

Behar: Prevention and Cure

- Rabbi Berzon develops the idea of prevention being the only true medicine, and worth pounds of cure. He applies this to raising children, Jewish education, as well as international relations.
Submitted by Nisson Shulman

BEHAR; PREVENTION AND CURE

by Rabbi Bernard Berzon z"l

I remember once hearing the story of little Sammie who had measles, and the doctor presented a bill for his services which Sammie's father thought was a bit high. The physician explained that he had spent a great deal of time on Sammie, with many visits to his home. To which the father replied, "Please keep in mind, doctor, that it was Sammie who brought you a great deal of business during the past weeks, for it was he who started the epidemic by infecting the whole school!

Nowadays, we inoculate against Measles, thus preventing the problem altogether, because it is true that "an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure". We no longer call upon our family physician only to cure us when we are ill, but we go to him for periodic check-ups to help keep us in good health. We inoculate our children against measles, smallpox, diphtheria, polio; public sanitation programs are inaugurated in every progressive community to prevent epidemics, and quarantines are established to ward off contagion, such as immigration quarantines for animals. The accent is now on prevention rather than on cure.

It is generally agreed that RAMBAM, Maimonides, was the father of preventive medicine. He required that houses be built with large spaces of air and light between; that there be a sanitation system in Sultan Salahadin's Cairo and other cities; that pharmacists be set up throughout the city so that medicines be readily available; that people take regular exercise, moderate and regulate their diet, and many other such principles. It is told that when this great sage who lived more than 850 years ago, served as physician in the court of Egypt, the Sultan once said to him, "Everyone tells me that you are an excellent doctor. I would like to agree with them, but since you came to us, no one has been seriously ill, so how can I tell?" To which Maimonides replied, "Your majesty, the talented physician is not merely he who can cure disease, but primarily one who knows how to prevent sickness. The very fact that no one in the court has become seriously sick since I came here should be proof of my medical skill. Look into the Bible. God promises His people 'All the diseases with which I have afflicted the land of Egypt I will not bring upon you, for I the Lord am your physician' (Ex. 26:26). God did not promise to cure the Israelites, but to prevent disease from afflicting them. That is the true test of the great physician." So did Maimonides reply to the Sultan.

While most of us appreciate this truth in medicine and health, we often fail to apply it to social and religious areas of life. There we still cling to the outmoded curative approach. First wars are waged, and then endless conferences are held to reach a settlement. First children are permitted to grow up in an environment where they become corrupt by friends or society, taste dope and

sex and perversions and criminal activity, and then we look for magic ways to save them. First we neglect to give a real Jewish education to our children, and we do not provide them with a home where Judaism is a way of life and where there is no consideration of alternatives under any circumstances, and we compound this by thrusting them in university or work into an almost totally non-Jewish social environment, or at best a majority non-Jewish social environment, and then we cry when our children forsake us and marry out of the faith.

I read about an employee of an automobile company whose task is unique. Every day this man walks slowly about the plant, his eyes almost constantly glued to the ground. His tools consist of one tin bucket and a big steel magnet strapped to the end of a shovel handle. It is his duty to remove from the roadway every nail, every bit of metal that might puncture a tyre. Thousands of cars are run over that roadway to the testing place, and it is figured that without this precaution the cost for cut or punctured tires would be thousands of pounds a year.

If it pays in business to remove the cause of danger and trouble, how much more is this true in the moral and religious realm of life? Many lives have been wrecked because parents and community have not taken the trouble to remove temptations that cause people to stumble and fall.

Of course Judaism applies this same principle to the problem of helping the poor. The recession is not yet over, and it is a principle of our faith that one should not wait to extend help until the poor fellow is down and out, but should do everything possible at the first sign of weakness or trouble, by granting a loan, obtaining a job, providing medical care in time, all this can prevent a person from being crushed.

Rashi explains the Torah view on this subject in a comment on a verse in this weeks Sidra: "Do not permit him to fall, for then it would be difficult to lift him up. Strengthen him from the time that he begins to slip. To what may this be compared - to a burden that is laid upon a donkey. As long as it is on the donkey, one person can keep it from falling. But when it falls to the ground, five cannot pick it up (Lev. 25:35).

If we would only act in accordance to Rashi's advice, if we would not wait until the damage is done but extend help as soon as it is needed, concentrating on preventing trouble in our families, communities, society, how much suffering and sorrow we could be spared! For it is true, isn't it, in human relations as in the field of medicine that the old proverb still holds true, that an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure.