

Why was Maimonides controversial?

Introduction

Always glad to talk about Maimonides:

- He was Sephardic (of Spanish origin), and so am I
- He lived and worked in Egypt, and that's where I was born and grew up
- His Hebrew name was Moshe (Moses), and so is mine
- He was a rationalist, and so am I
- He was a scientist of sorts, and so am I
- He had very strong opinions, and so do I
- And, oh yes: He was Jewish, and so am I.

-Unfortunately, he probably wasn't my ancestor.

-Rabbi Moshe ben Maimon, aka Maimonides, aka The Rambam:

b. 1135 (Córdoba, Muslim Spain) – d. 1204 (Fostat, Egypt):

Torah scholar, philosopher, physician:

Maimonides was the most illustrious figure in Judaism in the post-talmudic era, and one of the greatest of all time... His influence on the future development of Judaism is incalculable. No spiritual leader of the Jewish people in the post-talmudic period has exercised such an influence both in his own and subsequent generations. [Encyclopedia Judaica]

-Best-known for *Mishneh Torah* and *Guide for the Perplexed*:

-*Mishneh Torah* (*Sefer Yad ha-Chazaka*) codifies Jewish law. Gathers all laws from Talmud and adds rulings of later Sages. Clear, concise, and logical. No personal opinions.

-The *Guide for the Perplexed* (*Dalalat al-Ha'erin; Moreh Nevukhim*) is a non-legal philosophical work, for general public, that bridges Jewish and Greek thought.

-Controversial in his lifetime and for many centuries afterwards.

Controversies concerning Maimonides

1-No need to study Talmud

-He appears to downplay study of Talmud. His *Mishneh Torah* claims explicitly that it supersedes the Talmud:

I called this work *Mishneh Torah* (Repetition of the Torah), because all a man has to do is first read the written law, the Torah, then follow it up by reading this work, and he will know the entire Oral Law, without the need to read any other work between them. [Yad, Intro]

- He later said he did not mean that Talmud shouldn't be studied.
- The Talmud is still the main subject of study in yeshivot.

2-No sources cited

-Maimonides almost never cites sources.

-The Ravad, a sharp critic, says:

There are matters on which the Sages [*geonim*] disagree and the author has selected the opinion of one.... Why should I rely on his choice? [Abraham ben David of Posquières, *Hassagot* to introduction of *Mishneh Torah*].

-A judge refused to judge according to Maimonides, saying:

He does not give proof from the sayings of the Talmudic sages for his decisions. So who is going to follow his opinion? It is far better to study Talmud. We will have nothing to do with his books and his writings.

-Sources can't always be traced

-Secondary issue of credit. Many quotes attributed to Rambam, but are not his. Best-known examples:

1. Much have I learned from my teachers, more from my fellow students, but most of all from my students. [Ta'anit 7a, Makkot 10a]
2. There are eight levels of *tzedakah*. [All in Talmud]

Yet rabbis must be very careful to assign credit for their pronouncements.

The Talmud says twice:

He who reports a saying in the name of its author brings deliverance to the world. [Megillah 15a, Chullin 104b]

-Rabbi Yosef Karo's *Shulchan Aruch* supplanted *Mishneh Torah* 3.5 centuries later. It is based on the Rif, the Rambam, and the Rosh. When two agreed, their common opinion is listed as "the" law.

-Except when most ancient authorities disagreed, or when there already was a different accepted custom.

3-Spiritual, not bodily, resurrection

Maimonides rejects the idea of physical rebirth, saying the afterlife will be purely spiritual, that we cannot conceive of it, and cannot appreciate it now:

There are no bodies... in the World to Come... There is no eating or drinking there, nor anything which the human body needs in this world. Nor any of the

bodily events in this world, such as sitting, standing, sleep, death, distress, laughter, and so forth... There is no eating or drinking or procreation.. There is no way for us in this world to know or comprehend the great goodness which the soul experiences in the World to Come, for in this world we know only of material pleasures, and it is these we desire. [Berakhot 17a; Yad, Teshuvah 8:2]

He also said:

All men must die equally, their bodies becoming dissolved into their constituent matter. [Introduction to Sanhedrin 10]

The Ravad countered:

The words of this man seem to me to be very near to those who say there is no resurrection of the body, but only of the soul. By my life, this is not the view of the Sages. [Rabbi Avraham ben David of Posquières on Yad, Teshuvah 8:2]

His 13th principle of faith is “the resurrection of the dead”, but he means only spiritual resurrection. Still debated.

4-Conversion to Islam permitted for survival

-Almohad Muslims took over when he was 13 and forced Jews to convert or die. Family probably converted. His rabbi was tortured to death for practicing Judaism in secret. He was arrested under same charge but saved by a friend who vouched for him. Later, a rival in Egypt denounced him and wanted him put to death for apostasy (1187), but friendly Muslim judge (and patient) ruled his conversion legally invalid because coerced.

-He allowed Jews to convert to save their lives, strongly refuting the prevalent view of his time:

Thus says Moses, the son of Maimon, the Judge, the Sephardi: A contemporary of ours addressed a question concerning the tragic problem of apostasy to a pseudo-scholar, who lived [comfortably and in freedom] in a community [that] was spared the affliction of apostasy... It involved some Jews who, under compulsion, had to confess the authenticity of Mohammed as God's messenger and as a true prophet. They were given one of two choices: Either to accept the Muslim confession and spare their children from falling into the hands of their oppressors or refuse to pronounce the Islamic formula and suffer martyrdom -- a fate presumably prescribed by the laws of Moses...

The consultant responded in a most derisive and distasteful manner... [His] arguments were without foundation even for the unenlightened... [We are responding] because we are grounded in this matter, and find it hard to tolerate the ignorance of this man... and his arrogance... He [then...] dispatched his decision... to every city and country, plunging the hearts of our co-religionists into darkness... I shall proceed now to explain the grievous error committed by this fanatic doctrinaire, who failed to realize the consequences of his own actions...

The apostasy we are experiencing consists of no overt acts of commission but of simply uttering a formula of faith which even our adversaries are convinced we do not believe... [If] one has yielded to [such] coercion instead of undergoing martyrdom, he acted badly, yet no punishment can be imposed upon him and no Jewish court can intervene against him. To rule otherwise, as this fanatic zealot has done, is a gross misrepresentation of Judaism... Hence if a man asks me "Shall I be slain or utter the formula of Islam?" I answer, "Utter the formula and live!" [Iggeret HaShmad, Letter on Apostasy]

His ruling stuck. He advocates exile whenever feasible.

5-Sacrifices were a transitional step

In his halachic work, *Mishneh Torah*, the Rambam says:

The Messiah... will build the Holy Temple and gather the dispersed of Israel... All the laws of the Torah will be reinstated as before. The sacrifices will be offered; and the Sabbatical year and the Jubilee will be instituted, as outlined in the Torah. [Laws of Kings 11-12]

But in his *Guide for the Perplexed*, he downplays sacrifices, saying they were a necessary transitional step between the human sacrifices of the pagans and the kind of worship God really wanted, which is prayer. If God had asked only for prayer back then, the people would not have followed:

The custom in those days among all men...consisted in sacrificing animals. God did not command us to give up these services, for this would have been contrary to the nature of man, who generally cleaves to that to which he is used.

Sacrifices [however] are not the primary object [of the commandments about sacrifice], prayers are. [To wit,] we were not commanded to sacrifice in every place, and in every time, or to build a Temple in every place, or to allow anybody to become a priest and sacrifice. Only one Temple has been appointed, and only, [as the Torah says,] "in the place which the Lord shall choose" [Deut. 12:26]. In no other place are we allowed to sacrifice. [The Torah even says,] "Be careful not to give your burnt-offerings in every place that you see" [Deut. 12:13]; and only the members of a particular family were allowed to officiate as priests. All these restrictions served to limit this kind of worship. But prayer and supplication can be offered everywhere and by every person. Because of this, the Prophets rebuke people for being over-zealous in bringing sacrifices. [Guide for the Perplexed 3:32]

The Ramban (Nachmanides) disagreed, saying sacrifices had intrinsic value, because when they watched what happened to the animals being sacrificed, the sinners realized the seriousness of their transgressions, and it helped them undergo teshuva, or repentance. [Ramban on Vayikra 1:9]

Traditional Judaism today looks forward to the rebuilding of the Temple and the resumption of sacrifices [Siddur].

6-Converts may say “God of our Fathers”

The Rambam allowed a convert to say “God of our fathers” in prayers, which a convert was, up to that point, not allowed to say, because his “fathers” were not Jewish. Indeed, the Mishna in Bikkurim does not allow it:

The convert brings [first fruits] but does not recite [the relevant declaration in Deuteronomy] because he cannot say “the land which God has sworn to our fathers to give us.” [Deuteronomy 26:3]. But if his mother was of Israel, he may [both] bring [first fruits] and recite [the declaration]. And when he prays by himself, he says, “God of the fathers of Israel”. And when he is in synagogue [with the community], he says, “God of YOUR fathers.” But if his mother was of Israel, he says, “God of our fathers.” [B. Bikkurim 1:4]

But in the Jerusalem Talmud, the gemara in Bikkurim allows it:

A... convert brings [first fruits] AND recites [the declaration in Deuteronomy]. Why? [Because God said to Abraham]: “For I have made you the father of a multitude of nations” [Genesis 17:5]. In the past you were a father to Aram [only], but now, henceforth, you are a father to all the nations. [J. Bikkurim 1:4, 64a]

Maimonides ruled in favor of leniency. In a response to a convert, he says:

You ask me if you, too, are allowed to say... “Our God and God of our fathers”, “who has sanctified us through His commandments”, “who has separated us”, “who has chosen us”, “who has given to our fathers to inherit [a pleasant, good and spacious land]”, “who has brought us out of the Land of Egypt”, “who has worked miracles to our fathers”, and more of this kind. Yes, you may say all this in the prescribed order and not change it in the least...

And he concludes:

Toward father and mother we are commanded to honor and revere them, toward the prophets to obey them, but toward converts we are commanded to have great love in our inmost hearts.... God, in His glory, loves a convert... [because he is] a man who left his father and birthplace and the realm of his people at a time when they are powerful, who understood with his insight, and who attached himself to this nation which today is a despised people, the slave of rulers, and recognized and knew that their religion is true and righteous... and pursued God... and entered beneath the wings of the Divine Presence... [Letter to Obadiah the Convert]

The debate continued. It took four centuries for the Rambam’s position to be universally accepted.

7-All Jews must accept the 13 Principles of Faith

Maimonides had a rational and analytical mind, and so felt the need to champion a creed for Judaism, as other religions did. He introduced the following 13 principles of faith (*'ikkarim* in Hebrew) [Commentary on Sanhedrin 10]:

1. God exists and created everything,
2. God is One,
3. God has no body,
4. God is eternal,
5. God alone should be worshipped,
6. God revealed Himself through the prophets,
7. Moses was the greatest of prophets,
8. The Torah we have today is the very same one God gave us on Mount Sinai,
9. The Torah will never change,
10. God knows all our actions,
11. God rewards good and punishes evil,
12. The Messiah will come; and
13. The dead will be resurrected.

Controversial when proposed. Luminaries such as Hasdai Crescas and Yosef Albo asked: Is the rest of Judaism any less important? All agreed that the principles are indeed in Judaism, but many were uncomfortable with the idea of a formal creed, that would separate “good” Jews from “heretics”. More importantly, Judaism stresses action, that is commandments, not belief. Belief is not central in Judaism. Your thoughts are your own, and you are not accountable for them.

So Jews ignored the 13 principles for many centuries. However, Jews today recite them regularly. The popular Orthodox siddur, the Artscroll (1984), writes:

Historically Judaism never separated belief from performance... However, philosophical speculation and dogmas of faith became prevalent among other religions and, in time, began to influence a number of Jews. To counteract this trend, medieval rabbinic authorities felt the need to define the principles of Judaism... [The Rambam's version] has achieved virtually universal acceptance. It is commendable to recite these principles every day after Shacharit. [Artscroll siddur, p 242]

Survived in Yigdal and Ani Maamin. Judaism remains a package deal. Indeed, the Mishna says:

Be as scrupulous in observing a minor commandment as a major commandment, because you do not know the value of each commandment. [Pirkei Avot 2:1]

8-Greek philosophy must be studied and applied

Maimonides' synthesis between Judaism and Greek philosophy horrified many. Yehudah Halevi had warned:

Turn aside from [Greek philosophy, full of] mines and pitfalls. Let not Greek wisdom tempt you, for it bears flowers only and no fruit... Listen to the confused words of her sages built on the void... Why should I search for bypaths, and complicated ones at that, and leave the main road? [Yehudah Halevi, from his poem *Devarekha be-Mor Over Rekuhim*].

The Rambam was accused of explaining away certain practical commandments as no more than symbols, to be fulfilled only by simple men, but not by educated people. Maimonides' followers responded by accusing them of being ignorant, simple-minded, and under Christian influence. The sages of northern France pronounced a *herem* on Maimonides' philosophical works. Nahmanides tried to heal the rift by saying one must understand Maimonides in his own surroundings:

[Those around him] have filled their belly with the foolishness of the Greeks... They did not enter profoundly into the ways of our Torah... If it wasn't for the words of [Maimonides], and the fact that they live out of the mouth of his works... they would have slipped away almost entirely.

He warns that extremism would split Judaism, that it is better to educate gradually, and issue only partial prohibitions.

Among many beleaguered Jews of 15th-century Christian Spain, Maimonides' rationalism was seen as the cause of the misfortunes and the reason for apostasy (one-third had already converted well before expulsion).

How much to study non-Jewish subjects is still an issue today.

9-Science must prevail

Maimonides believed that the Torah is not intended to be history or science, but ethical teachings:

Those passages in the Bible, which, in their literal sense, contain statements that can be refuted by proof, can and must be interpreted otherwise. [Rambam, Guide to the Perplexed, 2:25]

Nahmanides disagreed: The idea of laws of nature, ordained by God and discovered through reason, was heresy. The workings of nature are only "hidden miracles."

10-One must not pay for others to study Torah

Rambam sharply criticized the notion that Jews must financially help people study Torah:

All this is wrong. There is not a single word, either in the Torah or in the sayings of the [Talmudic] sages, to lend credence to it... for as we look into the sayings of the Talmudic sages, we do not find that they ask people for money, nor did they collect money for the honorable and cherished academies [Commentary to Avot 4:5]

His opposition to monetary support for Torah study failed completely.

How Maimonides is viewed today

-Generally, Maimonides was vindicated, but it took centuries. He anticipated this outcome:

[As for] those who won't accept [the *Mishneh Torah*], that is uniquely in my generation. In future generations, when jealousy and the lust for power will disappear, all of Israel will subsist on it alone, and will abandon everything else besides it without a doubt, except for those who seek something to be involved with all their lives, even though it doesn't achieve a purpose [Talmud study?].
[Letter to his student Rabbi Yosef ben ha-Rav Yehudah]

-Today, Chabad has annual study cycles of *Mishneh Torah*, innovated by the Lubavitcher Rebbe in 1984, and a daily study of the *Sefer Hamitzvot*, the Rambam's listing and commentary on the 613 commandments.

-One of the most widely studied and debated Jewish thinkers.

-One of the very few with influence in the non-Jewish world.

-Popular medieval saying (and epitaph):

**From Moshe (of the Torah) to Moshe (Maimonides),
there was none like Moshe.**