Why We Still Need New Methods in Our Prisons

Adolph Lewisohn Says Reforms Have Not Gone Far Enough and Points Out Need of Improvements in Different Institutions

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There has been considerable discussion during the past year or two of the subject of prison reform, particularly regarding the conditions which formerly existed at Sing Sing and Auburn prisons and the improvements which have been made under the Osborn system of self-government.

Many people think that we have already had too much, or at least enough, prison reform, and that it is now time to leave matters alone. I am not of that opinion. I think we have only just started improvements in this direction, and that even in Auburn and Sing Sing prisons there is still a great deal to be done to make conditions right, in order that the prisoner, when released, will be in such condition, both mentally and physically, that he will be able to take care of himself and his family, if he has any, and that there will be a good chance of his becoming a decent member of society. In other words, the prisoner should be treated more or less as a patient in a hospital, and an effort made to cure him of his faulty condition, and to improve him in every respect, particularly also in character, so that in future he will be likely to avoid the wrong path which has brought him to prison.

The only way this can be brought about is to give him such instruction and treatment during his stay in prison that he will be able to find the right kind of occupation afterward and to educate public sentiment so that the people will look at the matter in the right light and be willing to give the prisoner another chance when he comes out. We must get away from the idea of mere punishment, and rather strive for improvement and cure.

In recent years attempts have been made from time to time to improve the conditions in the prisons and to introduce the parole and honor systems, but the great benefit of the Osborn system is that it has a good influence on the character of the prisoners and under its treatment most of them go straight after their release, not because they fear further punishment, but because there is created in them the desire to do the right thing and become good members of society. Many of the ex-offenders from Sing Sing and Auburn who are now on the right path have told me that they want to do the right thing on account of either their mothers or other near relatives. I do not think such a thought formerly entered the minds of ex-offenders, or, if at all, only in rare cases.

The change has been brought about principally because there has now been created in the prison a hope for the future, in

part of the whole problem; their most important value is in the model they form for others to copy.

Great improvement is needed also in the conduct of the jails and institutions for juvenile delinquents, some of which can be covered by the system of self-government, and yet the methods in these institutions should be radically changed.

The institutions for the young are often the starting point of the criminal life which follows. Statistics show that many of the prisoners have originally been in reformatories, and that their criminal careers started when they came to these institutions as little children. We must see what can be done in regard to these delinquent children, and look after them when they come out of the reformatories.

The Osborn system cannot be applied to delinquents except in a moderate way, as young children are not fit for self-government. I hope that gradually the number of children placed in institutions, particularly in correctional institutions, will decrease to a minimum and that those who must be placed in institutions shall be so treated that they will be able to take care of themselves or be properly taken care of upon their discharge.

The number of persons placed in jails before they are found guilty should also be reduced to a minimum, and those who have to be detained should be carefully segregated and not mixed up with habitual criminals, which often may have a bad influence upon them, especially upon young people. No action taken should be placed upon persons detailed for examination until they are really found guilty. The system should be substituted for imprisonment in jails whenever possible.

The following is an excerpt from an address I made at a meeting at Carnegie Hall last October.

We all greatly deplore the terrible war raging in Europe and the great suffering and loss of life which accompany it. Yet, looking at it coolly, we see that it is far from being a war of nations. The conflict is a war of the mentally and physically suffering, if not greater, than they in Europe, and the most pathetic part of it is that great sacrifices should be made in order to avoid it. It is not a pity that in committing the prisoner we punish his innocent family or dependents, not only by the loss of support but by the stigma which is indirectly put upon them.

During the last twenty-five or thirty-five years great improvements have been made in many directions. Through the advances in medicine and surgery, diseases are now cured which formerly was considered incurable. Great has been the advances in the arts and sciences and in the many other branches of industry, but no corresponding advance has yet been made in the treatment of prisoners or in prison management. We employ a tremendous amount of superfluous guards, judges, doctors, attorneys, wardens, keepers, and the like, and what we are accomplishing is not only ineffective but is certain to prevent it. We waste and use a much greater number of wardens, keepers, and keepers. The innocent and the guilty are treated alike. They are indiscriminately thrown into one mass, and in the jumble they go out of liberty with our ignorance or in ignorance of it.

We do not prevent or eliminate crime, and of those who come out of the prisons we do not consider the remission of fines, etc., or we consider the remission of fines, but go back to the general community. It is of the utmost importance, and we must make it as a duty to try to see that the prisoner is so treated when he comes out that he will be a better person, cured, or at least partly cured, and able to support himself and his family.

If we have been able to show that his health should be safeguarded, while in prison he does not become a good citizen, how much less is the case when he leaves the prison and goes back to the general community. It is of the utmost importance, and we must make it as a duty to try to see that the prisoner is so treated when he comes out that he will be a better person, cured, or at least partly cured, and able to support himself and his family.

The National Committee on Prisons, of which I am President, has a very large amount of work before it. It cannot be done in one day, but it is doing it all practically as soon as possible, and it will be successful if it receives the cooperation of a large number of our good citizens, and our fellow-men generally.