

Miriam Frenkel

MAIMONIDES: CULTURAL HERO AND HISTORICAL FIGURE

Dr. Miriam Frenkel is a Genizah researcher, a lecturer in the Department of Jewish History at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, and Deputy Chair of the Ben Zvi Institute, Jerusalem. Her most recent book is *The Compassionate and Benevolent; The Leading Elite in the Jewish Community of Alexandria in the Middle Ages* (Jerusalem, 2006).

The Jewish philosopher and legal scholar R. Moshe ben Maimon (1135–1204), better known as Maimonides (a Graecized form of his name given him in Latin European sources) or by his Hebrew acronym, Rambam, is a figure of worldwide renown. Cultural, educational, and medical institutions are named after him, and his imagined portrait decorates coins, medals, stamps, and statues. His status as a cultural hero has made his biography the concern of many people.

The ongoing writing, transmission, and rewriting of Maimonides' life story has taken two main paths. In the first, it is detached from its historical context and transferred to the realm of myth and legend. In the second, it is a laborious endeavor of generations of researchers and admirers, who have patiently gathered any available piece of information concerning the biography of "the Great Eagle" and compiled it into a realistic, continuous, and coherent narrative. This project of reconstruction traditionally drew upon several available sources, including literary fragments about the genealogy of his family written by Maimonides himself, especially in the concluding pages of his Commentary on the Mishnah; occasional remarks in his official communal letters; the biographies included in medieval Muslim encyclopedic works such as that of Ibn al-Qifti (1172–1248); and, principally, passages from Jewish historiographical works such as Saadya ibn Dannon's *Seder hadorot* (The order of the generations) and Yosef Sambari's *Sefer diorei Yosef* (The chronicles of Joseph), composed, respectively, in the fifteenth and seventeenth centuries. This information was consolidated into what has become the accepted version of Maimonides' biography.

On this basis, we know that Moshe ben Maimon was born into a distinguished family in Cordoba, Spain, on the eve of Passover, 14 Nissan 4895 (1135). His forebears included several communal, judicial, and religious leaders. When he was thirteen, the family was compelled to leave Cordoba after its conquest by the Muwahidun (the Almohades), an anti-anthropomorphist Muslim movement that took over all of Spain and North Africa and forced the non-Muslim populations there to embrace Islam. For some years the family wandered between Spain and Provence, until, in 1160, it settled in the city of Fez in Morocco. Some time between 1150 and 1160, Maimonides and other members of his family were obliged to convert to Islam in order to escape execution and the confiscation of their property (there is no reason to doubt this piece of information, although it is reported only by Muslim sources). Maimonides was later to write a comprehensive description of these hard days of instability and distress, in which, as he says, his spirit was troubled and restless.¹ In Fez, he met R. Yahudah ibn Sawsan, a renowned scholar and doctor with whom he studied philosophy and medicine. Ibn Sawsan had a crucial influence on the formation of the young man's worldview. It was in Fez that Maimonides acquired most of his medical knowledge, largely, as he acknowledges, by studying Muslim medical treatises.

In 1165 the family left Fez for Acre (Akko) in Palestine, and from there, around 1168, it traveled to Fustat (old Cairo), where it finally settled down. Maimonides was appointed court physician of the *wazir*, Al-Afdal, the real sovereign of Egypt at the time. He also held the position of "Head of the Jews" (*Rais al-Yahud*) for

several non-consecutive periods. Maimonides married a woman from the Fustat Jewish community, who bore him his only son, Abraham. It was in Fustat that he wrote most of his scholarly works, and it was there that he died, on 3 November 1204, leaving a spiritual legacy that would become both a cornerstone of philosophy and of Jewish learning, and a bone of bitter contention throughout the Jewish world, the Muslim East, and Christian Europe.

The progress made in recent years in studying the trove of discarded medieval Jewish documents discovered over a century ago in the Genizah of the Ben-Ezra Synagogue in Cairo makes it possible to add a hitherto unknown dimension to this conventional biography. These documents comprise a new source of information that is qualitatively different from the above-mentioned ones – from the considered phrases in Maimonides' official writings, composed with future generations in mind; from the conventional modal patterns traditionally used by professional Muslim encyclopedists; and from the writings of the later Jewish historiographers, who shaped the biography of the Great Eagle to suit their contemporary inclinations and needs. What the Genizah left us is more like the stuff of an archaeological excavation: torn scraps, remains, and vestiges of Maimonides' own life, including letters written by him and to him, slips, notes, instructions, and scribbles. All these may seem trifling, but, written as they were out of the sweep of the writers' lives, they offer contemporary reflections of Maimonides' personality and private life. Naturally, they attest to Maimonides' years in Egypt. In the following paragraphs, we shall present four documents that freeze three moments in this most significant, creative, fruitful chapter of his life. All are written in the Judeo-Arabic that was the principal spoken and written language of the Jews of Spain and North Africa in Maimonides' time.

The first letter documents the circumstances of a crucial trauma in Maimonides' personal history: the tragic death of his younger brother, David. Written by David in his own handwriting, it tells the story of the fateful journey from which he was not to return. The letter was written in the spring of 1169, shortly after Maimonides' family arrived in Egypt, and David figures in it as a novice merchant inexperienced in the ways of trade between Egypt and India:

To my beloved brother R. Moses son of R. Maimon, may the memory of the righteous be blessed. From David, your brother, who is longing for you – May God unite me with you under the most happy

circumstances in His grace. I am writing this letter from 'Aydhab. I am well, but my mind is very much troubled, so that I walk around in the bazaar and do not know – by my religion – where I am ..., nor how come that I did not imagine how much you must worry about me.

This is my story: I reached Qus and after Pass-over I booked for 'Aydhab in a caravan. ... So we traveled alone out of fear of him. No one has ever dared to embark on such a disastrous undertaking. I did it only because of my complete ignorance. But God saved us after many frightful encounters, to describe which would lead me too far afield. When we were in the desert, we regretted what we had done, but the matter had gone out of our hands. Yet God had willed that we should be saved. We arrived in 'Aydhab safely with our entire baggage. We were unloading our things at the city gate when the caravans arrived. Their passengers had been robbed and wounded and some had died of thirst. Among them was Ibn al-Rashidi, but he was unharmed. ... We preceded him only slightly and there was only a small distance between us and those who were robbed. We were saved only because we had taken upon ourselves those frightful experiences. All day long I imagine how you must feel when you hear about 'Atallah ibn al-Rashidi, how he was robbed and you believe that I was in his company. Then God comes between me and my reason.

To make a long story short: I arrived in 'Aydhab and found that no imports had come here ... at all. I found nothing to buy except indigo, so I thought about what I had endured in the desert and how I was saved; then it appeared to me an easy matter to embark on a sea voyage. I took Mansur as my travel companion, but not Ma'ani, for all my troubles came only from him. "You know the man and how he behaves" [II Kings 9:11]. Once, if God will, I shall tell you all that happened between us on our way from Fustat to 'Aydhab.

My company in the Malabar Sea will be Salim ibn al Dallalah and his brother's son Makarim al-Hariri and his brother, and the brother of Sitt Ghazal. But Ma'ani embarked together with Ibn al-Kuwayyis on another ship, and Bu 'l-Ala remains in Dahlak, since the ship in which he traveled foundered, but he was saved and absolutely nothing of his baggage was lost. Ibn 'Atiyya, however, was in another boat, together with Ibn Maqdisi. Their boat foundered and only their dinars remained with them.

Now, despite of all this, do not worry. He who

saved me from the desert ... will save me while on sea. ... Please calm the heart of the little one and her sister; do not frighten them and let them not despair, for crying to God for what has passed is a vain prayer. ... I am doing all this out of my continuous efforts for your material well being, although you have never imposed on me anything of the kind. So be steadfast. God will replace your losses and bring me back to you. Anyhow, what has passed is past, and I am sure this letter will reach you at a time when I, God willing, shall have already made most of the way. "But the counsel of God alone will stand" [Prov. 19:21]. Our departure will probably be in the middle of Ramadan. I shall travel with Tell this to his uncle, and also that he is fine. Abraham is fine. Best regards to you, to Bu 'Ali and his brother, to my sisters and the boys, to all our friends, to the freedman, and to Mahasin. Written on the 22nd of Iyyar, while the express caravan is on the point of leaving.²

This was David's last letter. With his death, Maimonides' life was utterly changed, as he confessed in one of his letters:

The greatest misfortune that has befallen me during my entire life – worse than anything else – was the demise of the saint, may his memory be blessed, who drowned in the Indian sea, carrying much money belonging to me, to him, and to others, and left with me a little daughter and a widow. On the day that I received the terrible news I fell ill and remained in bed for about a year, suffering from a sore boil, fever and depression, and was almost given up. About eight years have since passed, but I am still mourning and unable to accept consolation. And how should I console myself? He grew up on my knees, he was my brother, he was my student; he traded on the markets, and earned, and I could safely sit at home. He was well versed in the Talmud and the Bible, and knew Hebrew grammar well, and my joy in life was to look at him. Now all joy has gone. He has passed away and left me disturbed in my mind in a foreign country. Whenever I see his handwriting or one of his letters, my heart turns upside down and my grief awakens again. In short: "I shall go down to the nether world to my son in mourning" [Gen. 37:35].³

The third letter was written in a later period, when Maimonides was already assimilated into Egyptian society and held a high position at the Ayyubid court

and within the Jewish communities of Egypt. The writer is his sister Miriam. Since she is a woman, it is a professional clerk or some relative of hers who writes the letter down for her. The letter is addressed to "The illustrious supporter, the exalted master our lord R. Musa, the superb crown, son of R. Maimun, may God bless his memory":

To the most illustrious sage, R. Musa, may God protect him, from your admirer, your sister, Miriam. May God preserve the high rank of my lord and master, my crown, my jewel, the light of my eyes ... exalt his splendor and grandeur. ... Shall his name always be praised and his happiness never end. ... If you could see me now, you would never recognize me because of my poor situation and my grave pain. All this is because of my son, from whom I have received no news, as if he resides in a deep well. I have not received any letter from him. ... I have no idea where he is or where he could be, and this is why I keep crying and fasting. He went away from me and forgot me. He does not remember me for one reason or other. I believe you can help me because of your high rank and because you are very close to him. Please tell me where he is and where I can find him. Tell me: is he in the same place where your highness is? Or, maybe, in some other place? If he is in another place, please send him my letter and attach to it a letter from you, in which you should reproach him and tell him to write and inform me about his situation. Please, be so kind as to write a letter to me as well. You will not find it difficult to find somebody to send it with. Write me in this letter everything you know about him and about what he is doing. By doing so, you shall ease my pain and soothe my weeping and my grief and sorrow. Please, be so kind and generous as to do it.

Peace be upon my lord and master. All your servants send you their greetings. Please send greetings to the uncle and to all the sisters, may God protect them. The writer of this letter, ... Ben Yaakub the cantor, also sends greetings to all of you.⁴

In this familial letter, the dynamics in the Maimonidean family can easily be discerned. Miriam's beloved, rebellious son had probably found refuge and shelter in the home of his loving uncle. Miriam is certain that her brother knows very well where her son is hiding and has it in his power to bring him back to her. She relies on her brother's love and manipulates it by describing in detail her great suffering.

The last letter, written in 1196, describes a visit to

Maimonides' home. Though only the lower part of the letter has survived, it reflects very clearly the writer's great excitement at the memory of his visit, of which he preserves every tiny detail, cherishing it as a unique and central experience in his life:

Al Fahr, may God protect him, went with us when we set out for R. Moses' house, but he preferred for his part to remain at the entrance to the house while I and al-Galal proceeded to enter. I kissed his noble hand, and he received us with a most cordial welcome. He said to me: "Come and be seated, young man," beckoning me to sit on the edge of the *iwan*, opposite where he himself was seated, whilst he sat at the other end of the *iwan*. So I sat down while he read the message, which I gave him, from beginning to end. He was delighted with the presents and started to play with al-Galal, may God protect him. There was no one else seated in the *iwan* save him, R. Abraham, and myself. Then there transpired that which a book would prove insufficient to describe. Next, caskets were brought and he began to eat lemon cakes. We stayed just for a while, but he detained me in order that we confer a moment confidentially. The master seemed favorably inclined. In the meantime, R. Abraham, may God protect him, had taught al-Galal a term with which to address R. Moses. Upon his reciting it R. Moses laughed with amusement and sported with the child. I was the first to leave the house, while al-Galal remained behind talking to the usher in the vestibule. Whereupon R. Moses enquired of R. Abraham: "Where has his son gone?" "He is standing by the door," he replied. "Go and call him," he said, while re-entering the door, whereupon he came across the child, who again recited the form of address. Peace.⁵

This last letter enables us to enter Maimonides' residence in Cairo. At the entrance we encounter the usher, who is charged with filtering the visitors and announcing their names and titles. Then we walk down a long, curved corridor to the large parlor. This dramatically decorated room is symmetrically crossed by an elevated platform (*iwan*), on which the master of the house sits with his guests. The servants offer refreshments (lemon cakes). The striking contrast between the royal setting and Maimonides' intimate, cheerful reception makes an overwhelming impression upon the guests.

The description also offers us some insight into the relationship between Maimonides and his only son,

Abraham, who was about ten years old when the visit described in this letter took place. We meet him accompanying his father and receiving guests together with him. Maimonides seems to have been preparing his son to inherit his role as the community's leader.

When Abraham was but four years old, his father wrote about him:

When I look at this world, I can only find comfort in two things: philosophic contemplation and my son Abraham, because God Almighty has blessed him with grace and with the blessings of the Patriarch Abraham. ... He is humble and well mannered. His mind is sharp and his talents are nice. No doubt he is going to be one of the famous and renowned.⁶

Scholars⁷ have wondered about these words of Maimonides, who ascribed almost adult qualities to his very young son. Some even suppose that this letter comprises two separate fragments written at different times and joined by mistake. Nevertheless, the description in the preceding letter of the ten-year-old accompanying his father at work makes it clear that Maimonides indeed believed his son to possess all these qualities, and assigned him a brilliant future as his heir.

- 1 Moses Maimonides, "The Epistle to Yemen," in idem, *Crisis and Leadership: Epistles of Maimonides* (English transl. by Abraham Halkin), Philadelphia–New York–Jerusalem 1985, p. 95.
- 2 ULC Or 1081 J 1, translated by S.D. Goitein in his *Letters of Medieval Jewish Traders*, Princeton 1973, pp. 209–212.
- 3 *Responses and Letters by Maimonides*, Leipzig 1856 (Hebrew), translated by Goitein in *Letters* (above, note 2), p. 207.
- 4 TS10J18.1, published by S.D. Goitein, "An Autograph by Rambam and a Letter to Him from His Sister, Miriam," *Tarbiz*, 32 (1963), pp. 481–491 (Hebrew).
- 5 TS 8J14.18, published by Paul Fenton in "A Meeting with Maimonides," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*, 45 (1982), pp. 3–4.
- 6 Maimonides, *Epistles*, ed. Itzhak Shilat, Jerusalem 1995, I, p. 424 (Hebrew).
- 7 See, e.g., the remarks of D.H. Baneth, in Moses Maimonides, *Epistles*, ed. Baneth, Jerusalem 1985, p. 95.