

MAIMONIDES - RAMBAM

(1135-1204)

As the 12th century marked the beginning of the end of the Golden Age of Spain, it was also the century that produced the greatest man of Spanish Jewry. His influence has been felt down through the ages. The impact of his personality, scholarship, intellect, creativity, and humanity have placed him in a unique category all of his own. Rabbi Moshe ben Maimon was the epitome of all the diverse forms of Jewish greatness that fueled the Golden Age.

Rambam was born in Cordova where his father, R. Maimon, was a well-known scholar and leader of the Jewish community. R. Maimon also served as one of the local judges of the Jewish court in Cordova. Tradition has it that the family of R. Maimon descended from the great aristocratic families of the tribe of Judah, stretching back to R. Yehuda HaNasi, with possible roots reaching back all the way to the royal house of David. The young Moshe inherited a brilliant mind with a prodigious ability for scholarly concentration. When he was only six years old, his father brought him to the deathbed of R. Yosef ibn Migash, the aged spiritual leader of Torah life in Spain. Fully aware of the child's unusual qualities and potential, the Ri Migash kissed the young Moshe and blessed him. Many years later, Rambam reportedly ascribed all his Torah wisdom to the venerable scholar's blessing.

The Jews had been leading citizens of Cordova for more than four centuries when the young Moshe was born. But it was in 1150, when he was but 15 years old, that the disaster fomented by the fanatical Almohads descended upon southern Spain. Jews were given the choice to either convert to Islam or else go into exile. The entire Maimon family left Cordova, and for the next seventeen years, the Maimons would wander from place to place seeking a refuge that would almost always elude them. Originally, the family opted to stay in Spain, moving to northern Christian

Spain for 10 years. In 1160 Rambam departed from Spain, never again to return. His next port of arrival was in Fez Morocco where R. Moshe, together with his brother David and his father, R. Maimon, would seek refuge. However, Fez was also under control of the Almohads, and the Jews living there had already been forcibly converted to Islam, without the option of flight. Nevertheless, the authorities turned a blind eye to the Jews' practice of their own religion in the privacy of their homes. This accommodation allowed Jewish life to continue and even to flourish, albeit in an underground fashion. Fez continued to remain a vital Jewish community. The members of the Maimon family, because of their fame as scholars, philosophers, and aristocrats, were allowed by the Almohad rulers to practice their Jewishness openly, though the Maimons were discreet enough never to flaunt their Jewish observance in the eyes of the fanatical masses

The literary talent of the young Moshe was exhibited early on. While yet in his teens he composed a small book called "Explaining Philosophic Terms", and he also wrote an essay on the mathematics and astronomy of the Jewish calendar. Both these works were composed before his twentieth birthday. While in his early 20's he began one of his major scholarly works - his commentary on the Mishneh, Peirush HaMishnayos. It took him seven years to complete. This great, all-encompassing work, completed in 1168 and written in Arabic, was the first major attempt of R. Moshe to achieve his lifelong goal of bringing Torah to the people of Israel. Through his writings he presented the treasures of the Mishnah and Talmud in a clear, lucid, and organized fashion. He always viewed his writings as the vehicle by which the Torah would become the property of all of Israel, and through which they would become intimate with the mind-set and value system of the Talmud. Rambam's commentary on the Mishneh was soon translated into Hebrew, and it became recognized as a classic in the Ashkenazic world as well. From the moment it was published, it became an inseparable adjunct to the Mishneh. This commentary brought Rambam to the forefront of Jewish attention and leadership.

In an introduction to the Mishneh tractate of Avot (Ethics of the Fathers), Rambam presented a discussion of the ethical rules of Aristotle, plus that of several important Arab philosophers. He showed that Jewish ethics, rising independently from Judaism's teaching, compared favorably with the best that the Greek and Arab world had to offer. This discussion is one his most widely read shorter works, studied separately under the name Shemoneh Perakim (Eight Chapters).

At this time Rambam formulated his code of the 13 fundamental tenets of Judaism. A whole literature and controversy has sprung up around his classification of these tenets as fundamentals. These fundamentals were set in prose as the Ani Maamin prayer recited by many Jews every day. The popular hymn Yigdal also incorporates many of these basic ideas.

As the tyranny of the Almohads intensified, the underground status of Jewish observance became emotionally and practically more problematic to the Jews of Spain and Morocco. Many Jews found themselves conscience-stricken in their public appearance as Moslems. They searched for reassurance that their subterfuge was halachically acceptable and morally correct. They longed for comfort and hope in a bleak and dark world. In 1163, seeking this type of moral guidance, a number of leading Jewish citizens of Fez, all of whom publicly professed Islam, asked a great Talmudic scholar of the time to allow them to continue this behavior. Instead the scholar responded by demanding that they be prepared for martyrdom rather than profess Islam publicly, albeit insincerely. This threw the Jewish communities under Almohad rule into turmoil. Many now gave up even on their secret Jewish observances, feeling that since they were not prepared for martyrdom, and were thus damned in any event, any continuing secret observance of Torah and Jewish tradition would be viewed as halachically hypocritical. Others prepared themselves for martyrdom, and many were emotionally broken by the terrible dilemma facing them. Rambam forcefully involved himself in this chaotic situation. Although not yet thirty years old, he was not intimidated by the opinion of the older and more famous scholar. He published a definitive halachic essay in Arabic, later translated into Hebrew, which came to be known as

Iggeres HaShmad, The Letter regarding Apostasy. Here Rambam presented the case strongly and personally, and characterized the scholar advocating martyrdom as insensitive to the true plight of his brethren. He also described him as being ignorant of correct halachic interpretations of the situation and exhibiting a lack of good sense. Rambam defended the dual behavior of the Jews under Moslem persecution, and comforted and strengthened them in their resolve to survive as Jews. He also scorned those who rendered life and death decisions regarding others without having faced such circumstances themselves. Having himself experienced Almohad terror, he felt himself better qualified to determine the correct halachic response to this bitter problem. Rambam now became not only a scholarly force in the Jewish world, but also positioned himself as a leader of his people.

In Iggeres HaShmad, Rambam had suggested that those who were able to do so should leave Morocco, and escape to areas of the world not dominated by Almohad rule. He took his own advice, and in 1165, he and his family escaped Fez and boarded a ship bound for the Land of Israel. The journey was beset by terribly stormy weather, and when the boat finally docked at Acre, Rambam vowed to commemorate this experience all his life by observing the date of that storm (10 Iyar) as a day of penance, and the date of his arrival in Israel (3 Sivan) as a day of rejoicing, feasting, and alms-giving to the poor.

Israel was then still under the domination of the Christian rulers of the 2nd Crusade, and Jews traveling alone to visit holy shrines were always in physical peril. Nevertheless, Rambam visited Jerusalem, Hebron, and other holy sites. Probably less than 1,000 Jewish families were living in the Land of Israel at that time, and the largest Jewish community was located in Acre. Its Jews treated Rambam and his family as royalty and implored him to remain with them.

For unknown reasons, Rambam and his family left Acre for Egypt in 1166 and settled in Fostat, then a major center of Jewish life. Although Rambam originally felt somewhat uncomfortable in his new surroundings,

he rapidly adjusted and soon rose to a position of primary leadership in the Egyptian Jewish community, a community that he never left for the balance of his life.

Rambam suffered personal tragedy during his early years in Egypt. His wife, two sons, and his beloved father all died within two years of one another. He was harassed by jealous people in the Jewish community who filed false accusations against him with the Moslem authorities. But the crowning blow fell upon him in 1169 when his brother David was lost at sea. His ship, together with the family fortune, capsized in the Indian Ocean. David who had been a successful diamond dealer and merchant, had supported his great brother financially allowing him to concentrate on his Torah works. It was only after David's death that Rambam undertook to support his family by practicing medicine. Rambam mourned these losses all his life, and it was only in his studies, books, and leadership that he found comfort. His surviving son Avraham was also a scholar and author of note, but he spent most of his life in the shadow of his great father, editing his works and defending them from outside criticism.

Rambam's medical practice continued for the next twenty years under difficult financial conditions. He was hard-pressed to support his own family, as well as that of his brother whose care and upkeep he had also undertaken. Finally, in 1190, he came to the attention of a courtier of the emperor Saladin, who appointed him to be the court physician. This appointment freed Rambam from further financial worries and great him great influence with Saladin's court. He used this influence to aid the Jewish communities of both Egypt and Palestine. But his hours were long, and his body was taxed and became weakened. Nevertheless, he found the time to write and to manage the religious affairs of the Cairo community. Rambam eventually was given the title of Naggid (prince) of Egyptian Jewry, a title also held by his son and five generations of Rambam's descendents.

As leader of the Jewish community Rambam established a governing council that ruled Jewish life and brought a semblance of order to the

previously chaotic internal life of Egyptian Jewry. He always opposed separatism and strife among Jews. He insisted on tolerance towards wayward Jews, even those who had been forced to temporarily adopt Islam publicly. He abolished many customs that had crept into Jewish life but were pagan in origin. He was well aware of the impression that Jews and Judaism made on their non-Jewish neighbors, and he was determined to structure Jewish society in a way that would ensure that the impression would always be positive. He demanded that behavior in the synagogue be respectful, halachic, and impressive. Rambam also effectively ended the Karaite schism that still plagued Egyptian Jewry. He strongly and publicly opposed Karaism and wrote many polemics against its erroneous interpretations and distortions of the Torah. At the same time he extended a hand of friendship and understanding to individual Karaites. This two-pronged approach brought many of the Egyptian Karaites back to normative Judaism. Rambam's reputation among world-wide Jewry only became more enhanced as time went on.

Mishneh Torah

About the year 1170 Rambam began his monumental work, the Mishneh Torah. This was a comprehensive halachic compendium derived from the Talmud and the works of the Geonim. Mishneh Torah comprises 14 books, hence its popular title: Yad HaChazakah - the word yad having the numerical value of fourteen. Each volume is arranged systematically according to topics. It took the Rambam 10 years to write this sefer. It is unique in its format, as well as in its content. Unlike his predecessors who discussed only halachic topics relevant to the time of the Exile, Rambam also included laws pertaining to Eretz Yisroel in the Temple era, such as sacrifices and contamination and purity. Mishneh Torah is concisely written in pure, lucid Hebrew. However, in his concern for brevity, Rambam omitted the source of each decision, and thereby evoked much criticism, since it was almost impossible to verify the halachic decisions. Rambam later regretted that he had not composed a separate work citing the source of each decision.

From the moment that the Mishneh Torah appeared, it became the basis for all Torah scholarship, second only to the Talmud. No other book in Jewish history has spawned as many books in its wake. Incorporated into Rambam's halachic discussions are his philosophic and theological beliefs, his medical advice, his knowledge of mathematics and astronomy, and his serene, rational view of the Jewish mission, redemption, and the Messianic age.

The Mishneh Torah immediately gained extraordinary popularity, and many scholars acknowledged that the work was a magnificent contribution. The scholars of Provence studied the code zealously and addressed their questions to Rambam himself who replied to their satisfaction. Mishneh Torah later became a pillar of Halacha, and over 325 commentaries were written on it. Rambam also wrote another halachic work called Sefer HaMitzvos, written in Arabic, which traces the 613 Torah precepts. This book which was intended as an independent prologue to Mishneh Torah also inspired a host of commentaries.

Guide to the Perplexed

Moreh Nevuchim, Guide to the Perplexed, Rambam's philosophical treatise, was written in Arabic about 1175, and was later translated into Hebrew by R. Shmuel ibn Tibbon, a Provence scholar. The purpose of this work was to guide persons, who having studied philosophy (specifically Aristotle) were perplexed by seeming contradictions between the teaching of the Torah and philosophical theory. Rambam demonstrates that there is no contradiction between the two, and that all difficulties arise from the misinterpretation of the true fundamentals of either, and from the false conclusions drawn from them. This work was written when Rambam was about 50 years old.

A major part of Moreh Nevuchim dispels the anthropomorphic notions that G-d is corporeal, or that he has such human attributes, such as wrath

or jealousy. Rambam holds the incorporeality of G-d to be so central to Judaism, that to think otherwise is heretical. Then he goes on to discuss the uniqueness and absoluteness of G-d's unity. Rambam argues that Scripture's multiplicity of names to designate the Deity does not suggest that He is multiple or changing. Rather they describe how G-d appears to man. Then Rambam proves G-d's existence and that he is the Creator of the universe. Rambam also goes on to explain prophecy and its varying degrees, revelation, and the essence of the nature of man's free will. Rambam's view was that the quest for a rational understanding of G-d and His creation is a Divine precept that is incumbent on everyone who is intellectually capable of it. Thus *Moreh Nevuchim* was not simply an exercise in secular studies, but was the most exalted brand of study enjoined by the Torah - delving into the secrets of the Deity and His creation.

Although *Moreh Nevuchim* was not meant for scholars educated exclusively in Torah, it sparked a confrontation on the rabbinical scene. Many scholars opposed this work and bitterly fought against the study of philosophy in general. This controversy continued even fifty years later. But despite the bitterness of this controversy, Rambam has remained a preeminent figure in Jewish thought down through the ages.

An additional work of the Rambam is *Iggeres Teiman*. This letter was a response to a period of religious persecution and the rise of a false Messiah in the Jewish community of Yemen. *Iggeres Teiman* was meant as a letter of encouragement to that community, and it greatly inspired the masses and kept them from forsaking their faith. So indebted did the Yemenite community feel to Rambam for the inspiration of his letter that during Rambam's lifetime they added his name to their version of the Kaddish prayer.

Rambam wrote numerous other treatises which were later published. His reputation as a brilliant physician was also widespread, and he was frequently quoted in the medical literature of his day. Some of these medical treatises were later translated into Hebrew.

In 1193 Saladin died and a bitter war of succession ensued among his many heirs. Rambam was drawn into the fray despite his intent to avoid controversy. Rambam supported the candidacy of the eldest son of Saladin who eventually overcame his foes and sat on his father's throne. The position of Rambam and the Jewish community was thus strengthened, but Rambam paid for this victory with his health. By the year 1200 Rambam was mainly bedridden, even though he continued his literary work and his leadership role in the world. He continued his Talmudic correspondence with Jewish scholars of all nations, and especially with the great rabbis of Provence, some of whom were his greatest supporters and admirers, and others of whom were his main critics and intellectual opponents.

When Rambam died in December 1204, both the Jews and non-Jews of Fostat officially mourned him, and in Jerusalem a fast was decreed on his behalf. Rambam's body was taken to Tiberias, and his tomb is a place of pilgrimage to this very day. Rambam's greatness is expressed by the popular maxim inscribed on his tomb - "From Moshe till Moshe, there arose none like Moshe".

An assessment of Rambam's contribution to Jewish survival must take into account the turbulence of his times, and the pressures that then impinged upon the Jewish psyche and condition. The Sephardic masses were suffering a widespread weakening of Torah scholarship due to spreading persecution and social dislocation. The influence of philosophic skepticism had also begun to erode their faith and observance, especially affecting those whose knowledge of Torah was merely superficial. Rambam attacked these problems directly. His halachic work, which became the legacy of the greatest scholars of the ages, simultaneously appealed to the masses of Israel, making the intricacies and beauty of Talmudic reasoning and faith accessible to all. His strong defense of the faith of Israel and his defining of that faith in logical and acceptable categories brought heart and strength to Jews hard-pressed to defend themselves physically and intellectually from the continuing harassment of Islam and Christianity. His philosophic works reached the upper classes

and the intelligentsia, guiding them back to the path of Torah and tradition. His writings steered them away from the rejection of religion, a trend soon to become apparent in the Christian world of the Renaissance, and the equally dangerous spirit of rejection of intellect and progress which would now visit the Moslem world. In short, Rambam spoke to all Jewish people with different methods, but always with the same message. Only such a multi-faceted holy person, blessed with a historic degree of genius, could reach the entire Jewish world. There has been only one Rambam in the history of Israel.