayor [Zohran Mamdani](#) recently called Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu “[a war criminal](#)” and “the architect of a horrific genocide.” His win in the US city with the largest population of Jews has been widely read as evidence that anti-Zionist politics can win elections across the country.

In the months since Mamdani's election, antisemitic hate crimes in New York have climbed sharply: NYPD data show Jews, roughly 10 percent of the city's population, were targets in [55 percent of all confirmed hate crimes](#) in the first half of 2026, with anti-Jewish incidents up [182 percent year-over-year in January alone](#).

Goldberg sees that rhetoric traveling regardless of the border. “That has a trickle-down effect on Montrealers,” she said. She's watched a segment of the city's progressive activists argue that Montreal's own mayor should “follow Mamdani” and formally declare that Israel is committing genocide in Gaza. Her worry isn't that Israeli policy is off-limits for criticism—she says she criticizes the Netanyahu government herself—but that mainstreaming anti-Zionism as just another respectable political position is what's fueling the rise in antisemitism she's living through.

Goldberg said that people keep telling her to consider moving to Israel. She isn't interested. “I'm not going anywhere,” she said. “It's exactly what they would want, so I'm not going to clarify their mission.” That doesn't mean the fear isn't real, she added: “It's very, very dark. It's dark times for us.”

Brown pointed to a pattern that predates the fire at Nöam. Last August, an Orthodox man was [beaten in a Montreal park](#) in front of his three children; his attacker tore the kippah from his head and threw it to the ground. Quebec prosecutors ultimately determined it wasn't a hate crime—the attacker was found [not criminally responsible](#) due to mental illness.

When pro-Palestinian protesters marched down Toronto's “hospital row” in February 2024 and [mobbed Mount Sinai Hospital](#), organizers said the hospital [hadn't been targeted](#); it just happened to be along the route. Brown calls this a recurring dynamic. “There's a lot of gaslighting that occurs,” he said.

He expects something similar will happen with the Nöam investigation: police have video of the fire being set, but Canadian hate-crime charges require proof of motive that's notoriously hard to establish. More likely, he said, if the suspect is charged with arson alone “then people who want to deny what is happening will say, ‘Well, we have no proof that was antisemitism.’”

There's already a template for how that skepticism plays out.

[In December 2024](#), a man threw a Molotov cocktail into Montreal's Beth Tikvah synagogue; windows were smashed the same night at a nearby Jewish federation office. The man who pleaded guilty to three of six arson-related charges, Mohamed Ilyes Akodad, [testified this summer](#) that he'd been paid \$15,000 through an anonymous contact on Signal to firebomb two buildings and torch a car, and that he didn't know one of them was a synagogue. Prosecutors are seeking a two-year sentence; his lawyer is asking for a suspended sentence and home confinement. A judge is expected to rule September 10.

Lisa Grushcow, rabbi at Montreal's Temple Emanu-El-Beth Sholom, which experienced its own [firebomb attack this June](#), has seen the pattern up close. "At this point, none of it feels surprising," she said, "and that in itself is quite sobering." Protective coatings on the synagogue's windows kept the firebomb from getting through, and police apprehended the suspect that night. It could have been far worse, she said, "but we can't just say 'This is not who we are,' because clearly this is who our society is right now."

Still, she pointed to what happened the day after her synagogue was attacked: so many families showed up for a scheduled service that the congregation had to run two instead of one. She saw the same instinct play out in Toronto, where customers lined up outside Kiva's Bagel the morning after the shootings there.

"It shouldn't take resilience to live as a Jew," she said. But if the choice is between resilience and retreat, her community has made its decision: "We're not going to give up or move away."

Lipstadt's message to Jews was also one of resilience, not despair. Asked whether Canadian Jews should consider leaving the country, she declined to answer directly. "That's not my place," she said. But she was unequivocal that Jews would endure. "We have survived worse," she said. What worries her isn't whether Jews will survive—it's whether the societies around them will. "Will democratic society, writ very large, be okay?" she said. "I'm not so sure."

Nöam's owners Azerad and Cohen have said little publicly since the fire. Szalavetz described them as "very camera shy," agreeing only reluctantly to a brief interview with a local reporter after Szalavetz pushed them to speak. "The world needs to know," he told them.

For now, what's certain is the plan: rebuild in the same spot and reopen "bigger, better, newer" than before, said Szalavetz. He estimates that could take six months to a year. In the meantime, he said, he's working on finding them a temporary home so the restaurant can remain open.

"Coming back is the goal," Szalavetz said. "It's my goal as a proud Jew. You're not going to take us down."  
—Forward

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