



Rabbi Moshe ben Maimon (Maimonides) **Rambam** 1135 – 1204

Rabbi Moshe ben Maimon was born on the eve of Pesach (*Passover*) in Cordoba, in 4895 (*CE 1135*). He was born into a very illustrious family which was able to trace its ancestry back to Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi, the compiler of the Mishna, and King David. His father, Rabbi Maimon, the *dayan* (*judge*) of Cordoba, gave him a good education in Torah and secular subjects such as mathematics, astronomy, and philosophy. Moshe excelled in all these studies.

When the Rambam was thirteen years old, the Almohades, a Muslim sect that demanded that all the Jews convert to Islam, conquered Cordoba. The Rambam's family fled, and after wandering for some time in Christian Spain, eventually settled in Fez, Morocco in 1160. Despite the troubles of this period, the Rambam continued his studies and began his literary work. At the age of twenty-three, he wrote two short treatises (*one on logic and one on the Jewish calendar*) and began work on his Commentary on the Mishnah, one of his major works. In Fez, they encountered many Jews who had been forced to convert to Islam but continued to practice Judaism. Rabbi Maimon was active in encouraging these Jews to maintain their connection to Judaism. He published a letter titled Igeres HaNechama (*Letter of Consolation*) for these unfortunate people. Some time later, a rabbi from outside of Morocco wrote a letter that stated that the Jews who had been forced to profess adherence to Islam were sinners who had lost their connection to Judaism. That rabbi also declared, that the prayers of these Jews were abominations and their good deeds were worthless. This "*decision*" had a terribly demoralizing affect on the Jewish community in Morocco.



Many felt inclined to abandon Judaism entirely, since according to that rabbi, all their Jewish observances were worthless anyway and their only remaining option would be to lose their lives at the hands of the Muslim authorities. In response to this letter, the Rambam wrote his famous *Igeres Kiddush HaShem* (*Letter on the Sanctification of God*, also called *Igeres HaShmad*) in which he strongly condemns the opinion expressed by that rabbi, and delineates the true laws which govern when one must give up his life. In addition, he clarifies the important rule that a Jew's prayers are always acceptable to God, and that one's sins do not take away from one's good deeds. He further advised these Jews to leave the land that oppressed them at the first opportunity and settle in a country

where they could properly observe Judaism. Due to their involvement with these unfortunate forced converts, the Maimon family eventually attracted the displeasure of the Islamic government and was again forced to flee in 1165. They traveled to the land of Israel where they remained for some time. However, the Jewish community in Israel at that time, was suffering from intense poverty and oppression and they were unable to remain there. Within a short time, they left and traveled to Egypt. At about this time, Rabbi Maimon passed away.

The family settled in Fostat, the Old City of Cairo. Rabbi Moshe's younger brother, Rabbi Dovid, a dealer in precious stones, continued to support the family while Rabbi Moshe spent his time in Torah study. In 1168 Rabbi Moshe published his first major work, the Commentary on the Mishna. It was written in Arabic and was one of the first commentaries of its kind. Of particular significance were the various introductory sections he included the commentary. Perhaps the most famous is his introduction to the tenth chapter of tractate *Sanhedrin* where he enumerates the thirteen fundamental beliefs of Judaism. These thirteen principles eventually became the authoritative credo of Judaism. Till this day, many Jews recite an abridged version of these 13 foundations every day after morning prayers.

However, the following year, tragedy struck when Rabbi Dovid perished at sea. With him was lost the entire family fortune. The Rambam was shattered by this blow, and was bedridden for an entire year. Even years later he continued to mourn for his brother. After he recovered he had to assume the responsibility to support the family. In compliance with his principles, he was unwilling to earn a living from his Torah so he began to practice medicine, a trade he had studied in Fez.



Despite the heavy burden of work which his medical profession placed upon him, the Rambam continued to be active both as a leader in the Jewish community and as a writer. In 1172 the Rambam wrote a famous letter to the Jewish community of Yemen, called the *Iggeres Teiman* (*the Letter to Yemen*). At that time, the Jews of Yemen were suffering from terrible religious persecution from the Islamic authorities. These oppressors were aided by a Jewish apostate who became a missionary for Islam, attempting to prove the truth of Islam from the Torah. Added to all this, was a false Moshiach (*messiah*) who took advantage of these difficult times to gain a large following. The Yemenite community turned to the Rambam for advice and he responded with the *Iggeres*. In the letter, he encourages the Jews to remain steadfast in their

commitment to Judaism, with practical advice on how to deal with their situation. He also demolishes the claims of the Islamic missionary and the false Moshiach. The letter had an enormous impact on the Yemenite community, inspiring hope throughout the land. The Rambam also used his influence in court, to lessen the large tax burden on the Jews of Yemen. In 1177, he was appointed the *nagid* (*leader*) of the Fostat Jewish community. In this position, he successfully defended the position of true Judaism from the encroachment of the heretical Karaite sect. This sect, which denied the validity of the Oral Torah, had unfortunately made some successful inroads in the Jewish community. The Rambam attacked their doctrines, proving them to be false. At the same time, he openly welcomed the followers of this sect back into the fold of Judaism. The Ramba'm also used his position as a medical doctor, in Sultan Saladin's court, which began in about 1185, for the benefit of the Jewish community both in Egypt and elsewhere (*as he did in Yemen*).

During this period (*1180s*) the Rambam published his most significant work, the *Mishneh Torah* (*Review of the Torah*) in which he codified the entire body of Jewish law. This was the product of ten years of work and was the first systematic codification of Jewish law ever written. Unlike all of the Rambam's other works, the *Mishneh Torah* was written in Hebrew and was intended to provide the average Jew with access to the body of Jewish law. Until the *Mishneh Torah*, in order to ascertain the law it was necessary to be experienced in the study of the Talmud and other major works, and even then, determining the final law could be very difficult. The *Mishneh Torah* provided a basic reference that one could study to know the law without these difficulties. It was quickly accepted throughout the Jewish world. However, there were some scholars who were not entirely happy with this. While no one denied the incredible scholarship that the *Mishneh Torah* represented, there were some who



were upset with his apparent intent to have the study of his Mishneh Torah, replace the study of the Talmud itself, which is basic to the complete understanding of Jewish law. Others were critical of the lack of references in the Mishneh Torah. The Rambam eventually came to partially agree with the latter criticism, but he firmly maintained that his intent was not to turn people away from the study of the Talmud. In a letter which he wrote about these criticisms he states, "God forbid! I never said that people should not study the Talmud!" (*Shut HaRambam 140*). The third major work of the Rambam was the *Moreh Nevuchim* (*Guide for the Perplexed*) which he wrote as a very long letter to one of his students sometime around 1190. In the *Moreh*, Rambam deals with the conflicts which exist between Aristotelian philosophy and Judaism. While he held Aristotelian thought in high esteem, he differed with him on many issues.

The *Moreh* inspired a great deal of controversy on a number of issues. It should be noted however, that contrary to the frequently expressed opinion that "*the Rambam considered Jewish law subject to change*", the *Moreh* "*never mentions any such idea*". One of the controversial aspects of the *Moreh* was his attempt to provide rational explanations for the commandments. Some have misunderstood this to signify that we need only follow those commandments that we understand. The Rambam never even suggests such an idea. As the Rambam states in his thirteen foundations of Judaism and many other places, the laws of Judaism are not subject to change. The *Moreh* is a difficult book to understand and it is not surprising that it has frequently been misunderstood, both by those who opposed it and by those who have attempted to misuse it.

One of the issues that raised a lot of questions, was the Rambam's treatment of the principle of *Techiyas HaMeisim* (*the Resurrection of the Dead*). Even though the Rambam lists *Techiyas HaMeisim* as the thirteenth, of his thirteen foundations of Judaism, there were those who accused the Rambam of denying (*or neglecting to mention*) this basic concept in his other works. In response to these accusations the Rambam wrote his *Ma'amar Techiyas HaMeisim* (*Discourse on the Resurrection of*

the Dead) in about 1191. In this discourse, the Rambam explains the concept of Techiyas HaMeisim and eliminates any questions as to his belief in it.

Another significant work produced by the Rambam, is his *Sefer HaMitzvos (Book of the Commandments)* which enumerates the 613 commandments in the Torah. This book was written in Arabic and was intended as a prefatory work for the Mishneh Torah.

In addition to all the aforementioned accomplishments, the Rambam authored numerous books on medicine, *responsa (letters in response to questions in Jewish law)* and Talmudic commentaries.

The Rambam passed away in 4965 (CE 1204). The Jewish community worldwide mourned him. The community of Fostat instituted a three-day period of mourning. His remains were taken to Tiberias in the land of Israel for burial and his tomb can still be visited there today. His son, Rabbi Avraham succeeded him in the position of nagid.

The Rambam was one of the most influential leaders the Jewish people ever had. His accomplishments had a dramatic effect, both within the Jewish world and in the non-Jewish world. His *Moreh* in particular, had a powerful impact even outside the Jewish community. (For example, *Thomas Aquinas, the author of what became the basic philosophy of Christianity, was familiar with the Rambam's writings and even refers to the Ramba'm in his writings.*) His incredible stature is best summed up with the folk saying which arose regarding him, "*From Moshe (Moses) to Moshe, there arose no one like Moshe.*" Moises ben Maimon, lovingly know as "*The Rambam*" was a very special and talented Sephardic Jew.

