

Maimonides

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

It is a well-known saying that “ From Moses to Moses, there was no one as great as Moses.” The second Moses the saying refers to is the Moses known as “Rambam”. Which is an acronym of **Rabbi Moshe ben Maimon**. Or, in secular usage, Maimonides.

He was born around 1135 in Cordoba, Spain. At the time, Spain was a relatively moderate Muslim kingdom in which Jews and Christians could live, albeit in an inferior Dhimmi state. In 1148, a Jihadi like Berber dynasty, the Almohads, conquered Cordoba and gave the Jewish population a choice to convert or leave. Rambam and his family moved eventually to Fez in Morocco. There they spent some ten years. Then, they moved on to Tiberias in Israel, before settling in Fustat in Egypt in 1168. Rambam’s Talmudic scholarship began early in Fez. By the time he reached Fustat, he was regarded as one of the great Jewish scholars of his age. A polymath, he also mastered Greek and Arabic philosophy.

He authored the most significant book of Jewish Philosophy of all time – (*A or The Guide for (or to) the Perplexed*). It was written in Arabic. It covers three areas: explaining the physical universe in terms of Aristotelian and Neo-Platonic systems, clarifying and reconciling the ambiguities of Biblical language and terminology and explaining the relevance of traditional Jewish Laws and traditions to the rational thinkers of his day.

He also compiled the first comprehensive code of every aspect of Jewish Law, the *Mishneh Torah*, which still serves as a popular guide and core text to this day. He wrote important polemical pamphlets for the main Jewish communities of the Muslim and Mediterranean world. He gave them moral support and encouraged them to resist attempts to undermine or convert them. Records found in the Genizah of Cairo show a wide range of personal correspondence to rabbis around the Jewish world. As the outstanding scholar and authority of his day, he was appointed *the Nagid* – the Prince and Master of Egyptian Jewry.

He had been supported financially by his merchant brother, David. But when David was drowned in the Indian Ocean, he turned to medicine to support himself and his family. He became the personal doctor of the Grand Vizier Al-Qadi al Fadil and then of Sultan Saladin. After Saladin’s death, he remained a physician to the royal family. One of his letters recalls his coming home after a typically exhausting day at the Palace to find a house full of Jewish petitioners needing guidance on everything from religion to health and commerce.

Despite his stature, he was attacked in Spain and France for encouraging philosophy and for his broad-minded approach to scholarship. It is reminiscent of current attitudes to secular knowledge in certain ultra-Orthodox circles. As he once wrote to the rabbis of Provence, “You members of

the congregation of Lunel, and of the neighboring towns, remain alone in raising the banner of Moses. You apply yourselves to the study of the Talmud and also cherish wisdom. The study of Torah in our communities has ceased; most of the bigger congregations are dead to spiritual aims; the remaining communities are facing the end.”

He died in Egypt but was buried in Tiberias. After his death, his tomb was desecrated by his opponents and his books were burnt in Paris (in 1240). Yes, fanaticism in our religion has a long history.

The ongoing controversy over Maimonides has centered, at one level, on the difference between his rational thought and his commitment to Jewish Law and tradition. For example, in his *Guide*, he says that sacrifices were a temporary stage to wean the Israelites off human sacrifice. On the other hand, in the *Mishneh Torah*, he discusses sacrifices as an ongoing and relevant feature of Judaism in the messianic era. Despite his excoriating superstition and magical cures, he also acknowledges what we might call “the placebo effect”. Some branches of Judaism claim him as a mystic although he makes no reference to Kabbalistic literature.

Did he write one way for the rational world in Arabic and another for the religiously conservative in Hebrew? Was he mystic as well as a rationalist? Was he bifurcated, combining both? Or, like many of us, able to see different facts of Judaism?

Almost every major scholar within rabbinic Judaism has interpreted Maimonides according to his own context and predilections. To my knowledge, no one else has so dominated Jewish thought to the extent that even today, when most of his halachic rulings have been superseded and his style of philosophy is no longer in fashion, he still dominates almost every discussion.

The shadow of Maimonides can even be seen today. The Lubavitch Chassidim uniquely follow Maimonides in his straight branches for the Hanukah menorah which contrasts with the curved version nearly everyone else prefers. On the other hand, R. Nachman of Bratslav, the grandson of the Baal Shem Tov (who has now become a cult figure), did not accept Maimonidean thought – even if he did revere the man.

The latest study on Maimonides is **“Reinventing Maimonides in contemporary Jewish Thought”** by James A. Diamond & Menachem Kellner. It is a remarkable contribution to Maimonides’ scholarship. It shows how, over the past century or so, some of the most important rabbinic figures have reflected on and validated their own Torah and world views, disparate as they are, through Maimonides.

I agree with Diamond and Kellner (who are both distinguished academics and thinkers) that Maimonides would be the pick of any rabbi, no matter what denomination, when asked who the most indispensable thinker and authority in Judaism (after the Talmud) is.

The best overall book on Maimonides is still Moshe Halberthal’s **“Maimonides.”** But I must plug another book **“Reading Maimonides’ Mishneh Torah”** by David

Gillis – who happens to be the brother of my brother in law.