

Have Faith In Humanity

When Poland was reeling from accusations of antisemitism, Israel's ambassador knew how to navigate the situation.

The Story

Professor Jan Gross is a well-known Holocaust researcher who has written several books on the subject. One day, while digging through archives in Poland, he stumbled upon a bundle of documents. A note attached to them stated that they were to be burned in thirty years. In reality, that order was never carried out, and so the documents ended up in the hands of Jan Gross—a man whose mother was Christian and whose father was a Jewish Holocaust survivor.

The documents recorded the history of the Polish town of Jedwabne (the Jews called it Yedwabna), where Jews and Catholic Christians had lived side by side for 800 years. The town had one synagogue and, across from it, one church.

Then, in July 1941, the Nazis took control of Jedwabne, which had previously been under Soviet rule. At that time, the large-scale massacres and systematic extermination of Jews by the Germans had not yet begun. But in Jedwabne, the Polish locals *beat them to it*.

A town council meeting was held at city hall, attended by the mayor, all the council members, and many of the town's residents. The topic on the agenda? *What to do with the Jews*.

The decision was unanimous: *kill them all*.

Someone suggested sparing a handful of Jewish craftsmen—maybe keeping one carpenter, one tinsmith, and so on—to serve the Polish population. But then the town's *Christian* carpenter stood up and objected. There were already *plenty* of tradesmen, he argued. They had no need for Jews whatsoever. In fact, he was so eager to get rid of them that he even volunteered his own barn as the site for their execution.

On the morning of July 10, a mob of local men—joined by others from nearby villages—gathered with axes, clubs, and whatever weapons they could find. Then, they got to work.

First, they rounded up all the Jewish men, telling them they were needed for a public cleaning project. Instead, they were marched to the cemetery, where a mass grave was dug. The Jews were slaughtered on the spot.

Then, house by house, the mob went on a rampage, dragging out the remaining Jewish residents—elderly men, women, and children. Some were beaten with axes, others were simply forced along. They were all herded into the carpenter's barn.

And there, in broad daylight, under the open sky, 1,500 Jewish men, women, and children were packed inside—and burned alive.

To drown out the screams, the locals arranged for musicians to play, ensuring that the horrific scene had a fitting “soundtrack.”

Out of the entire town, only seven Jews survived.

The Public Outburst

At first, Jan Gross found it hard to believe. Could it really be that ordinary people—without any orders or assistance from the Nazis—would rise up and murder their own neighbors? Families who had lived side by side for generations, who had known each other since birth? And yet, it was those very neighbors who went from basement to basement, hunting down any Jew who tried to hide, dragging them out with merciless beatings before sending them to the barn to be burned alive. It was almost too horrifying to comprehend.

But the more Gross researched, the more he discovered that Jedwabne was *not* an isolated case. This wasn't some horrific exception—it was the *pattern*. Across dozens of towns and villages in Poland, the same thing happened again and again.

In 2001, Gross published a book titled *Neighbors*, documenting these atrocities. Around the same time, Israeli politician Shevach Weiss was finishing his term as Speaker of the Knesset. Prime Minister Ehud Barak offered him an ambassadorship—either in Berlin or Moscow. But Weiss had only one request: he wanted to be the Israeli ambassador to Poland.

Before he left for his new post, a close friend warned him: *“You’re arriving at a very tense time. Jan Gross is about to publish a book that will stir up all the painful history of the Holocaust and Poland’s role in it. You need to be prepared.”*

Sure enough, Weiss arrived in Poland right as the book was making waves. There were protests against Gross, threats to his

life, and loud accusations that he was a liar, tarnishing Poland's reputation. As Israel's ambassador, Weiss was invited to speak on Poland's national television.

During the interview, the host quoted Gross's claim that 1,500 Jews were murdered in the barn at Jedwabne. She pushed back, citing other historians who claimed the number was closer to 1,200. Some, she added, even argued that it was just a few hundred.

Weiss calmly responded, *"Alright, let's say it was only a few hundred. Or even just one little girl who was burned alive. Would that be okay? If it were only one small child, does that make the crime any less horrific?"*

Hearing this, the interviewer asked, *"So, does that mean you hate us, the Polish people?"*

Weiss replied with just four words: *"I know other barns."*

The Barn of Righteousness

Weiss himself was a Holocaust survivor. At the age of six, a Christian woman hid him and his parents in a barn, saving their lives. And throughout the war, there were many brave Poles who risked everything to shelter Jews.

In Nazi-occupied Poland, helping a Jew meant a death sentence. Unlike in some other countries, where hiding Jews might result in imprisonment, in Poland, the punishment was swift and absolute—execution, often on the spot. Every Polish family who gave shelter to Jews lived under constant fear, hour by hour, day by day, never knowing who might betray them.

There were even cases where Polish mothers hid Jewish children in their homes but kept it a secret from their own sons—sons who had joined the Nazis to hunt down Jews.

And on top of the danger, hiding someone wasn't easy. It wasn't just a matter of giving them a place to stay. You had to feed them, take care of their waste, and tend to all the small, daily needs of human survival—all while knowing that at any moment, it could cost you your life.

When Professor Weiss made that statement on Polish television, it completely changed the atmosphere in the country. Suddenly, people felt like they could finally look at themselves in the mirror.

Until then, many Poles had reacted with outrage whenever these painful truths were brought up. Why? Because if they were forced to believe that all Poles during the Holocaust were nothing but cold-blooded child murderers, then their grandchildren simply *couldn't* live with that fact. It was too unbearable. So, they felt they had no choice but to deny it—and became furious when confronted with the truth.

But the moment Shevach Weiss acknowledged that there were also *good* Poles, the tension broke. Now, they could begin the difficult process of recognizing the horrifying reality of what happened in Poland during the war.

The truth is, any Jew who survived the Holocaust in Poland *had* to have received help from a non-Jew. Survival wasn't possible otherwise. Someone had to look the other way and not report them. Someone had to offer them a piece of bread. Someone

had to take an unthinkable risk.

And when we talk about the *Righteous Among the Nations*, we're not just talking about people who were kind. We're talking about individuals who *risked their lives and the lives of their families*—sometimes for years—to save Jews.

Because of Weiss's approach, an official monument was eventually built in Jedwabne, and the Polish president at the time even attended a ceremony marking sixty years since the massacre. There, he did something historic: he publicly apologized on behalf of the Polish people for the crimes committed by Poles during World War II.

Why the Strange Order?

This week's parsha, *Parshas Terumah*, introduces the mitzvah to build a *Mishkan* (Tabernacle) for G-d: "*They shall make Me a sanctuary, and I will dwell among them.*" This parsha, along with the following one, *Parshas Tetzaveh*, is entirely dedicated to the construction of the Mishkan.

But here's the big question: The Jewish people left Egypt on Pesach. Seven weeks later, they stood at Mount Sinai and heard the Ten Commandments directly from G-d. Then, Moshe ascended the mountain for forty days and returned with the Tablets. But when he came down, he found the people dancing around the Golden Calf. Shocked and devastated, he shattered the Luchos and later ascended the mountain again to plead with G-d for forgiveness. After another forty days, Moshe finally descended—this time on Yom Kippur—with the second set of Tablets.

It was only *then*—the day after Yom Kippur—that Moshe first told the people that G-d wanted them to build a Mishkan.

So, one thing is clear: the sin of the Golden Calf happened *about three months* before the construction of the Mishkan began. Which raises the obvious question—why does the Torah place the commandment to build the Mishkan *before* the story of the Golden Calf?

(Some say this leads to a broader discussion: Was the Mishkan always part of G-d's plan, or was it introduced as a response to the Golden Calf? Rashi holds that the Mishkan was a form of atonement, while others, including the *Zohar*, argue that it would have been built regardless. But either way, *historically*, the Mishkan came *after* the Golden Calf—so why does the Torah put it first?)

Don't Feel Hopeless

One possible explanation is this:

Imagine someone is reading Exodus for the first time. He follows the incredible journey—the Exodus, the Splitting of the Sea, the awe-inspiring moment at Mount Sinai—and then suddenly, *boom*: forty days later, the very same people who heard G-d Himself say “*I am the Lord your G-d... You shall have no other gods*” go and build a Golden Calf.

It's *shocking*. Unbelievable. How could this happen? How does an entire nation fall for a man-made idol and declare, “*This is your god, O Israel*”?

Reading this, a person might feel completely disillusioned. If

that generation—the *Dor De'ah*, the “Generation of Knowledge,” who saw miracles firsthand—could collapse so quickly into idol worship, then what hope is there for the rest of us? How can anyone truly trust themselves to stay strong in their faith?

That’s precisely why the Torah *first* lays out the command to build the Mishkan in full detail—describing all the gold, silver, and copper donations, the intricate designs, and the dedicated effort of the people.

Because by the time we reach the story of the Golden Calf, we already know the full picture. Not *everyone* worshipped the idol. In fact, the overwhelming majority of the Jewish people were involved in building a home for G-d—not turning to a false god. In reality, *only* 3,000 people participated in the Golden Calf, a small fraction of the nation.

This changes everything. Instead of feeling hopeless, we can put the story in perspective. We can recognize that even after a terrible failure, there is always a way forward. If the Jewish people could recover from such a betrayal and build a sanctuary for G-d, then no mistake is too great to repair.

And that’s the key to *teshuvah*. If everyone had sinned, there would be no hope. But because the majority stayed strong and moved forward, there *was* hope. The Mishkan wasn’t just a place for G-d to dwell—it was proof that no matter how far a person falls, there is always a path back.

See the Good

Lately, with the rise of terror attacks in Europe, we’ve been

hearing voices claiming that Jews have no future on the continent—that they should pack up and leave for Israel or elsewhere.

But when the people of Europe hear statements like these, they take it as an accusation. They feel that we're branding all of Europe as antisemitic, as if every European is a Jew-hater. And that kind of blanket blame doesn't motivate them to do anything about the problem—it does the opposite. If they're going to be labeled as antisemites no matter what, then why even bother trying?

But what if, instead, we take a different approach? What if we say that, yes, there is a dangerous minority of terrorist extremists who hate Jews, but that the vast majority of Europeans are good, decent people who believe in justice and fairness? If we frame it that way, then there's hope. The people of Europe may actually *join* the fight against antisemitism and help stop this growing crisis.

The Jewish people *alone* cannot defeat global terrorism. Even if we all moved to Israel tomorrow, the only way to truly overcome this threat is with the help of the nations of the world—those who value justice and morality, whether they are Christian, Muslim, or of any other faith.

And only when we rally the world to stand with us—yes, even the Arab world—will we, with G-d's help, succeed in bringing this battle to an end. Until the day comes when we will finally see the fulfillment of the prophecy: “*And kings shall be your nurturers, and their queens your nursing mothers*” (Isaiah

49:23).