**The Rambam the man who can bring peace between Jews and Muslims Part II**

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Maimonides consistently emphasized the importance of philosophy in finding the best of human society, defining the subject in broad terms in the Guide: “The person who wishes to attain human perfection should study logic first, next mathematics, then physics, and, lastly, metaphysics” (“Quotes,” University of California, Berkeley).The writing of Maimonides contains a stark beauty that shines with the light of integrity and wisdom. “Truth,” wrote Maimonides in the Guide, “does not become more true by virtue of the fact that the entire world agrees with it, nor less so even if the whole world disagrees with it” (Nissen Mangel, “Talmudist,” (Brooklyn, NY: Kehot Publication Society, 1985).

There are three distinct phases of Maimonides’s life spent alongside and with Muslims: first, the peace and prosperity that Muslim society gave to the Jewish community over the centuries and enjoyed by his family; then the abrupt change of policy of the new dynasty of the Almohads and the discrimination and persecution of the Jews in which his family suffered; and finally the power and success of working as the physician in the court of the great Sultan Saladin of Egypt with his inclusive attitudes to non-Muslims. The disruptions in his life had left the young Maimonides traumatized. He would have a love-hate relationship with Muslims for most of his life. In spite of this, Maimonides continued to reach out to the Muslim community and was a revered figure in Muslim society. His Muslim name was Abu Imran Musa ibn Maymun ibn Ubayd Allah or Servant of Allah. It is reported that Maimonides’ children and grandchildren rejected elements of his teaching and philosophy and some of them adopted certain Sufi practices.

In outward form, language and culture, Maimonides had absorbed Muslim civilization. His typical day in the Sultan’s court was always a full one, after which he hurried home to treat awaiting patients. Often, there would not even be time for a meal before attending them. His success in society can be gauged from the fact that his son and grandson both succeeded Maimonides as Chief Rabbis of the Egyptian Jewish community.

Maimonides is both a gateway and a bridge: he is a gateway for the Jewish people into the understanding of Judaism, and a bridge between Muslims, Christians, and Jews

The life of Maimonides resembles that of the Muslim philosophers we are discussing: intense creativity and serious life-threatening challenges. Like them, Maimonides was a man of genius in several disciplines such as philosophy, religious law and medicine. The titles of his books were as sharp as theirs: The Guide for the Perplexed as against Al-Ghazali’s The Incoherence of the Philosophers and Averroes’s The Incoherence of the Incoherence. His life took him from one part of the world to another; from living on the run in a cave at one stage of his life, to serving in the royal court in Cairo at another. In spite of the tumultuous life that he led, he successfully created his most ambitious work and magnum opus, the code of Jewish religious law (or the Halakha) which is called the Mishneh Torah or “The Repetition of the Torah,” considered the book of knowledge and its guide and commentary. Just as Al-Ghazali was called the “Defender of the Faith,” Maimonides, on the basis of his learned works, is considered one of the greatest rabbis of all time.

There are notable parallels between the career of Averroes the great philosopher of Andalusia and that of Maimonides. Both were quintessential citizens of Andalusia. Both wrote in Arabic. They both used reason and logic in appreciating faith and argued for the compatibility of the two. Their books were burned by members of their own community. They were exiled by the same dynasty. Averroes never recovered, while Maimonides flourished. Maimonides promoted the work of Averroes among his students. Today both are recognized in the ranks of the greatest philosophers of history while their critics are lost in obscurity.

According to Rabbi Mendel Bluming, “In the laws of Kings chapter 11 Maimonides praises the Muslims (and Christians) whom he says brought the idea of redemption and of adherence to G-d’s laws far and wide so that this idea is known to all of mankind paving the road for the entire world to be aware of and accept these concepts of serving our Creator.” When I requested Rabbi Mendel Bluming, a passionate admirer of the Rambam, to explain the reference to “Ismailites,” the word used in the original, he replied, “He is referring to the Prophet Muhammad who brought about a worldwide awareness of subservience to G-d.”

Studying Maimonides, we note how close Jewish and Muslim thought are on some central issues of their faiths: the definition and position of God, the centrality of Abraham and the importance of Moses, the rejection of idolatry, and the need to create a better world where people could live good lives and worship God. In his method of teaching, Maimonides underlined the need to avoid getting tangled up in the weeds and to keep the big picture in mind. For that, he stressed the importance of learning and knowledge. He is influenced by the Greek-influenced Muslim philosophers, and Maimonides himself is influenced by Aristotle. Maimonides is constantly balancing theology with practical common sense. He talks to us directly as a great teacher.

Maimonides is both a gateway and a bridge: he is a gateway for the Jewish people into the understanding of Judaism, and a bridge between Muslims, Christians, and Jews. He is thus in an extraordinarily relevant position a thousand years after his death. He is buried in Tiberias in Israel, and his grave on the shores of the Sea of Galilee is a popular pilgrimage site. There are many stories which are now part of folklore of how his bones were brought from Egypt and buried here. One story is about the Bedouin tribes who stopped the funeral procession in order to extract payment and then, realizing whose procession it was, hung their heads in shame because of the reputation of the man who, without payment, treated them and other patients when they were ill.

Maimonides was the most celebrated Rabbi to emerge from Spain during the Golden age of Islam, but there were other notable figures such as Rabbi Moses de Leon. Leon is widely believed to have composed the celebrated Zohar which is a collection of Rabbinic teachings reflecting the mystic or Kabbalah aspects of Judaism. Zohar which means “Splendor” or “Radiance” is considered the foundation of Jewish mystical thought known as Kabbalah. Kabbalistic knowledge is said to be given to Moses by God on Mount Sinai and some scholars go back further to Adam. The Zohar is a collection of esoteric writings explaining the relationship between the unchanging eternal God, the Infinite, and the mortal finite universe that is God’s creation. The Zohar includes commentary on the mystical aspects of the Torah. The Zohar also discusses other fundamental issues relating to Jewish theology such as the nature of God, and the origin and structure of the universe. The Zohar has been the center of discussion and controversy but is acknowledged as containing the essence of Jewish mysticism. Today Kabbalah is known internationally and has attracted celebrities like Madonna, Roseanne Barr, and Mick Jagger.

Let us give the last word about the Golden Age and the role of Maimonides in it to the late Lord Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, himself one of the greatest Rabbis of our times. Here he describes to me in an interview for my documentary , Journey into Europe, the exchanges between the religions going on at the time as “Convivencia,” meaning coexistence, a term Spaniards still use to describe this period in Spanish history:

“This period of al Andalus and under benign Muslim rule was one of the most, not only one of the most benign, Convivencia—living together—but one of the most intellectually and spiritually creative in all of the Middle Ages. What had happened was that you had these extraordinary Muslim scholars who had recovered the classical tradition of the Aristotelians and Neoplatonists and they were the first people in Europe to do so, they lifted Europe out of the Dark Ages. They then had an enormous impact on figures like Moses Maimonides, the greatest rabbi of the Middle Ages, whose not only his philosophy, but almost every aspect of his work was influenced by and stimulated by Islam. His creation of this magnificent legal code was inspired by Sharia codes. His formulation of the principles of Jewish faith was inspired by the fact that Muslim thinkers had done this wonderful presentation of Islamic faith. So, it spread from Islam to Judaism. It then spread to Christianity through Maimonides and influenced a figure like Aquinas. So, you have Islam leading Europe out of the Dark Ages.”

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