

## "A SHORT BIOGRAPHY OF A GREAT SAGE: Maimonides After 7½ Centuries"

1. Introduction. 750 years ago, a man died in Fostat, a suburb of Cairo, capital of Egypt. He was probably the greatest genius Jewry had produced since Moses the Lawgiver had flourished some 3,000 years before him. In his lifetime he already was called HA'NESHER HA'GADOL, the Great Eagle. As soon as the terrible news became to his co-religionists all over the world, there came into being the phrase, his epitaph, MI'MOSHE AD MOSHE LO KAM KE'MOSHE. And an entire continent of Jews so revered him that they mentioned his name in the Kaddish. He towers high and mighty in Jewish History as the great Philosopher, the Great Talmudist and the great Physician. And we are attempting to give his life in 30 minutes!
2. Elementary Data. To this day, his opinions are the point of departure for any book
  - a) on Jewish philosophy, and the greatest delight of any Halacha student is to explain a difficult passage in the Code he wrote.
  - b) Name: Moses, son of Maimon. RAMBAM...explain. MAIMONIDES...explain.
  - c) Dates: born Erev Pesach, 1135, died almost 70 years later.
  - d) Place: Lived the life of a wanderer. Fanatical Mohammedan sects held sway in his Spanish birthplace, and all over that part of world... From Cordova, Spain to Fez in Morocco, to Acco and Safedin Palestine, finally to Fostat in Egypt.
  - e) Background: Spain had been Mohammedan many years. Its tolerance for others, good will to Jews, as compared with Christian Europe with Crusades etc. ...But no rely on them, because Almohades of North Africa invaded, gave Jews choice of Islam, death or exile. M had been studying under father, R. Maimon, judge, cultured individual etc. His brother David a businessman, close to M, supported him while he studied. Then, during travels, David went down with merchant ship. Soon, R. Maimon himself died.
3. Intellectual Background.
  - a) Graeco-Arab philosophic tradition of Aristotle...i.e. Rationalism
  - b) Halachic tradition had flourished in Spain...Faith.
  - c) Schism between them, many left Judaism. M was to unite both:
  - d) also era of scientific development. M to grow here too.
4. His First Works. (Remember their forced exiles, lack of home & school).
  - a) first came a commentary on portions of Talmud practical today. Fragments left.
  - b) 2 scientific works: Terminology of Logic, Treatise on the Calendar (astronomical).

\*\*\*\*and this done when he was SIXTEEN YEARS OLD...time American Jewish boy just forgetting his Bar Mitzvah Haftarah, which took him two years to learn.
5. Commentary on the Mishnah, Letters and Medicine.
  - a) In Fostat, when he was 33 years old, he completed his first monumental work - to be eclipsed by later and even greater works - which is studied assiduously till this day. PEIRUSH HA'MISHNAYOS. A commentary on Mishna which gives essence of entire Talmudic discourse...filled with not only legal acumen but philosophic insight, historical essays and written in brilliant style. It took M ten years to write it. Now, 7½ centuries later, it is still being studied lovingly by students of the Talmud.

\*Under what conditions did he write it?...From a letter: "In addition I was troubled by the suffering and exile which G-d had decreed on me, since I was driven from one end of the world to the other; and perhaps I have received reward for that, since exile atones for sin. G-d knows that I have explained some chapters whilst on my

wanderings & others aboard ship. Besides, I have also devoted time to the study of science."

- b) at the same time, M was practically the Rabbi of Fostat, & unofficially the Naggid of Egypt. ...
- c) at same time too, achieved world renown as a great physician...physician to court of Sultan - Saladin and his harem.

\*(Invited by Richard Lion-Hearted to be his physician, but M refused.)

- d) meanwhile, produced series of major works in science -- most of his works written in Arabic.

\*Sexology, Poisons and Antidotes (translated into four languages, as recently as 1873), Bubonic Plague, Asthma, Pharmaceutical Nomenclature (gives names in Arabic, Greek, Spanish, Berber, Persian, Syriac), Dietetics, and Aphorisms of Hippocrates plus his own (always counselled MODERATION), and several volumes of case histories.

- e) does all this sound impressive? - well, M had by this time not yet achieved the two great works which assured him real immortality! All this was minor. but let me give you some more minor material before going into his main glory. He was eminent in Jewish life, hence greatest questions directed to him. Wrote epistles, or long letters, in response, and these guided an entire people in exile in numerous continents, and have survived till this day, when they still make fascinating reading.

In Spain and all over Africa, GEZEIROS HA'SHMAD. The Sword of Islam. People despondent. He encouraged them like a father talking to a son, and millions of people listened and gained strength. He counselled exile rather than either martyrdom or conversion, and mass exoduses began. He had a sharp pen, and he lashed mercilessly those who berated their fellow-Jews who were forced to convert openly while practicing Judaism in secret. He spoke of ANAVAS YISRAEL, and warned others not to speak sneeringly of Jews who were downtrodden and bitter. He called out to his people to remain strong of spirit, and reminded them that G-d, in speaking to their father Jacob, had ~~call~~ compared Israel to dust, and M added that just as dust is stepped upon, yet later vanquishes the person who stepped on it, so Israel would rise to live unto eternity and would yet witness the downfall of their persecutors. He guided his people clear from all sorts of False Messiahs, ...(explain, recent case in Connecticut).. who, if followed, could cause destruction of entire Jewry by Arabs, Christians. Told them to act in wisdom, not emotion. Not to be convinced by a lie simply because repeated many times. "The truth of any matter," he wrote, "is not established by much repetition and does not suffer by not being repeated. The cornerstone of our faith is "the Lord is One", and yet that is not mentioned more than once in the entire Torah." The young man in Fostat was already the Patriarch of his people.

## 6. The Code (Yad Ha'Chazakah).

M's career in Rabbinic scholarship climaxed by one of most immortal works ever published: the MISHNA TORAH (Second Torah) or YAD HA'CHAZAKAH, his Code of Halachah. It consists of 14 volumes, and embodied the whole learning of Judaism from the Bible till his own day. This work takes the entire sea of the Talmud, with its enormous quantity and quality of legal, philosophic and ethical content, and distills it into a systematic, orderly form, written in the simplest and most precise Hebrew, so that you can find any law you want and understand it.

"One wonders," writes Rabbi Herzog of Israel, "how a single human brain could have produced so titanic a work, so all-embracing, so artistically, so systematically ordered, the result of such vast erudition and research and of such intellectual power."

One of the outstanding features of the Code: completeness. Contains essence of both Talmudim, all Tannaitic writings, Gaonic responses; also, astronomical theory for laws relating to calendar; laws of diet (not for Kashruth, but health, SHMIRAS HA'GUF); and a systematic theology, with, of course, the bulk being the greatest code of jurisprudence ever written.....Jellinek in 1893: 220 commentaries...greatest adversary, RAAVAD, printed with M's text, united in eternity...also:(Nachas!)his son's commentary on it.

Hard to convince lay audience of vast importance of Code. Example: Halachic critique of Conservative Ketubah begins with an opinion of M. When you write an essay in Halachah, you generally begin with a quote from M's Code etc.....

For those here tonight who repeatedly tell me that they have little time for their own education and reading, that they are simply too busy for such leisure, let me read this excerpt from a letter by M to another scholar:

"I dwell in Fostat, and the Sultan resides in Cairo, & the distance between the two places is a double Sabbath's day journey (circa  $1\frac{1}{2}$  miles). My duties to the Sultan are heavy. I must visit him early every morning; if he feels weak, or any of his children or the inmates of harem are ill, I do not leave Cairo, but spend the greater part of the day in the palace. Also, if one or two of the officials fall ill I have to attend them and thus spend the whole day there.

"In brief, I repair to Cairo every day in the early morning, and even if nothing unusual happens, I do not return to Fostat until after the noon hour. Then I am fatigued and hungry and I find the courts of my house full of people, prominent and common, gentiles, theologians and judges, waiting for the time of my return.

"Thus no Israelite can have a private discussion with me except on the Sabbath. Then they all come to me after the services and I advise them what to do during the week; afterwards they study a little till noon and depart. Some of them come back and study again until the evening prayers.

"This is my regular routine. I have here related to you only part of what you will see, please G-d."

So that thus, while the doctor was on the couch, he gave advice, dictated prescription dictated responsa - some 400 of his judicial opinions are still available today - thought through his brilliant Halachic opinions, and pondered his philosophy which we shall soon discuss. All while too exhausted to get off his couch. Who is it, now, who can say that he is too busy to study or even to read an occasional Jewish book?

7. Guide for Perplexed. Finally, at age 52, M produced his second great work which gave him eternal renown not only in the Jewish world but amongst all people for all times.

\*I shall not attempt to describe even an infinitesimal part of the contents of the MOREH NEVUCHIM, or Guide for the Perplexed. It simply cannot be done. You cannot popularize what is essentially highly technical and abstruse without giving the whole thing a dish-water appearance. Besides which, the Rabbi of Kotzk once said of those who studied the MOREH NEVUCHIM, that if they were advanced students of Bible and Talmud and great scholars, then it was MOREH, or a Guide for them; if, however, they were not scholars of Talmud and Jewish thought and betook themselves to this work, then it proved to be NEVUCHIM, or an even greater Perplexity, to them. M himself maintained that this philosophical work was not written for the ordinary person. It was for scholars only.

\*Let us, instead, tell what M tried to accomplish.

\*Aristotelian tradition of REASON. Maintained Eternity of Matter, no Personal G-d.

\*Judaism based on FAITH. Taught creation, Personal G-d.

\*Conflict. Result: Either apostasy or tendency to outlaw rationalism.

\*He tried to reconcile both great traditions: Philosophy and Faith, Reason & Revelation.

\*As an outstanding student of Aristotle's system (Aristotle flourished over a thousand years before him), and the great exponent of Judaism, he formulated method of reconciliation as follows:

a) proved reasonableness of Bible and Judaism. There can be nothing in it

CONTRARY to reason. There is an area which is not amenable to Reason, called Faith.

b) He proved, by philosophic methods, by reason, that you can be a follower of

Aristotle, i.e. believe in Reason, and still maintain Creation and Personal G-d.

\*Guide translated into every major language. Influenced greatest theologians of Islam and Christianity. Has over 60 commentaries on it.

\*Gave rise to tremendous controversy in Judaism which was to last close to 500 years, and even today there are Maimonists and Anti-Maimonists.

\*Orthodox Judaism today is the embodiment of the principle of M. The inviolability of Halachah, the Divinity revealed in Torah, and yet the study of philosophy and Science.



## 8. His Death.

- \* Take the major works of M, and you will find an interesting progression-pattern. First the PEIRUSH HA'MISHNAYOS, the study of religious authority, then the MISHNA TORAH, then the Code, the living in accordance with Jewish Law. And finally, the Guide, the speculating and philosophizing. When a man has respect for authority and a knowledge of the Law, then he can begin to philosophize. Those who begin with speculation not infrequently overthrow law and authority.
- \* M died in Fostat 750 years ago, just short of 70 years old.
- \* He was buried in Tiberias, according to his request to be buried in Palestine. On his tombstone, only: "Here lies our Rabbi, Moses ben Maimon". That's all.
- \* When he died, Jews and Mohammedans alike mourned him for three days, and in Jerusalem a fast was declared and the Tochahchah recited, along with the part of the Book of Samuel which deals with the capture of the Ark. For Jews of that day, the Ark was gone.
- \* To us, three quarters of a millenium after his death, M appears to have grown even greater in stature. Our ancestors then mourned because the Ark was gone. We today, 750 years later, have this consolation: though the Ark is gone, the Torah has survived, and with it the MISHNA TORAH, the Second Torah of Maimonides which explained it - and which ensured its survival.
- \* MI'MOSHEH AD MOSHEH LO KAM K'MOSHEH. From Moses the Lawgiver until the Moses of 1955, there never was another Moses like Moses Maimonides.
- \* On a YAHRZEIT, we usually express the wish, ZAL DI NESHAMAH NABEN AN ALIYAH, may the soul of the departed rise on higher. Today, at the 750th Yahrzeit of our Rabbi Moses ben Maimon, The Great Eagle, we hope that the memory of his great soul will lift us up higher. Amen