
The Great Eagle

Maimonides:
The Life and World of
One of Civilization's
Greatest Minds

by Joel L. Kraemer

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Reviewed by
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WRITING IN 1935, a year thought to mark the 800th anniversary of Moses Maimonides' birth—now generally dated to 1138—the intellectual historian Solomon Zeitlin noted with surprise that no complete study had ever been written of the “greatest scholar the Jews [had] produced since the completion of the Talmud.” Zeitlin himself undertook to fill the lacuna, and, in the same year, so did a youthful Abraham Joshua Heschel. Since then, profiles of the legendary

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rabbi-physician-philosopher-leader have poured forth in various languages. The last few years alone have seen, in English, Herbert Davidson's well-received survey of Maimonides' life and works, Sherwin Nuland's popular account of Maimonides as doctor and thinker, and now Joel L. Kraemer's *Maimonides: The Life and World of One of Civilization's Greatest Minds*.

The nearly eight-century interval was certainly not due to any lack of interest. Already during his own time, Maimonides attained a larger-than-life stature among both adoring followers and vigorous critics. Over the centuries, interest in the "Great Eagle"—of whom it was famously said that "from [the biblical] Moses until Moses [Maimonides] there arose no one like Moses"—grew to epic proportions, generating countless tales about his many accomplishments and powers of mind alongside hundreds of learned commentaries on his diverse writings.

In the modern period, Maimonides' intellectual legacy was claimed by everyone from traditional scholars of Jewish religious law (halakhah), to an 18th-century Enlightenment figure like Salomon Maimon who even assumed his master's surname, to 19th-century religious liberals who saw Maimonides as a proto-reformer. As the Zionist writer Ahad Ha'am summed up at the beginning of the 20th century, Maimonides was one whom, "in spirit," generations of Jews "regarded as still alive, and to whom they turned every day for advice and guidance in all their theoretical and practical difficulties."

What hindered the production of a thorough treatment was the highly various nature of Maimonides' writings. The challenge was not only expository but intellectual: it was difficult to comprehend how this outstanding traditional authority, whose landmark restatement of Jewish law, *Mishneh Torah*, towered over all subsequent halakhic literature, could also be the author of the *Guide of the*

Perplexed, the most innovative work of speculative Jewish philosophy until the early modern period and one of the few permanent masterpieces of medieval philosophy, period.

Three different waves of controversy raged in the 12th through the 14th century over the Aristotelianism that infused Maimonides' philosophical writings, and later generations continued to be divided over whether they were devotees of Maimonides the rabbinic jurist, or of Maimonides the rationalist philosopher. A leading 18th-century rabbi, Jacob Emden, went so far as to deny that Maimonides was the author of the *Guide*; in the 20th century, by contrast, Leo Strauss dismissed the *Mishneh Torah* as a popular work, undue focus on which obscured Maimonides' predominantly philosophical concerns. Only recently have scholars attempted a unified portrait of this tantalizingly multifaceted figure.

Kraemer's *Maimonides*, the product of two decades' work by a medievalist who is professor emeritus of Jewish studies at the University of Chicago, is an ambitious undertaking in this new vein—the more ambitious for being pitched to a general audience.

MOSES BEN MAIMON (1138-1204) was born in Córdoba, the vibrant capital of Andalusia in southern Spain. Jews had flourished there under Ummayyad Muslim rule since the mid-10th century, and Maimonides' family and teachers were pillars of the local community. In Andalusia's unique cultural atmosphere, Muslims and Jews combined traditional studies with secular knowledge, including poetry, science, mathematics, medicine, and philosophy. The last was heavily influenced by the dominant Aristotelian orientation of 12th-century Islamic thinkers.

In 1148, Córdoba was invaded by the Almohads, a fanatically repressive Islamic sect from Morocco. Given the choice to convert to Islam or face the sword, many Jews,

including Maimonides' family, managed instead to flee. He spent his teens and early twenties seeking refuge in various places throughout Spain and North Africa, amassing along the way a remarkably thorough knowledge of traditional and secular culture. In Fez, Morocco, the family stayed long enough for him to receive his medical training. Then he and his father and brother embarked on a dangerous and brief visit to Palestine, at the time occupied by Christian Crusaders. This was followed by a move to Egypt, where, around 1165, the family ultimately settled in Fustat, outside Cairo. Here Maimonides would live out the rest of his life under the hospitable rule of Saladin.

After the premature death at sea of his younger brother, whose merchant activities had provided him with an income, Maimonides was hired as a medical adviser to Saladin's vizier. The work offered him a livelihood and public prominence. In time, he became unofficial head of the traditional Jewish community, which flourished under his leadership, as well as the foremost rabbinic authority of a large sector of medieval Jewry ranging from Provence to Yemen.

It was in Cairo, in the interstices of his demanding public duties, that Maimonides produced his two masterpieces. The fourteen "books" of the *Mishneh Torah* (literally, "Rehearsal of the Torah") brilliantly encapsulated the entire rabbinic legal tradition. In lucid language, with compelling logic and meticulous organization, Maimonides presented a new, authoritative statement of the whole corpus of normative teachings—derived at once from Scripture and from centuries of subsequent embellishment and interpretation—that regulated the totality of Jewish life. Writing in Hebrew to reach as broad an audience as possible, he expected this work to supplant the Talmud as the definitive legal code for all Jewish communities.

Then, from approximately 1185 to 1191, he proceeded to compose,

in Arabic, his *Guide of the Perplexed*. The perplexed were those, like himself, who were committed equally to faith and reason—to biblical revelation and its norms and to the truths of rational philosophy—but struggled to reconcile these two sources of authority. Both stylistically and in terms of its intended audience, this work could not have been more different from the *Mishneh Torah*. Utilizing esoteric philosophical terminology, it constantly alludes to subtle concepts of metaphysics, and its roadmap to an apprehension of the divine is not for the many but only for highly trained initiates.

KRAEMER FOLLOWS the stages of Maimonides' life and work through the four geographic locations in which he resided, placing his prolific output and multiple interests within the context of his time and place. Skillfully, he weaves excerpts from the writings into the biography. Thus, the story of Maimonides' lone visit to Jerusalem draws both on a public epistle to the Jews of Yemen and on the *Mishneh Torah*'s "Laws of the Temple," which include the directive that one must continue to treat the site of the ruined sanctuary with reverence. The portrait of Maimonides' heroic efforts to ransom Jews taken hostage by Crusaders and pirates similarly cuts to the *Mishneh Torah*'s "Laws of Gifts to the Poor," which enumerate no fewer than seven biblical commandments that are violated if a captive is not ransomed ("for not only is the captive included in the general category of the hungry, the thirsty, and the naked, but also his very life is in jeopardy"). And so on.

Kraemer also sheds useful light on aspects of Maimonides' personal life, exploring his early education and mentors, his close relationship with his brother, the ugly confrontation with a rival in Fustat nicknamed "Zuta the Wicked," and his devotion to his student Joseph (the epistolary addressee of the *Guide*), his son Abraham, and his many fol-

lowers. An early chapter revisits the controversial thesis, dating back to the 18th century, that Maimonides outwardly submitted to a forced conversion to Islam in his youth.

To illuminate Maimonides' writings, Kraemer draws on a wide array of primary sources, from documents stored in the Cairo Genizah (a rich repository of manuscripts from the medieval period that was re-discovered in the 19th century) to the works of Arabic historians, geographers, poets, and philosophers. He is particularly helpful in identifying the formative influence of leading Arab Aristotelians like Alfarabi, Avicenna, and Averroes. For the major treatises, he offers sturdy introductions to genre, layout, and structure, summarizes the principal themes, and discusses intellectual roots.

THERE ARE drawbacks. Crammed with information, Kraemer's book is at times too dense, at others too thin. One learns more than one needs to know about details like the number of biblical citations in the first book of the *Mishneh Torah*; by contrast, complex philosophical and rhetorical themes (e.g., the notion of God's indwelling or the stylistic use of semantic equivalence) are merely summarized. In an instance where he offers a fuller presentation of a fundamental issue—Maimonides' formulation of thirteen "principles of faith"—Kraemer fails to inquire into the reasons for his selecting or omitting specific dogmas, the absence of any mention of the principles in his more mature works, or the motivation behind this unprecedented theological project.

The analysis of Maimonides' legal code is especially inadequate. Substantively, Kraemer focuses on the philosophical sections of the *Mishneh Torah* and a few scattered legal themes, but neglects to provide an overview of its major categories or to highlight its novel rulings (e.g., categorizing negligence as a tort, introducing a mechanism for resuming rabbinic ordination, and assert-

ing the inflexible nature of inheritance laws). Moreover, Kraemer does not really get to the heart of Maimonides' project, in systematically reconfiguring the halakhic tradition, of legitimizing it against challenges from Karaites,* from rational skeptics, and even from adherents of the tradition who had lost sight of its essential coherence.

A BROADER limitation returns us to the dual themes of law and philosophy. One might have expected Kraemer's interest in the totality of Maimonides' achievement to inspire a deep assessment of his particular synthesis of these disciplines. Yet even as he recognizes the centrality of both, Kraemer separately evaluates Maimonides' contribution to each, thereby perpetuating a dichotomy between them.

Surveying Maimonides' complete works, the late Isadore Twersky concluded that "one would think that he had had a master plan from the very beginning to achieve his overarching objective: to bring law and philosophy—two apparently incongruous attitudes of mind, two jealous rivals—into fruitful harmony." Whether Maimonides ultimately achieved this harmony is questionable, but there is no doubt that the kinetic interaction between the two "jealous rivals" produced the energy that propelled his work. He never fully disengaged from either, or segregated one from the other.

Already in his *Book of the Commandments*, a work that Kraemer barely mentions, Maimonides had begun to discern, in the thicket of biblical rules and rabbinic exposi-

* This was a fringe sect formed in the 9th century that adhered to Scriptural law alone, denying talmudic-rabbinic authority—and that happened to be particularly active in Fustat. In his *Commentary on the Mishnah*, an earlier work, Maimonides had asserted that a stable chain of tradition reliably transmitted core oral teachings from Moses through the talmudic sages. Only in such a dynamic, living organism was there room for development in hermeneutics and legislation—this, as against the Karaites' static fixation on Scripture.

tion, both the rational order and the idealized principles of the commandments and the rational, orderly life of holiness that they embody. His prologue to that work reaches toward enunciating a distinct jurisprudence of Jewish law. In the *Mishneh Torah*, where this vision is laid out, law and philosophy are often mutually fructifying. A stellar example is the “Laws of Repentance,” which meld legal, inspirational, and philosophical meditations on themes like sin, guilt, rehabilitation, free will, character reform, reward and punishment, and love of God. The result is to show how man’s rational faculty is what enables a religious imperative—in this case, repentance.

But the interaction between the two “rivals” is often more subtle and complex. At times, philosophy reorients Maimonides’ approach toward law. Thus, the opening book of the *Mishneh Torah* asserts that the *philosophical* quest is mandated by the most fundamental of Jewish *commandments*: belief in God, love and fear of God, prayer, and study of Torah. At other times, correlatively, rabbinic values could reshape his approach to ethics and metaphysics. Thus, his adoption of the Aristotelian “Doctrine of the Mean”—which calls for moderation in character traits—includes important caveats opposing even moderate feelings of pride and anger. Far from the even-keeled Aristotelian man of virtue, Maimonides’ ethical hero is extreme in humility and devoutness. In his metaphysics, similarly, there is an ardent religious dimension to the philosophical quest, which in its highest state assumes a passionate, nearly ecstatic form, the seeker of knowledge not only contemplating but yearning to cleave to the divine.

NOR CAN one leave things at that. Tensions, too, are unmistakably visible in Maimonides’ dual commitment, and in reading him one sometimes suspects he could never fully overcome his own perplexity. In the

Guide and elsewhere, he undertakes an audacious purge of supernatural and miraculous elements from within Judaism by explaining away certain biblical passages as allegorical. Sometimes, though more rarely, he quashes rational conclusions in favor of tradition, as with his endorsement of a talmudic list of animal disabilities that he characterizes as scientifically dubious yet still disqualifying for dietary consumption.

Then there are points at which Maimonides affirms the contradictory teachings of *both* tradition and reason, which can strike a reader as a form of double dealing. Most famously, in the *Guide* he describes the ancient sacrificial rites as a primitive stage in religious development that will be phased out over time, while in his *Mishneh Torah* he presents a grand vision of a Third Temple where priests will officiate over a sacrificial cult.

It is with such irreconcilables that things nearly combust (and would literally burn up when Maimonides’ followers carried their rationalism further and some traditionalists responded by burning his books.) In one stunning passage of the *Guide*, he proclaims that he would be willing to discard the core religious tradition of an ex-nihilo creation if he felt that the Aristotelian argument for the eternity of the world was incontrovertible. In the opening chapters of the *Mishneh Torah*, he begins openly to disclose esoteric philosophical truths that he acknowledges he is religiously obliged to conceal. This work, his ultimate normative statement, here flirts dangerously with the boundaries of the antinomian.

It may be that a more exacting study of the successive stages of Maimonides’ thinking will bring some light to this whole issue. Most scholars have assumed that he became an even more enlightened rationalist as he grew older, a development reflected in the *Guide*. But some now contend that his mature mindset was more conservative or

traditional in nature. In other words, the trajectory of his thought is as much in dispute as its substance.

AT A CERTAIN level, moreover, the tension between faith and reason lies at the crux not only of Maimonides’ thought but of his personal life. There was the “faith” side: managing the Jewish charitable trust in Egypt, working to consolidate the communal liturgy and the hours seeing patients at court. And there was the “reason” side: the solitary, hermetic study of the most speculative matters and the hugely strenuous and surely isolating labor of distilling their essence in writing of peerless clarity and, sometimes, gnomic obscurity.

And there was a third side, even more characteristically personal. Consider his attitude toward mourning. In his philosophical work, Maimonides serenely describes death as a transcendent release; in his normative code, he calmly strikes the mean by sanctioning regulated mourning up to a year—excessive mourning being foolish, and diminished mourning being cruel. But in his own case, he remained permanently inconsolable over the loss of his younger brother. “Eight years have since passed,” he wrote around 1184, “and still I grieve.”

His writings about a trivial matter like nocturnal habits are similarly differentiated. In his even, regimented voice he universally prescribes up to eight hours of sleep for sound living. But for those driven by intense spiritual ambition, he urges neglect of all else and complete dedication of the night to study of Torah. Meanwhile, his private correspondence describes how the demands of his patients overwhelm him to the point where by nightfall he must “prescribe for them while lying down from sheer fatigue” and somehow still find hours for his communal and intellectual labors. Living under the twin banners of law and philosophy, he also lived beyond them.