

The Daily RYS 8/22/06 More on The Vilna Cholera Epidemic I

From The Mussar Movement by R. Dov Katz, Volume 1, Part 1, pages 210 - 211.

His [RYS's] son recounted an enlightening incident [that occurred during the cholera epidemic in Vilna in 1848], which deserves to be recorded as he retold it: "It happened that the grandson of R. Joseph Chalfan, one of the venerable, G-d fearing (personalities of the city) fell ill just at the time of the commencement of Shabbat. The committee-men on duty arrived. R. Jacob Deminitzer announced (to them) : 'We are not going to deviate from the orders of our Master and Rabbi, and on no account will we allow any gentile to do (anything). But what shall we do with the venerable R. Joseph Chalfan?' Him they sent to the Bet Midrash. They chopped wood, heated water, prepared the samovar... By six-o'clock they saw that the boy was out of danger, so they returned to committee (head-quarters). A few days later R. Joseph Chalfan came to the committee to give thanks for our having saved the child. R. Israel reprimanded him, saying: `Why do you have to thank us? G-d wanted him to recover, so he did. Then R. Joseph said: `I beg your pardon! Who am I to tell you? But these young men, the pride of our city, desecrate the Shabbat too freely: Our Master became afraid that this might lead them (the committee) to become lax in their activities. Even though he had never slighted anyone's honor - furthermore he had never addressed anyone as "du" .(the familiar, as opposed to the polite form of address) - and as is known, he never praised himself to others, nor did he ever recount his great deeds, since as is known, honor was humiliating to him, and humiliation honorable, - he began to retort angrily and no one had ever seen him so angry, but the saving of thousands of lives was at stake - in this language: `Du prostak!' (You boor ) Are you going to tell me what is allowed and what isn't? I took 60-70 young men constantly to attend to the sick, and I promised their parents to bring them back safe and sound, with G-d's help. And so it was. They are all well. Not one of them, nor did any of the other workers, take ill. - You do that! Can you do it?' R. Joseph Chalfan thereupon took off his shoes, sat down on the floor, and asked for forgiveness."