

MACHON PUAH

Fixing Spina Bifida

Last time we discussed the incidence of spina bifida and that taking folic acid can prevent this condition. An observant reader pointed out correctly that the directive is for a woman of reproductive age to take folic acid the whole time and definitely a month before she tries to get pregnant. I sometimes receive panic calls from people who did not start taking folic acid that early and are now pregnant, in such cases there is probably no cause for concern, but the recommendations are as stated above. I thank the reader for this clarification.

When coming to treat spina bifida we wrote last time that one of the options is to operate after the child is born but in many cases this may be too late and irreparable damage may have been done. This is therefore not always a good option.

Another option is not to intervene and to let nature take its course. The Gemara (Baba Kama 85a) deduces from the words "and he will surely heal" (Sh'mot 21:19) that the doctor has permission to heal. And Rashi explains that we do not claim that God made the person ill and it is He who will heal them. This source teaches us the Jewish approach to medicine in general that we do not just let nature take its course but we do all that we can to cure illness and heal the infirm and sick.

A modern day version of the Greek Hippocratic oath, written in 1964 by Louis Lasagna, Academic Dean of the School of Medicine at Tufts University, and used in many medical schools includes the line "I will apply, for the

benefit of the sick, all measures which are required, avoiding those twin traps of overtreatment and therapeutic nihilism."

Doctors are supposed to treat people and therefore this does not seem to be a good option.

Another possibility is to terminate the pregnancy. This is probably the path chosen in the majority of cases, but more recent research has proposed that such babies can be operated on during pregnancy with good results.

One method is to perform open fetal surgery in which surgeons open the uterus around 24 weeks of pregnancy, they remove the fetus from the uterus while it is still attached to the mother via the umbilical cord. Surgery corrects the spina bifida defect and the fetus is placed back in the uterus. The next stage is stitching the uterus back together in a water tight repair that will allow the continuation of the pregnancy. This is not so simple as leaks can occur but this is a developing technique. If all goes well the mother goes home, continues to be monitored and delivers a healthy baby as close to full term as possible. More on this next week.

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