

LifelifTERS Book Review Pulpit Series  
Part II

Maimonides

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This Shabbat we read the Ten Commandments. Moshe Rabbenu, that is, “Moses our Teacher” never looks grander than when portrayed alone atop Mt. Sinai as God engraved those sacred laws upon stone tablets. In the Torah’s closing verse, the last words of Deuteronomy, we are informed, “Never again did there arise in Israel a prophet like Moses...”

Our attention this Shabbos Eve will focus on another man named Moses Maimonides – surely one of the most genuinely brilliant human beings God ever created. Is there any wonder that from the publication of his very first book, a Commentary on the Mishnah, the familiar saying became popular among our people: “From Moses (of the Bible) to Moses (Maimonides), there arose no one like Moses.

I’ve stood in awe of Moses Maimonides ever since I flunked my first year philosophy exam at Hebrew Union College! It focused on translating from the Aramaic, Maimonides’ *Guide for the Perplexed*.

Well, I finally passed the test on the second go round, but for reasons I still blame on my now deceased, miserable professor, I was rendered traumatized and fearful of anything Maimonidean.

So, when Dr. Sherman Nuland, a Yale professor of surgery and author of the bestseller, *How We Die*, chose to write a new biography of this greatest of all Jewish physicians and philosophers, I overcame my 35-year-old dysfunctional anxiety and bought his book.

And how was it? I suffered all over again! Throughout this week, I have pondered a change of subjects. I’ve read and reread portions of the Nuland book, and here’s what I’ve decided. Shakespeare’s line in *Julius Ceaser* is applicable here: “The fault, dear Brutus, lies not in our stars, but in ourselves – MYSELF really.”

This Maimonides – Rabbi Moses ben Maimon – commonly called by the acronym, “the Rambam” was so far ahead of my limited mental powers – and I’ll bet yours, too – but there is a great value for all of us in pursuing his story.

The Rambam’s contributions to the perpetuation of Judaism are incalculable. This is not a warm, fuzzy fellow, however. But then the times in which he lived were far from easygoing and secure for Jewish living, to be sure. There is a certain import to his example. We who are living now through far from ideal times ought to hold up such individuals as examples of what can be accomplished, even when the times are tough. But then, our conditions are a cakewalk compared to Maimonides’ times, that’s for sure.

Maimonides lived from 1135 to 1204. His father was a most learned rabbi and judge (a dayyan) of the rabbinical court of Cordoba, Spain. His mother died three years after he was born. Moses came into the world toward the end of what is often called “the Golden Age of Spanish Jewry.” The Muslim caliph had extended liberal freedoms to both Jews and Christians. Sure, there were distinctions of privilege and second-class

status, but compared to times prior and those soon to come, Spain was an environment in which these Arabized Jews thrived.

Young Moses was educated by both his father and tutors in Greek philosophy, rhetoric, astronomy, science, and mathematics. We know that even as a boy, Moses poured over medical texts as well. Thus, he began what would turn out to be a great medical career.

Note well, Maimonides was blessed with what we know as a photographic memory. Once read, the contents of entire books remained in his recall. At ten years of age, he amazed the elders of his father's synagogue with his extemporaneous expositions on the Torah and Talmudic law.

In 1148, the Iberian Peninsula was overtaken by a violent fundamentalist Muslim sect. Non-Muslims were given the choice – convert or die. Emigration was not offered as an option. Many Jews undertook a sort of pseudo-conversion, made easier by the authorities' demand for public observance, but allowing them privacy at home. Moses' father would not play any such games, however.

Rabbi Maimon took his family into exile, escaping with several other Jewish families in the dark of night. There was an arduous pilgrimage to uncertain destinations. But all the time, tutors were found for young Moses. Moses taught his younger brother, David. Their homelessness lasted for years, but young Moses worked during this time on several treatises on philosophy, the Jewish calendar, and on commentaries of a few sections of the sacred scriptures.

By age 20, he began work on his famous Commentary on the Mishnah, which took him ten years to complete. It became obvious the Maimon family needed to settle somewhere else because Moses needed books for his research. His father took his family to Fez, Morocco. But conditions grew worse with Muslim persecution and the Maimon family joined the other Jews in hiding all outward signs of Jewishness while living in Fez. Some even say that Maimonides actually converted to become a Muslim during this period.

In 1165, the leading Rabbi of Fez, Judah ibn Shoshan, also a pseudo-convert, was seized and charged with reverting to the practice of Judaism – a crime for which he was tortured and killed by the Muslim authorities.

Moses Maimonides was also arrested and might well have suffered the very same fate had a Muslim poet and theologian, Abdul Arab ibin Moisha, not risked his life to intercede for his friend, Moses. Later in life, Abdul learned that Maimonides was the leading rabbi of the Alexandria Jewish Community, and regretted having intervened to save his friend's life.

After five years of a double life, the Maimons left Fez for Palestine, which was then called the Kingdom of Jerusalem. Palestine, home to a small number of forlorn and

largely impoverished Jews, turned out to be a severe disappointment to the Maimon family.

And so, they set out once again. This time they would make their home in Alexandria, Egypt, where for Jews there was a measure of freedom to be found in that very place in which their ancestors had once lived in slavery and oppression. Moses Maimonides was now 27.

Not surprisingly, he became their leading rabbi and authority on Jewish law. He now finished his Commentary on the Mishnah.

By the way, Maimonides took exception in his commentary with the view that all Israelites would share in the World to Come. Said Maimonides:

Only the righteous would be resurrected. The immortal being enjoys the bliss of contemplating God – i.e. a heightened state of spiritual communion with God (that's Heaven, for Maimonides). As for punishment, there was no physical torture, but rather a destiny of non-existence. Hell, for Maimonides, was to have one's soul cut off from the presence of God.

During this period in Alexandria, Maimonides also authored his famous 13 principles of faith – a catechism of sorts – each one of which begins, “I believe with perfect faith...” These principles affirm God as (1) Author and Guide of All, (2) a Unity of Oneness, (3) not a physical body, (4) the first and last – the alpha and omega, (5) the only one to Whom one prays, (6) the sixth principle affirms the truth of the prophets, (7) and the seventh – that Moses was the Chief Prophet of the Jewish people, (8) the Halachah is the same given to Moses on Mt. Sinai, (9) the Law is unchangeable, (10) God knows every deed and thought, (11) God both punishes the evildoers and rewards the righteous, (12) the Messiah will come, and we must await his arrival, and (13) there will be a resurrection of the dead when it pleases God to realize it.

Moses left Alexandria to settle in a town in Egypt called Fustat in 1168. There were 7000 Jewish families there and in Cairo. He made his living not as a rabbi, but received funds from the family gemstone business that his brother, David, conducted. Gemstones were a popular enterprise during that time, as you could carry your entire inventory in a small leather sack. But in 1174, when David's ship sank in a storm, Moses entered several years of profound mental depression.

When money ran out, he began to practice medicine in 1175 as well as being chief judge of the Egyptian rabbinical court. Arabic healing was now at the height of its influence.

Now he also completed his Mishneh Torah, that is, “the repetition of the Torah” in 14 volumes and 1000 chapters. The Mishneh Torah was a layperson’s index to the entirety of the Babylonian Talmud. Maimonides was convinced that the Messiah was soon to come, and that the Jewish state would be established. He felt that his Mishneh Torah would serve well as the national constitution of the Jewish state and people.

Maimonides’ next masterpiece was his *Guide for the Perplexed* – an attempt to harmonize both faith and reason, the Torah and Aristotle. The guide was completed in 1190.

Whereas the Mishneh Torah was conceived for people of second and third class minds, this *Guide for the Perplexed* was leveled at “the relatively few who were qualified to understand it.” When faith and reason clash, the Torah can be seen to be speaking in allegory. But, says Maimonides, its words must never be dismissed, as they were dictated by God to Moses. Thus, it is safe to conclude that Maimonides had no conviction that the profound truths of Judaism were within equal reach of all Jews. Much of his work was directed to people of differing intellectual abilities.

Dr. Nuland is best as a writer when he analyzes how accommodating the practice of medicine would become for Jews in the Middle Ages. He wonders and then answers why it is that we Jews have excelled in the healing arts and why it is that Maimonides and other Jewish physicians concluded that God did not want us to wait for divine intervention and healing the sick. Simply put, Jewish teachings always underscored that since we are blessed with free will, healing is a human responsibility. Greek and Jewish philosophy wedded in medical ethics.

Dr. Nuland writes:

Era after era, Jews had been forced to flee from country to country, usually taking few of their possessions and often able to retain little of their money. Medical knowledge was not only transferable but, until licensing laws were established in various territories around the late eighteenth century, was a means of starting up an enterprise immediately upon arrival in a foreign place...Not permitted to own land until relatively recent times (and in any event unable to put it into a suitcase), Jews looked on medicine as a form of un-real estate, valued because of the very real conditions to which they had to respond realistically. Traveling as they did, Jews learned many languages, and the medical men among them had contact with physicians from many areas, adding to their store of information and their comprehension of available texts, as well as enabling them to study the drugs used by local practitioners. In addition, the shared ability to speak and read Hebrew enabled them to transmit knowledge to one another. Their very privations added to their skills. Jews were of

necessity cosmopolitan, and so was their medicine...Jewish interest, unlike Christianity, lay in saving lives much more than saving souls.

And so you have it, in briefest form. There, I did it! Nothing to be afraid of here! I'll give myself a passing grade!

Moses Maimonides – a religious and scientific genius who was so far ahead of his times and blessed with God-given gifts of mind, all of which allowed him to be so astoundingly productive.

Mind you, he did not enjoy a long life or a life of ease in a secure setting. Yet, how much he was able to accomplish and what magnificent contributions he made to the perpetuation of our Judaism and to the high demands of the healing arts!

If you have a mind for philosophy or just want to understand more thoroughly how Judaism and the practice of medicine go hand in hand, then by all means, I urge you to pick up Dr. Nuland's fine book. Read it, and you too can be amazed and astounded by such a fabulous mind. You'll find yourself agreeing, "From Moses to Moses, there arose no one like Moses."

Amen