

BIOGRAPHY OF RAMBAM

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This is a biography of Moses Maimonides. He is known as RAMBAM, which is the abbreviation for Rabbi Moshe ben Maimon, because **his** name was Moshe and his **father's** name was Maimon.

AGES 0-13 (PEACEFUL TIME IN SPAIN)

Rambam was born 800 years ago in the city of Cordova in southern Spain. He was born near the end of a 400-year period of peace and enlightenment, when southern Spain was ruled by Moors, who were peaceful and enlightened Moslems.

The Moors were known for their great progress in the fields of science, philosophy, poetry, math, medicine, and art. The Moors built magnificent architecture, paved streets, universities, and public libraries.

Moors also respected Jews. They even promoted famous rabbis to become government ministers. Under the Moors, Jewish scholarship flourished. Great rabbis that we learned about in Hebrew school – Ibn Gabirol, Ibn Ezra, Yehuda Halevy, Yitzchak Alfasi -- lived in Spain during this period of enlightenment.

Despite southern Spain having many great rabbis, when it came to Jewish issues, the Jews in southern Spain, like **all** Jews in the Diaspora, were ruled from afar by the Jewish Gaon in Baghdad Iraq.

It was into this peaceful and enlightened environment that Rambam was born.

Rambam had a brother and a sister. Rambam's father, Maimon, was a world renowned rabbi, who made a living as jewelry merchant.

Everything in Rambam's life was peaceful.

AGES 13-25 (MOVING FROM PLACE TO PLACE IN SPAIN)

That changed when Rambam was 13yo. The Almohads, a fanatic Moslem sect in Morocco, spread northward across the Strait of Gibraltar and conquered southern Spain from the Moors. The fanatic Almohads were opposite of the tolerant Moors. The Almohads considered any deviation from Koran as heresy. They were **against** education and culture. Their leader declared himself the reincarnation of Muhamad, and demanded that the Jews in southern Spain convert to Islam

So, at age 13, Rambam, along with his family, fled Cordova, and spent the next 12 years fleeing from city to city in Spain. But no city was safe for Jews: Moslem cities were under the influence of the fanatic Almohads. And Christian cities were under the influence of murderous Crusaders.

Rambam's family stayed alive by converting to Islam, and adopting Moslem names, and acting like Moslems **outside** the home, but keeping Judaism **inside** the home.

AGES 25-30 (IN MOROCCO)

At age 25, Rambam heard that the Moslems in Morocco had eased up on the Jews. So he and his family

moved to Fez Morocco. In Fez, Rambam learned **Hebrew** subjects under the renowned rabbi Yehuda Ibn Shoshan. And he learned **secular** subjects from Moslem scholars.

One day, after Rambam had lived in Fez for 5 years, there was a pogrom in which 40 Jews, including Rambam's revered teacher, were killed by a mob for refusing to convert to Islam. So Rambam, at age 30, along with this family, fled Morocco and sailed to Israel.

Rambam wrote, in his memoirs years later, that his family toured Israel and even visited the Temple Mount. And that he found few Jews were left in Israel, because many Jews were massacred by crusaders, and many surviving Jews had fled the country.

AGES 30-70 (IN EGYPT)

Events in Egypt

So, at age 30, Rambam and his family left Israel and moved to Egypt. Egypt was the only safe place in the Middle East for Jews, because Egypt was ruled by Saladin, who was a tolerant Moslem leader

Rambam's family settled in **Cairo** Egypt, where Rambam lived for the remaining 40 years of his life.

Cairo's Jewish community was primarily Karaite. Rambam befriended the Karaites, and considered them authentically Jewish. He convinced many Karaites to return to mainstream rabbinic Judaism.

Rambam unofficially served as chief rabbi of the Cairo Jewish community. But Rambam refused to accept an **official title**, and also refused to accept a **salary** for the rabbinic services he provided. Then how did Rambam support himself? Rambam's father and brother ran the family's jewelry business and shared their profits with Rambam, so that Rambam could spend all his time learning and teaching and advising the community.

When Rambam was 33 years old, his father died. And his brother David, while on a business trip to India, was lost at sea along with the family's entire inventory of jewels, leaving a widow and an orphan for Rambam to support. So Rambam, for the first time in his life, had to find a secular **day** job to support his family. Rambam found a job as a medical doctor, using the knowledge he had accumulated throughout his studies

At age 50, Rambam was promoted to become the official doctor of the vizier – who Saladin had appointed to govern Egypt while Saladin was away fighting battles.

When Rambam was 51 years old, his wife died. Rambam married the sister of a Jewish government minister, and that government minister married Rambam's sister.

The remainder of Rambam's biography centers on 2 subjects:

- (1) the classic books that Rambam was writing -- essentially all of them in Arabic
- (2) controversies that were sparked by those books

Controversies

In one controversy: Rambam's books often used secular logic to justify Jewish laws. This upset many rabbis, including the Gaon in Baghdad. They argued that Jewish laws are justified by the fact that they were given by

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Gd, so Rambam was demeaning Jewish laws by saying Jewish laws need to be justified by secular logic from the pagan world.

In another controversy: Rambam opposed rabbis being paid a salary (and advised rabbis to support themselves by taking on a secular day job). This was insulting to many rabbis, who **were** paid a salary. And was especially insulting to the Gaon in Baghdad who was paid a **large** salary.

In another controversy: One of Rambam's books listed **13 "essentials" ("ikarim")** of Judaism – which are all beliefs about Gd; They are essentially the beliefs that Gd is a one, is eternal, has no material form, created everything, is the sole entity to be worshipped, knows our thoughts & deeds, based on which He rewards & punishes, will eventually send Messiah and resurrect the dead, and speaks to man through prophets, the greatest prophet being Moses, who gave us Gd's Torah which will never be replaced. Many rabbis argued that there is no evidence that **these** 13 features of our faith are more "**essential**" to Judaism than others. They further noted that all 13 features are **beliefs**, and asserted there is no evidence that what we **believe** is more "essential" to Judaism than what we **do**.

Rambam's Literary Works

Rambam wrote **responsas**, answering halachic questions that rabbis sent to him from all over the world. Rambam wrote each responsa in the language -- either Hebrew or Arabic -- that the question to him was written in.

Rambam's wrote the following books:

- a book entitled "**Pamphlet on Forced Conversion**" ("Igeret HaShmad") explaining his halachic opinion about forced conversion. This pamphlet explains that it is better to undergo the Moslem conversion process (to become a converso) than to be murdered, for 2 reasons: (1) Islam is not technically paganism according to halacha, and (2) the conversion process is simply stating that the only god is Allah and his messenger is Muhamed. And that a converso who keeps Judaism in private remains a Jew. And that conversos should nevertheless, as soon as possible, move from Morocco to a place where he/she can practice Judaism openly again.
- a book entitled **Guide to the Perplexed**, which reconciles Jewish religion with secular philosophy. It (like almost all of Rambam's books) was written in Arabic to be understood by everyone. It became an instant best-seller among Jews. It was also popular among Moslem and Christian scholars in the ancient world, and they even cited it in their own scholarly works.
- a book entitled **Commentary on Mishnah**
- a book entitled **Sefer Hamitzvot**, that explains each of the 613 mitzvot of the Torah.
- a book entitled **Resurrection of the Dead**, which explains Jewish concepts of soul, heaven, Messiah, and resurrection.
- a book on the heart, lungs, and blood circulation
- a book providing 350 medical cures, mainly derived from plants
- a book on hemorrhoids

- a book asthma
- a book on curing depression
- a book on poisons, that distinguishes between different types of snake venom, and presents remedies such as applying a tourniquet and cauterizing
- a book on preventive medicine, which recommends exercise, music, hygiene, diet, and avoiding stress
- a book on logic
- a book on the Jewish Calendar and astronomy
- Rambam's largest literary work, and the only one in Hebrew language, was Mishnah Torah. This book contains all **conclusions** of the Talmud, and leaves out all the **background** material that the Talmud's used to deduce those conclusions. Rambam's Mishnah Torah is like a CliffsNotes for the Talmud. This book was attacked, because it appeared to render learning Talmud obsolete (which is actually a point that Mishnah Torah's Introduction section substantially acknowledges.) This book was attacked also because it contradicted some Talmudic teachings. For example, it asserts that witchcraft does **not** exist, which contradicts the Talmud's teaching that witchcraft **does** exist. This book Mishnah Torah became a best seller, with hundreds of scribes working hard making copies of it to keep up with the demand.

Rambam's Hectic Work Schedule

Rambam once wrote a letter to a colleague, explaining his hectic daily schedule. Paraphrasing his letter, Rambam wrote: I leave home early in the morning to go to my day job at the vizier's palace. I take care of the vizier and his wives and his children and his ministers. I return home in the evening to find my house full of people that have been waiting for me to ask me questions about medicine and halacha. I beg their patience while I eat a small quick supper (the only meal I eat all day). Then I answer their questions till late at night.

With such a hectic work schedule, it is amazing that Rambam found time to write all of his scholarly books. (Admitted, the hectic schedule described in Rambam's letter might have lasted for only a small number of years.)

It is also amazing that Rambam's books are so timeless that they are still being reprinted, sold, and read, even now-a-days, 800 years after he wrote them.

At about 70 years old, Rambam died and was buried in Tiberias in Israel.