The Pandemic that saved a community

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As much of the world is back under lockdown, here is the story of a "pandemic" in a different time and place that saved countless lives.

The Typhus Epidemic

When the Germans occupied Poland at the beginning of World War II, they forced thousands of Poles to leave their homes and work in forced labor in German factories. Occasionally, these workers would receive permission to travel home for a short vacation.

One such worker arrived back in his hometown of Rozwadów for a short break and visited the local doctor for a physical examination. The doctor, Eugene Lazowski, took a blood test, and came back with a startling discovery. The tests showed that he was ill with typhus.

This was very bad news for the Germans. They had eradicated typhus in Germany twenty-five years earlier, which meant that the population didn't have antibodies to fight the illness. An outbreak of typhus had the potential to bring down the entire army, as it did during World War I.

The only way to fight the outbreak was with quarantine. Instead of returning to Germany, the worker was immediately ordered to remain closed off in his home.

Two weeks later, two more blood tests in Rozwadów came back positive for typhus. Now, the Germans began to get worried. When more and more blood tests came back with the same result, the Germans placed the entire city on lockdown and declared it a typhus-zone. When nearby villagers tested positive as well, they shut down the entire region.

However, the true story was a bit different.

The Secret Vaccine

Dr. Eugene Lazowski had arrived in the city when it was already under German occupation. The occupiers forbade him from treating the Jews in the ghetto, but he was a devout catholic and committed to treating every human being.

If a Jew needed treatment, someone would hang a cloth over the doctor's gate, and he would sneak into the ghetto under the cover of darkness to provide treatment—an offense that was punishable by death.

When this Polish worker came for an exam, he shared his woes with the doctor. He didn't want to return to his work-camp in Germany, but he was also afraid to remain home; the Germans would no doubt retaliate against him and his entire family by sending them all to a concentration camp.

Dr. Lazowski and his partner had been working on a vaccine for typhus. In the course of their research, they had discovered that by injecting a portion of a killed bacteria (Proteus OX-19) into a person, it gave the impression in blood tests that they had typhus, when, in reality, they were perfectly healthy.

They gave this fellow the injection and sent his bloodwork to a German laboratory, where, sure enough, it came back positive for typhus and he was able to remain home.

The doctor realized that he had the opportunity to save the lives of Jews and non-Jews alike. According to German regulations, if a Jew was found with typhus, he was immediately killed, but if a non-Jew had typhus, he was ordered to quarantine. Dr. Lazowski began to "vaccinate" more and more Polish residents, and an "epidemic" quickly spread.

The Germans immediately ordered the quarantine of the entire region. Nobody was allowed into the region, and more importantly, nobody was allowed out. Instead of being deported to the death-camps, the Jews of the ghetto remained safely in their homes.

Meanwhile, the Germans began to notice something suspicious: the grave epidemic didn't produce a single fatality!

They dispatched a group of doctors and officers to investigate.

Dr. Lazowski arranged for a reception at the outskirts of town where he provided a healthy amount of alcohol. When the chief doctor became intoxicated, he decided to send the junior doctors to run the investigation. They were terrified of contracting the illness, so they sufficed with blood tests from some patients. Seeing the results, they declared the "epidemic" to be legitimate.

This situation continued until 1942, when someone informed on the doctor and the Gestapo put out an arrest warrant. To his good fortune, a German soldier informed him of his impending arrest, and he was able to flee with his family.

Throughout his years of running the "epidemic," he is estimated to have saved some eight thousand lives. After the war, he immigrated to Chicago where he remained anonymous for many years. In 1980, he published an article telling his story, Yad Vashem gave him the "Righteous Among the Nations" award, and a documentary was made in the year 2000.

The First Righteous Gentiles

Who was the first Righteous Gentile?

In this week's parsha, we encounter this concept for the first time. The Torah says that after Moses was born, his mother needed to hide him from the Egyptian authorities, so she placed him in a basket on the Nile. He was discovered by a kindhearted woman, the daughter of Pharaoh—and she adopted the baby.

Think about it for a moment. Imagine Hitler's daughter adopting a Jewish child and raising him in Hitler's own home. Pharaoh was in the midst of a campaign to annihilate the Israelites, and his own daughter undermined him in his own home.

But there is another righteous gentile who is less well-known.

When Moses reached adulthood, he went out to visit his brethren and witnessed an Egyptian officer striking an Israelite. Angered, he killed the Egyptian on the spot. When Pharaoh heard what he had done, he handed down a death-sentence for him, so Moses fled to Midian where he met Jethro's daughters at a well. Jethro welcomed him into his home, and gave one daughter, Zipporah, to Moses as a wife.

Moses was a fugitive on the run. He was on the most-wanted list of the most

powerful empire in the world. Notwithstanding the danger, Jethro welcomed him with open arms.

And it wasn't his first righteous deed.

At an earlier point, he had himself lived in Egypt. He had even been counted among Pharaoh's close circle of advisors. According to the Talmud, when Pharaoh began to fear that the growing Jewish population would become a fifth column and rebel against him, he consulted with three people: Bilaam, Job and Jethro. Bilaam and Job were afraid to come to the defense of the Israelites, but Jethro stood up to Pharaoh and spoke out against his abuses.

When you speak out against a dictator, you don't remain alive very long. Jethro understood that and therefore fled to Midian, where Moses later found him. So he was himself a fugitive from Egypt, and notwithstanding the danger, he agreed to host a second fugitive as well.

Egyptians vs. Egyptians

There is something unique about the story of the Polish doctor. He used the entire non-Jewish population of the city to save the Jews of the town. It was the "infected" Poles that saved the Jews of the ghetto.

This reminds us about the story of Shabbos Hagadol; Moses told Pharaoh that G-d would smite all the firstborns, so the firstborn Egyptians themselves made an uprising, hoping to force Pharaoh to chase out the Israelites and save their own lives.

Pharaoh wasn't interested in letting them go, so he sent his army to put down the insurrection. Egyptians waged war against Egyptians, all on behalf of the Israelites. We mention this in our prayers with the words *limakeh Mitzrayim bivchoreihem;* we thank G-d for provoking the Egyptians to battle the Egyptians.

Even in modern day history, this can happen. During the Gulf War, America formed a coalition of many countries to fight Iraq on behalf of Israel. As the Rebbe noted, the greatest miracle was that the nations of the world were defending the Jewish people.