

Video Clip: Rambam

ממשה עד משה לא קם במשה

Rambam is known as one of the greatest halakhists, philosophers, and medical researchers. His ability to organize texts for the masses is known through his *Mishneh Torah*. He also wrote 11 medical texts which were used across Africa, Asia, and Europe. It is important to understand the life of the man and the era in which he lived in order to better understand his rulings and impassioned writings, particularly *Iggeret Teiman* (Letter to Yemen) and *Iggeret HaShemmad* (Letter of Apostasy or Discourse on Martyrdom).

Suggested Implementations

Philosophy/Hashkafa

1. An introduction to any work by Rambam
2. Crypto-Judaism

General History

1. A research project on the Almohad Empire

Jewish History

1. An introduction to Jews in Arab lands
2. A research project on lives and writings of prominent Rabbis

Background

Rabbi Moshe ben Maimon was born in Cordoba in approximately 1135 CE (4995). During that period, the Almohad Caliphate, or Al-Muwahiddun, conquered Al-Andalus, parts of what is today Spain. For fear that the local intellectual population would influence the “true believers,” or those following the strict tenets of the Caliphate, the Almohads set out to kill all Muslims performing research and analyzing texts. Once the Muslim intellectuals were annihilated, the Almohads turned their focus to the Jews. They issued an ultimatum of convert, leave, or be killed – *Gezeirat HaShemad*. Many chose to convert overtly while maintaining their Judaism within the home, much as the Spanish *anusim* we know about. (For more information on Crypto communities throughout the ages, join the ASFIJE online course “The Crypto Experience” on EdX.)

In approximately 1148, Rabbi Maimon decided he did not want to raise his son, Moshe, in this environment, and chose to move to Christian Spain along with many others from their community. At this time, Christian Spain was still open to Jews and they were able to attain political influence and wealth.

However, Rabbi Maimon saw in Moshe an intellect and thirst for knowledge from a young age and wanted to allow it to develop. For seven years (some say 11 years) Rabbi Maimon and his family searched across Christian Spain for a suitable teacher, but to no avail.

Finally, word spread of an underground community of intellectuals in Fes, Morocco. Jews and Muslims were encouraging and supporting each other in their studies and watching out for one another. It was almost counterintuitive, as the Almohads had originated in Morocco. However, for the education of his son, Rabbi Maimon was willing to risk their lives. In approximately 1160, the family moved to Fes in order to allow the two brothers, Moshe and David, to study with Rabbi Yehudah HaKohen, a local teacher of Iraqi descent.

In Fes at the time, Jews, crypto-Jews and Muslims studied together. Crypto-Jews were those who verbally accepted Allah and his Prophet Muhammad and attended Muslim prayers on Fridays and holidays. It is said that Rambam studied in the local Al-Qarawiyyin, the oldest, still-functioning institute of higher education. In fact, there is a building in Fes today, across from Al-Qarawiyyin University that is marked as the house of Maimonides. Of course, university studies in Muslim society at that time included study of the Qur'an and memorizing its full text. It is generally accepted by historians that Rambam knew the complete Qur'an (in addition to Jewish texts) as that would have been a prerequisite to attend Al-Qarawiyyin.

Rambam flourished intellectually in Fes, but he was distraught by the inner conflict amongst the Jews. The conflict between the crypto-Jews and the Jews who did not outwardly convert grew. A Jewish edict was sent from Spain declaring Islam to be idol worship. As such, no crypto-Jew could be included in a minyan, nor could they marry into the Jewish community. Converting, even in secret, would be **ייהרג ובל יעבור**, be killed rather than transgress.

Rambam saw this as divisive and was concerned that full communities would be ex-communicated across the Almohad Empire. Thus, he wrote *Iggeret HaShemmad*, a religious ruling declaring that Jews who outwardly convert to Islam, while remaining practicing Jews in the home, were to be accepted as full Jews. Men were to be counted in a minyan, and you could marry the women of that group. It was a ruling based on both halakha and historical context, Rambam's points of reference for many of his halakhic rulings and philosophical writings. He wrote *Iggeret HaShemmad* at approximately age 26, when he already had a reputation as a *Talmid Hakham*. With this momentum, he began writing commentary which was later the foundation for the *Mishneh Torah*.

It is told in many sources that Rambam was forced to leave Fes due to a story with a *lulav* and a stone. The story goes: one day Rambam invited a fellow student to his house to study with him (as it was Fes, they were probably studying philosophy). This peer saw the Rambam holding a *lulav* and made a derogatory comment about the logic of using a palm branch. Rambam's response was sharp and he said that it is no crazier than those who throw stones at another stone (referring to *rami al-jamarat*, in which Muslims on Hajj throw pebbles at three pillars to symbolize stoning the devil). This peer then reported Rambam as a heretic and he and his family were forced to flee. After stops in Acre, Jerusalem, and Hebron, the family settled in Fustat (part of Old Cairo).

In Fustat, the family lived well as Rambam's brother, David, was a successful merchant. However, on one of his business trips he drowned, forcing Rambam to maintain the family's finances and become a doctor. As with his previous endeavors, Rambam's reputation preceded him and he was appointed doctor to the Sultan.

During the 1170s Maimonides worked constantly on his *magnum opus*, his immense codification of Jewish law, the *Mishneh Torah* (also known as the *Yad ha-Hazakah*). In contrast to his other works which

were written in Arabic, he composed this revolutionary work in very clear Hebrew, hoping to encapsulate the entirety of Jewish knowledge in a single work accessible to Jews of all lands. Sometime after 1185, Maimonides wrote his major philosophical treatise, *Moreh Nebuchim* (Guide to the Perplexed). By this point he was generally acknowledged as one of the greatest Jewish thinkers of all time. His death in 1204 was mourned by the Jewish world and acknowledged by Muslims in the Near East. He was ultimately buried in the city of Tiberius in Palestine. His descendants served as leaders of Egyptian Jewry for several generations after his death.

Questions for Discussion

1. Maimonides declared, against popular opinion, that the Jews who adopted Islam openly and remained Jewish inside the home were to be considered Jews for generations to come. What does that mean for Judaism? Watch Professor Hilda Nissimi's talk on identity in the context of the Mashadi Jews https://youtu.be/9duSSV4_02k - what does that mean for who is a Jew?

2. Write the place/name associated with each of the following:
 - _____ Maimonides' birthplace
 - _____ The location of Maimonides' tomb
 - _____ Where Maimonides was the physician to the Sultan
 - _____ Where the Maimon family fled to when the Almohads terrorized Al-Andalus
 - _____ The community encouraged by Maimonides' compassionate letter

3. Maimonides' influence can be appreciated by viewing the scope of his writings. Fill in the chart below:

Type	Name (English)	Name (Hebrew)	Purpose for writing the book or its importance
Jewish philosophy			
Jewish Law			
Jewish Law			
Commentary			
Communal leadership			
Secular knowledge			

Suggested Readings

Abramson, Henry. *Who was Moses Maimonides?* https://youtu.be/ESbelgl-l_s. 2013.

Halbertal, Moshe. *Maimonides: Life and Thought*. Princeton, 2013.

Halkin, Abraham and David Hartman, eds. *Crisis and Leadership: Epistles of Maimonides*. Philadelphia, 1985.

Heschel, Abraham Joshua, *Maimonides*. New York, 1982.

Kraut, Benny ed. *Moses Maimonides: Communal Impact, Historic Legacy*. New York, 2005.

Sacks, Jonathan. "Rabbi Jonathan Sacks explains why Maimonides is so controversial."
<https://youtu.be/EniqLk8l5RQ>.

Stroumsa, Sarah. *Maimonides in His World: Portrait of a Mediterranean Thinker*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 2009.

Twersky, Isidore. *A Maimonides Reader*. New York, 1972.

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