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Moses Maimonides

by

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Moses Maimonides, the 800th anniversary of whose death is being commemorated this year, was, by general agreement, one of the greatest Jewish legal minds of all times and, at the same time, the outstanding Jewish philosopher of the Middle Ages. It is appropriate that we celebrate Maimonides at this time since, like any great personality, he was important not only during his own period, but even our own times can learn a good deal from him and his writings.

Descended from a family of distinguished judges, Maimonides was born in Cordova, Spain in 1138. During his early years he received a thorough grounding in biblical and rabbinic learning from his father Maimon and other teachers and it appears that already at an early age he manifested an interest in the study of philosophy.

The prosperous and tranquil life, characteristic of the Jewish communities in Muslim Spain, came to a sudden end with the invasion of the Almohads, a rigorous North-African Muslim group, in 1148, the year in which Maimonides was ten years of age. Whereas previous Muslim rulers had been tolerant of non-Muslims, Jews and Christians, the North-African invaders demanded conversion to Islam or exile. Unwilling to convert, Maimonides’ family began a period of wandering in Spain and North-Africa and the year 1160 finds it in Fez, Morroco. These years are shrouded
in darkness, but it is possible that the conversionist zeal of the Almohads subsided for a while or that they permitted some non-Muslim to remain. But the year of wandering were not wasted. Ever the eager student, Maimonides continued his rabbinic and philosophic studies and, by his own testimony, it was during this period that he learned medicine from Muslim physicians.

In spite of some possible *de facto* tolerance, the conditions of the Jews under Almohad rule did not improve substantially and in 1165 the Maimonides family decided to leave. At first it planned to live in Palestine, then under Christian rule, and after a perilous sea voyage of one month, it landed in Acre. The Jewish communities of Palestine were small, poor, and insecure and after a stay of five months, marked by pious pilgrimages to Jerusalem and the graves of the patriarchs in Hebron, the Maimonides family went to Egypt where, after a stay in Alexandria, it settled in Fustat (Old Cairo). After years of wandering the family finally came to rest.

During the next eight years Maimonides was able to devote himself to full-time study and writing. His brother David supported the family through dealing in precious stones, but, when during a business trip to India, David drowned in the Indian Ocean, it became Maimonides’ task to support the family. Reluctant to accept appointment as a rabbi, Maimonides turned to the practice of medicine to earn his livelihood. The beginnings were difficult, but slowly he established a reputation as a physician and in 1185 he was appointed as court physician of al-Fadil, the vizier of Saladin, who had become ruler of Egypt. The years that followed were marked by an active professional and communal life and he continued to write
books, treatises, and numerous letters to Jewish communities and individuals throughout the world who thought his legal and spiritual advice. Some four hundred of his letters are still extant. In a letter to Samuel Ibn Tibbon, the Provençal scholar, who translated his *Guide of the Perplexed* from the original Arabic into Hebrew, Maimonides describes his routine as follows:

My duties to the Sultan [that is, the vizier] are heavy. I am obligated to visit him every day early, in the morning; and when he or any of his children, or any of the inmates of his harem are indisposed, I...must stay during the greater part of the day in the palace...even if nothing unusual happens. I do not return to Mizr [Fustat] until the afternoon. Then I am almost dying with hunger.... I find the antechamber filled with people, both Jews and Gentiles, nobles and common people, judges and bailiffs, friends and foes.

After a brief meal, the only one during the day, he sees his patients until nightfall and, sometimes, into the night. “I am so exhausted,” he reports, “that I can scarcely speak.” Even the Sabbath provides no rest. The letter to Ibn Tibbon continues:

On that day, the whole congregation, or, at least the majority of the members come to me after the morning service, when I instruct them as to their proceedings during the whole week; we study together a little until noon, when they depart. Some of them return and study with me after the afternoon service until the evening prayers. In this manner I spend that day.
After a rich life marked by the professional activities of a physician, service to the Egyptian Jewish community and Jewish communities throughout the world, and unequalled literary activity, Maimonides died in Fustat on December 13, 1204. So great was the loss that the community of Fustat declared a three day fast and public mourning was observed throughout the Jewish world. According to tradition, his remains were taken to Palestine where they were buried in Tiberias. To this day, pious pilgrims visit his suposed grave there. Posterity said of him: “From Moses (the prophet) to Moses (the son of Maimon) there was no one like him.”

Possessed of a keen and probing mind, unequalled mastery of rabbinic and philosophic learning, and the power of incisive and orderly literary expression, Maimonides was the model of a Jewish intellectual who, faithful to the beliefs and practices of his religious tradition and fully versed in the philosophic literature of his day, tried to integrate the two realms. These concerns motivated him to undertake a three-fold program to which he adhered throughout his life: (1) to summarize and organize the vast body of rabbinic learning in order to provide practical legal decisions for the day-to-day life of every Jew, (2) to enlighten the Jewish masses by providing a more philosophic approach to their religious beliefs, and (3) to guide the perplexed intellectuals who found it difficult to reconcile apparent contradictions between the teachings of religion and philosophic truths.

The author of hundreds of responsa, expert religious-legal opinions which address such matters as prayers, holidays, marriage, divorce, contracts, partnerships, thefts, ritual purity and many other topics, Maimonides made three major contributions to rabbinic scholarship. The first of these was *The Commentary on the Mishnah*
(technically entitled *The Book of Illumination*), a commentary on the *Mishnah*, a basic rabbinic work. This work was completed when Maimonides was 30 years of age. This *Commentary* was followed by *The Book of Commandments*, a work devoted to the enumeration and discussion of the 613 commandments contained in the Torah. Finally, Maimonides composed the *Mishneh Torah* (The Repetition of the Torah), his magisterial code of Jewish Law. The first two of these works were written in Arabic, Maimonides’ native tongue, though subsequently they were translated into Hebrew; only the third was originally written in Hebrew, though in Mishnaic Hebrew at that.

According to ancient tradition, recorded by Maimonides in the Introduction to his *Mishneh Torah*, the Torah was given to Moses in two parts: the written Torah, recorded in the five books of Moses, and the oral Torah, first transmitted by word of mouth, but collected in writing and redacted in the early third century of the common era as the *Mishnah* by a Palestinian teacher, Rabbi Judah the Prince. This was the work on which Maimonides wrote his *Commentary*. Once the *Mishnah* was available it became subsequently the subject of study and discussions in Babylonian and Palestinian rabbinical academies. These discussions were at first transmitted orally, but in the end they were once again collected and set down in writing as the Babylonian and Jerusalem (Palestinian) Talmud. But whereas the *Mishnah* contained legal opinions, the two Talmudim contained records of the rather free flowing discussions that occurred in the Babylonian and Palestinian academies. By the time Maimonides arrived on the scene, predecessors had written responsa stating what the practical law was in particular cases, had composed summary
works for particular areas of law, such as the laws of inheritance, and had even written legal codes, but an authoritative code covering all of Jewish law was still lacking. To provide such a code was the task Maimonides undertook in his 14 volume *Mishneh Torah*. Aware of the need to organize Jewish law and present it in authoritative form, Maimonides was guided by a grand vision. Not only would he include in his *Mishneh Torah* those laws still practiced by the Jews of his day, but also such laws as those of the Temple and sacrifices which had not been practiced for centuries, but which, he seemed to hope, were to be practiced once again in Messianic times.

Having presented the great need for writing the Code—“in our days, severe vicissitudes prevail,…, the wisdom of our wise men has disappeared,…, only a few individuals comprehend the legal teachings,” he writes—, and listing the vast body of rabbinic literature he had carefully studied, he states, with the self-confidence so characteristic of all of his writings

I have entitled this work *Mishneh Torah* (The Repetition of the Torah), for the reason that a person who first reads the Written Law and then this compilation, will know from it the whole Oral Law, without having occasion to consult any other book between them..

While in a large portion of the *Mishneh Torah* Maimonides appears as the dispassionate legal scholar who, having weighed the opinions of his predecessors, decides the law, there are others in which he appears as the man of practical wisdom, moral sensitivity, and human compassion. Emphasizing that human beings have free will and that human happiness depends on what a human being does, he
states that it is within a human being’s power to become righteous or wicked, wise or foolish, merciful or cruel, and miserly or generous. Urging patience on teachers, he advises that, should a student not understand the lesson the first time, the teacher should repeat it again and again. Speaking as a physician, he advises moderation in food and drink. Commenting on the biblical law requiring honesty in commercial dealings, he decrees that if the seller knows that an article he is selling has a defect, he must inform the buyer about it. To communal leaders he says that it is forbidden to lead the community in a domineering and arrogant manner, but that they should exercise their authority in a spirit of humility and reverence. Finally, while he grants that it is commendable to give alms to the poor, it is better to find work for them so that they do no longer need to beg from other people, but become financially independent.

Written to provide practical guidance for people at large and to aid rabbis in rendering legal decisions, Maimonides’ legal writings contain a feature absent from earlier and later codes—the intellectual enlightenment of ordinary people. How strongly he felt about the importance of correct opinions, even for ordinary people, emerges from his branding, in the Mishneh Torah, as a heretic someone who believes that God has a body or possesses bodily attributes. He similarly writes in his Guide of the Perplexed that even children must be taught that God does not possesses a body, and that there is no likeness in any respect between Him and His creatures. To foster correct opinions, Maimonides began his Mishneh Torah with a “Book of Knowledge” and he listed “Thirteen Principles of Belief” already in his early Commentary on the Mishnah. Certain beliefs are, of course, recorded in the
Bible and certain beliefs appear in the rabbinic writings and in prayers, but
Maimonides was the first one to compose what he considered an authoritative list of
13 beliefs and he was the first one to require that, in order to be considered a Jew,
one must affirm all of these 13 beliefs.
Maimonides’ 13 principles appear as a commentary on a section of the Mishnah
that states that three persons do not have a part in the World to Come, the afterlife:
he who denies the resurrection of the dead, he who denies the divine authorship of
the Torah, and the Epicurean, whose beliefs are not spelled out, but who is possibly
someone who has false beliefs concerning God. Putting a positive interpretation on
this negative saying, Maimonides requires that a Jew must have certain beliefs
about God, the Torah, and reward and punishment and the afterlife. Beliefs about
God consist of the belief that He exists, is one, is incorporeal, is eternal, and that He
alone is to be worshipped. Beliefs about the Torah consist of the belief that God
inspires prophets, the prophecy of Moses is superior to that of other prophets, the
Torah came from God, and the eternity and immutability of the Torah. Beliefs
about reward and punishment and the afterlife consist of the belief that God
providentially knows individual human beings and their deeds, He rewards those
who obey the commandments of the Torah and punishes those who disobey them,
that the Messiah will come at some future time, and the resurrection of the dead.
Because of Maimonides’ standing as a legal scholar, versions of these principles
were included in the prayer books of all Jewish rites. In the Ashkenazik prayer book
they appear as the *Yigdal* and the *Ani Ma’amín*. Yet in spite of Maimonides’
insistence on the authoritative and required nature of the 13 principle,
contemporaries as well as successors both defended and challenged his opinions for the remainder of the Middle Ages, and they are still a subject for debate in modern times.

While there are philosophic elements in Maimonides’ legal writings, the full-fledged exposition of his philosophic views was reserved for his Guide of the Perplexed, a work composed between 1185 and 1190. The Guide shows that Maimonides mastered the Islamic philosophic literature of his day, but, by his own admission, it is not a work on pure philosophy. He wrote the work for a former student, Joseph ben Yehudah and others like him, who, convinced of the truths of the beliefs of the Torah and adhering faithfully to its commandments but having studied the philosophical sciences, had become perplexed by the apparent conflict between the literal meaning of biblical terms and parables and the teachings of philosophy. To these he wanted to show, first of all, that a comparison of the language of biblical texts alone discloses that no conflict exists between the two. To that end he argues that, already in the Bible, terms describing God by terms taken from the human body in some verses have a spiritual, non-corporeal meaning in other verses. Thus, for example, while the Bible speaks of the outstretched arm of God it has in mind the abstract property of divine power and while it speaks of the eyes of God it has in mind, the abstract property, divine providence. The Guide is, then, first of all a work of biblical interpretation designed to teach a spiritual conception of God. To this topic, the linguistic comparison of biblical texts Maimonides devotes a large portion of the first book of Guide.
But the *Guide* is more than a work on biblical interpretation. It is also devoted, in Maimonides’ language, to reveal “the ‘secrets’ of the Torah.” By this he has in mind that, behind the rather simple biblical text, there lay profound, philosophic teachings concerning God, the world, and human life. These can be discovered by philosophic interpretation and speculation. Following the order of the *Guide* these topics are: divine attributes; proofs of the existence, unity, and incorporeality of God; the nature of angelic beings; creation of the world; prophecy; the nature of evil; divine omniscience; divine providence; the nature of the Torah and the reasons for its commandments. While the technical aspects of these discussions need not detain us, let us get some sense of Maimonides’ opinions by analyzing what he has to say about God and human beings.

If there ever was a “God-intoxicated” philosopher, it was Maimonides not Spinoza. It was man’s task in life, Maimonides held, to understand of God whatever is within the capacity of the human intellect, and man’s eternal happiness in the World to Come, the afterlife, consists in contemplating God. Jewish tradition had always made the love of God the highest goal of human life, but it had generally identified this love with the observance of the practical commandments of the Torah. While Maimonides made the observance of these commandment an important part of the Jewish religious life, he daringly identified the ultimate form of the love of God with knowledge and contemplation of Him. Maimonides writes:

> It is known and certain that the love of God does not become closely knit in man’s heart till he is continuously and thoroughly possessed by it and gives
up everything else in the world for it…. One only loves God with the knowledge with which one knows Him. According to the knowledge will be the love. If the former be little or much, so will the latter be little or much.

In line with this conviction, Maimonides offers at the beginning of the second book of the *Guide* four proofs for the existence of God based on certain features of the world. All these proofs are designed to show that a careful examination of the world discloses that there exists a first being, God, who is the ultimate principle of the world. Based on proofs offered by Islamic philosophers, these proofs were later embraced by Christian philosophers.

We have already seen how Maimonides used the comparison of the language of biblical texts to show that attributes describing God by means of terms taken from the human body, already in the Bible, have a non-corporeal, non-physical meaning. But besides addressing this problem by means of a comparison of biblical texts in the early part of the *Guide*, he addresses it in a more philosophical manner in the latter section of the first book and at the beginning of the second book. This time the issue is how can Jewish tradition maintain that God is one and yet describe Him by means of *many* attributes. If God is totally one how can he, at the same time exist, be living, be wise, be provident, be jealous, be angry, be merciful, and long suffering.

Accepting a distinction common in medieval philosophy, Maimonides distinguishes between attributes of two kinds: essential and accidental. Essential attributes, examples of which are “existing,” “living”, “wise,” are such that their denial requires that the being to which they are attributed ceases to exist once these attributes are denied. Accidental attributes, by contrast, such as “jealous”, “angry”,

“merciful”, are such that they can be denied without it being required that the being to which they are attributed ceases to exist. For it is possible that a being is angry at one time, but merciful at another. Maimonides held that essential as well as accidental attributes introduce multiplicity into that to which they are attributed, so that neither attribute can be predicated of God in any positive way. To solve the problem, Maimonides maintains that accidental attributes attributed to God do not describe any property in Him, but describe his actions. Essential attributes attributed to God, similarly, do not describe any property in Him, but describe what He is not. God is merciful, for example, signifies that God performs merciful actions, while God is one, signifies that God is not many.

In his philosophy of man, Maimonides once again undertakes of bringing the literal meaning of the Bible close to philosophic truths. At first glance it appears that the Bible teaches that human happiness is attained through the observance of the divine commandments in the practices of day-to-day life; the Bible seems to have little interest in beliefs and philosophic speculations. Not so, argues Maimonides. If, as the philosophers teach and judicious interpretation of the Bible seem to confirm, human beings have not only a body, but also possess a mind, it seems to be inconceivable that the Torah, in its commandments, should neglect the human intellect. Expressing this conviction, Maimonides writes in the Guide:

The Torah as a whole aims at two things: the wellbeing of the soul [intellect] and the wellbeing of the body….the wellbeing of the soul [intellect] consists in the multitude’s acquiring correct opinions, corresponding to their respective capacity…. the wellbeing of the body is achieved through two
Continuing his exposition, Maimonides adds, that of these two goals, the wellbeing of the intellect is more noble than the wellbeing of the body.

Maimonides’ conception of the centrality of the human intellect in the life of man was important not only for his conception for the role of man in this world, but also for his conception of man’s eternal beatitude in the afterlife, the World to Come.

Life in the present world, according to Maimonides, consists in the acquisition of the moral and political virtues as well as in the acquisition of correct opinions, but existence in the World to Come consists solely in the contemplation of God.

Approvingly citing a rabbinic statement that states "that in the World to Come there is neither eating, drinking, washing, anointing, and sexual intercourse, but the righteous sit, their crowns on their head, enjoying the radiance of the divine presence,” Maimonides comments

‘with their crowns on their heads’ signifies the immortality of the soul [intellect] through the intelligible concepts inhering in it; ‘enjoying the radiance of the divine presence’ means that these [eternal intellects] enjoy blissful delight in their attainment of the knowledge of the true nature of the creator, blessed be He.

Guide of the perplexed of his own day, Maimonides became the teacher of Jews and Christians for generations to come. In Jewish circles, his legal writings, especially his Mishneh Torah, inspired commentaries, critical evaluations and subsequent
codes of Jewish law, and, until this day, scholars ponder the wisdom of his work. The training of no contemporary rabbi, no matter to which group he belongs, is complete without some familiarity with Maimonides’ great code. The *Guide of the Perplexed* determined the course of Jewish philosophy for the remainder of the Middle Ages to the extent that there appeared hardly any philosophic work that did not cite, comment on or, as the case may be, criticize Maimonides’ views. Beyond that, the *Guide* had a seminal influence on philosophers of the Jewish enlightenment, and to this day scholars and theologians study the work.

Similarly “Rabbi Moyses”, as the scholastics called him, was a respected author in Christian circles and his *Dux neutrorum* or *Dux dubitantium aut perplexorum* as the *Guide* was called in its Latin translation, was a regularly studied work. Among Christian scholars influenced by the *Guide* was Thomas Aquinas, the great Christian Theologian. Even today Maimonides is still of interest to scholars of all groups. A critical edition of the Latin version of the *Guide* is in preparation, a relatively recent journal carried an exchange between two non-Jewish theologians concerning the validity of Maimonides’ negative theology, and only last year there appeared a book devoted to a critical evaluation of his thirteen principles of Jewish belief. Maimonides was a blessing to his own generation and he continues to be a blessing to ours.

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