

Abba Hillel Silver Collection Digitization Project

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Moses Maimonides, 1935.

MOSES MAIMONIDES

Rabbi Abba Hillel Silver
On
Sunday morning, March 31, 1935
At
The Temple

In 1492 all the Jews of Spain were exiled. In 1935, the government of Spain decreed a five day national celebration of the octocentennial, the 800th anniversary of the birth of the great Jewish philosopher who was born on this day. In the synagogue of Cordova, in the city where this man was born, in which synagogue for 1500 years no Jewish prayers have been uttered, because upon the exile of the Jews it had been converted into a church and which was later appropriated as a national museum — in this synagogue this week, a Jewish rabbi, after an elapse of nearly five centuries, is again reciting Hebrew prayers. Such strange are the/mutations of Jewish history.

One can draw a large measure of satisfaction from this fact -that ultimately truth is vindicated and real worth is recognized. Jewish
genius and the contribution of our people to the thought of the world,
while it may for a time be rejected, is ultimately recognized and
appreciated. And while nations may in periods of national aberration
drive leaders of thought into exile and burn their books, ultimately,
when that nation is sobered up, it is glad to make honorable amends for
the acts of earlier and more bigoted generations.

Take, for example, Nazi Germany which in the last two years has made such strenuous and ludicrous, if they were not so tragic, attempts to erase every vestige of Jewish influence on the life of Germany, even going to the extreme of changing names of streets and public squares dedicated to Jewish notables -- this Germany, now mad with racial possession, will when it becomes sobered, also make honorable amends

and adequate restitution and will be proud to reclaim those Jewish men of genius who in the last two years it has driven into exile.

This celebration of the 800th anniversary of Moses Maimonides sheds light on yet another phase of Jewish experience and is symbolic of a quality of Jewish character. World Jewry today is celebrating the anniversary of a philosopher, a thinker, an author, a man of the mind and the spirit, not a general, not a warrior, not a conqueror, not a man who succeeded in changing the political map of the world for a few brief years. In the annals of Jewish history for the last two thousand years, we have had no such heroes. Jewish people are not addicted to the glorification of such heroes to celebrate their anniversaries. The Jewish people is inclined to revere and honor those who have changed the contours of world thought, those who reveal new knowledge, those who wage their battles in the arena of the human mind, with a pen which is mightier than a sword, and who extended not the physical prowess of a people or nation, but the intellectual and spiritual prowess of the whole human race. The People of the Book honored the men who waged their battles for the well being of mankind with books, with written or spoken words. If you were to mention the ten greatest Jews, you would not find a general among them. They would all be men who guided the human race towards great truth and towards a noble sweet way of living.

That is our Jewish aristocracy in the noblest sense of the word. Our aristocracy is not made up of hereditary nobles, lords, princes or kings or royalty, but princes of the mind, noblemen of the

spirit. So we celebrate today throughout the world the birthday of a gigantic intellectual figure who cultivated a new highway in human thought, who guided his generation and the generations which followed him into finer ways of living and thinking.

Maimonides, of course, is a man whom we designate with that very vague term "genius". In a sense genius is above race or class.

Nevertheless in the personality of the man and in the quality of his thinking and his writing, we find those characteristics which we must identify with the term, Jew. Maimonides represents for us, if we may use the term, what we call the comprehensive Jew, the man who is the classic product of Jewish civilization. Thus, for example, his thought world is a perfect blending of reason and faith and moral passion, and that perfect blending is characteristic of what we call Jewish culture, Jewish civilization or Jewish life.

Moses Maimonides is not a rationalist exclusively, or a pietist, or a legalist, or a moralist. But in him there is that project harmony which is so difficult to achieve, of clear courageous thinking, a high and exalted faith and a prophetic earnestness. He is an not obscurantist who is willing to sacrifice reason to blind faith.

On the other hand he is not a cold rationalist who acknowledges nothing to be true which mind cannot grasp. Nor is he a cold sentimentalist whose world is based on uncritical wish fulfillments. Maimonides insists upon employing the highest human intellectual scaffolding as a means of reaching the highest battlements of faith, using both reason and faith

as a foundation on which to base his system of ethics. In this comprehensive, in this fine blending of intellect and piety and passion for social righteousness, one finds the classic Jewish personality. And also in his life's activities, in his life's conduct, in his attitudes, Moses Maimonides exemplified what we like to think of as the ideal qualities of Jewish character, that patient wisdom, that sympathy, that tolerance, that firmness coupled with forbearance, idealism plus practicability, of justice plus love. That you find in Moses Maimonides.

Now the Jews of his day, the Jews of the twelfth century, sensed all this in Maimonides and they turned to him instinctively, During his lifetime, He became the "Light of the Exile." The sound racial instincts of Israel sensed in him a leader whose knowledge and wisdom, whose spiritual and intellectual integrity could be relied upon in crises -- and that century was a century of crises for the Jews, both in the West and in the East, in Christian and in Mohammedan lands. It was the century of the Crusades. Terrible erusades had been launched. In North Africa and in Spain, waves of intolerance swept over the people. Maimonides himself, when only a lad of thirteen, with his parents and family had to flee from Cordova. It was the century of SECT OF MOSLIM the Almohades, the persecuting of the Mohammedan Puritan sect which gave men the choice of accepting Monammedaniem, exile or death. And so Maimonides himself experienced very early in life, persecution, exile and wandering.

The people turned to him in those days for guidance. He gave them counsel at all times, calm reasoning, judgment coupled with fatherly admonition, very often with cheer and comfort to sustain them in their tribulation.

Questions poured in from all parts of the world, from individual Jews and from Jewish communities and Maimonides answered them all. He advised them to eschew and forego all forms of superstitution. He warned them against false Messiahs and begged them to put their faith in God, in their heavenly constellation. To the Jews who practiced Judaism secretly, while publicly professing another faith, unlike some of the other raceis of his day, he spoke words of comfort and consolation. Some rabbis denounced the Morranos as idle worshippers. They crushed their spirits and broke their morale. Maimonides, because of his love for his people and his sympathetic understanding of The Forced ONDS human suffering, refused to read them out of the Jewish fold and to brand them as traitors to their God. He welcomed them and comforted them. He told them that while, seemingly they were not Jews, that they were still Jews and he advised them to leave whenever they could For month Tolenant Lands where so they could practice their or religion freely. He strengthened their morale by telling them that God would not forsake them because they had publicly acknowledged another religion because they had done it through compulsion and not through the wickedness of their hearts. Told The commonities He preached tolerance towards sectaries and dissenters and said not to thrust from them their Karaite brethren. The Karaites were a large religious sect who refused to accept the law of the Rabbis but who subscribed exclusively to the laws of the Bible. There was a

controversary between the rabbinic Jews and these Biblicists. The rabbinic Jews said that the Karaites were no longer Jews. Maimonides offered a counsel of reconciliation, advising the rabbinic Jews to treat the Biblicists as brothers, to eat with them, to drink with them and by so doing to win them back into complete conformity with Jewish traditional life.

Moses Maimonides was tolerant of Christianity and Mohammedanism as well. Both of these religions, Maimonides maintained, were paths leading ultimately to one true religion, that there is truth in all of them, that they were different paths leading to the same goal. So that, in very truth, he was the "Guide to the Perplexed" of his day and generation.

his which are amazing for their profundity, for their versatility, for their encyclopaedic qualities. Maimonides was great in so many ways. He was not only a great physician. He was a great mathematician, a logician, a grammarian and a great stylist. He wrote beautifully in Hebrew as well as in Arabic, and in all his writings, there is an amazing clarity and precision of thought and orderliness which was almost unique in his day and quite rare in our own day. He was a young man of twenty-three and he was already in exile, He began his first great work which occupied ten years of his life -- a commentary on the Mishnah, called Siraj, which means light, the luminary. -- a comentary on the Mishnah, that code of oral Jewish law which was compiled in the second century of the Common Era. Moses Maimonides

elucidated every piece of that Mishnah and wrote remarkable introductions to its parts. In the process of elucidating at the Mishnah, he takes occasion to elucidate the principles of our religion, to present his own system of ethics based on the classic ethics of Judaism, chains of thought scattered through that remarkable commentary on the Mishnah.

The second great work which he undertook was even more remarkable than the first. It was nothing less than the arrangement and the systematization of the oral laws of Israel from the time of the Bible to his own day. All the laws which had developed in Israel in Bible times through the Mishnah, up to his own twelfth century, that maze of law -- Maimonides undertook to classify, systematize, organize and arrange in such a way that a man could place his finger on any law he is after and know what the Jewish Law is on this or that particular question. The Mishnah-Torah which he wrote in Hebrew consisted of fourteen volumes -- one thousand chapters which is an exacting piece of work. There were no printed books in his day and much of that material Moses Maimonides had to carry in his head. It is a stupendous achievement! The Mishnah-Torah became an important textbook of Jewish Law.

The third work of Maimonides, that work which crowns him as the greatest philosopher of the Middle Ages, was written in Arabic.

Lie was unlike his earlier books which were written for the masses.

This book was written for the scholar, the philosopher....

For 250 years before, Jews had been writing on metaphisics, explaining Jewish philosophy -- Saadia, Ibn Gabirol, Bachia, Jehuda Halevi.

But Maimonides represented the crest of the wave, and truly, after him the wave begins to sink again.

What was the purpose of Maimonides in writing the "Guide to the Perplexed"? Simply this -- to show that the doctrine of Judaism is compatible with reason. Jewish thought can be vindicated through philosophy to faith and religion, that the task of every generation is to endeavor to reconcile the things we believe in with the technique of reason and methaphisics.

In the Middle Ages the master of thought was Aristotle.

Christians and Monammendans looked up to him as the supreme intellect and so it was the task of the Jewish philosophers to set about to the teaching of Aristotle through Arabic interpretation. That was a difficult thing to do. It was one thing to assume the principles of Aristotle as a guide to thought. It was another thing to attempt to reconcile the revered book, the Bible, with these principles of Aristotle. There was in Jewish life a source of authority, the Bible, the word of God, and it is difficult to reconcile the Bible, the word of God, the revealed truth with Aristotle.

Aristotle spoke of God as the unknown of the Universe who leads one throughout eternity, unchanged. Maimonides never for a moment doubted the truth of the Bible, but he believed that there was clearly a discrepancy between truth as found in the Bible and in Aristotle. The Bible speaks of God as walking, sitting, being angry, intervening in the lives of men. How can you reconcile the two? And yet to Maimonides, both Aristotle and the Bible were truths. To Maimonides, however, the words of the Bible were inspired by God. He sets about to do what seems

almost impossible, to reconcile the two. He does that by presenting to the philosophers the "Key to the Scriptures." He maintains that the Bible is written in the speech of the common folk because many people do not understand philosophical terminology. He maintains, however, that every literary passage also has a profounder philosophic meaning, so that when you come across phrases in the Bible which aim to be anthropomorphic in expression, you must take these phrases metaphysically, allegorically.

Maimonides illustrates this point: Moses asks God to reveal himself. "Show Thyself to me." The answer is: "I will be in same room but thou wilt not see my face." Maimonides proceeds to show that the word face has also another meaning in the Hebrew language. Show me Thy glory. Reveal Thyself to me. "Thou canst see only the evidences of My existence, of My work in the world, but My real presence thou canst not grasp." Maimonides sets about to show that in the Bible most of the philosophy is true if it represents the highest intellectual truths of the world.

Every problem of philosophy is treated in the Bible. God, the proof of the existence of God, the unity of God, the problems of providence, evil and retribution. Even the rational explanation of every one of the 613 commandments of the Jewish people is treated.

I have not the time, however to go into the entire system of philosophy.

I want to indicate in two or three sentences what Maimonides' conception of God was. The mind of God was pure, always actual, never potential. God cannot be known or grasped by the human mind. You cannot ascribe any attributes to God. You cannot define God, for to define is to classify. You cannot say God is good or wise or powerful because

those terms are human terms. All you can say is that He exists. He is. At best, you can speak of God in negative terms. He is not ignorant of anything in the world. He is not weak. But positively, affirmatively, you cannot describe him.

You must remember that Maimonides, like all philosophers solved no philosophic problems. They cannot, however, be ignored. The human mind must question and the greatest contribution of the Jew to the world is that he insists on enthroning reason, instigating our people to think, to seek, to know, not merely to believe blindly.

The work of Maimonides did not go unchallenged in his day.

People did not like some of his ideas, on resurrection, the concept of the Herafter. They felt that emphasis upon reason tended to make people sceptical. There was a wave of opposition to Maimonides during his own lifetime throughout the world, particularly in Southern France. This rabbi excommunicated that rabbi who excommunicated this one. It came to a point as so often happens — that the non-Jewish world was involved and the enemies of Maimonides went to the Dominican Monks. The Dominican Monks had the works of Maimonides burned publicly. A few years later, the Dominican Monks having smelled the smoke of burning Jewish books once, and liking it, collected 24,000 volumes of Jewish books, principally copies of the Talmud, and had them burned.

This bitter controversy continued until the Jews of France were expelled in the year 1306. Then they had Tzores to think about other than the philosophy of Maimonides.

I want to conclude with this reference of Moshe ben Maimon's life. He was not only a rabbi, a teacher, a writer, an instructor of Bible, a "Light in the Exile," he was also a physician. The Jewish people took to medecine readily in the Middle Ages -- Jehuda Halevi, Nachmonides. Moses Maimonides' fame as a physician increased until he was invited by the Vizier Alfadbil, a court physician of Saladin to become/of the court physicians. Maimonides wrote extensively on medical hygiene. In the Mishnah Torah he gives twenty-two rules of health which I believe are still valid for people today.

There is a prayer which is ascribed to Maimonides the physician which I want to read and with which I shall close, which indicates the high concept of ethics which he had. Every day before he started on his medical rounds he uttered this prayer:

Father of Mercy, in all my efforts to heal the sick. For without Thee, man is but a helpless creature. Grant that I may be filled with love for my art and for my fellow-men. May the thirst for gain and the desire for fame be far from my heart. For these are the enemies of Pity and the ministers of Hate. Grant that I may be able to devote myself, body and soul, to Thy children who suffer from pain. Preserve my strength, that I may be able to restore the strength of the rich and the poor, the good and the bad, the friend and the foe. Let me see in the sufferer the man alone. When wiser men teach me, let me be humble to learn; for the mind of man is so puny, and the art of healing is so vast. But when fools are ready

to advise me or to find fault with me, let me not listen to their folly. Let me be intent upon one thing, O Father of Mercy, -- to be always merciful to Thy suffering children."

From Moses unto Moses, from the Moses of the Exile unto Moses

Maimonides, there arise no man like unto Moses. That was the tribute which

Israel paid to the "Light of the Exile" to this great Jew who served his

people in such faithfulness and constancy, who in their darkness was a

light, who in their sorrow was a great consolation, who in their perplexity

was a light. The world will continue to celebrate many and many another

century the work of this great Jew, of this great man.

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