

Moses Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah*, ed. Rabbi Eliyahu Touger (Brooklyn: Moznaim Publishing, 2000), 18 vols.

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Book Review

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Moses Maimonides (d.1204) is a Jewish religious scholar, philosopher and physician. He was born on March 30, 1135, in Cordoba, Spain. In the Islamic literature, he was called as Mūsā bin Maymūn or shortly Ibn Maymūn. He is known to English speakers as Maimonides and Hebrew speakers as Rambam (abbreviation of Rabbi Mōsheh bēn Maymūn). In the Jewish history, he was accepted as the greatest Jewish philosopher of the medieval period and his works have been still widely read today.

Maimonides' famous work *Mishneh Torah*, which was given a commentary on Talmud (Jewish Lawbook) and later named as *Yad ha-Hazaka* (The Mighty Hand),¹ was completed in 1180 after a work that lasted ten years and it is the only work of the author that he wrote in Hebrew. Maimonides, although this work is mainly based on the Babylonian Talmud, he also benefited from the Jerusalem Talmud and other Jewish religious literature. He has pioneered the writing of new books in the field of Jewish law, which was an example of similar works with its unique style. However, from the period of the author of this work, which has aroused wide interest in the Jewish world, there were also strong reactions against his work *Mishneh Torah*.

¹ Hebrew word *yad*, is the numerical equivalent of fourteen. Thus *Mishneh Torah* is actually divided into fourteen booklets (volumes).

Mishneh Torah, his fourteen-volume work of Jewish law (Halakha),² took him to the leading rabbinic authority of his time or better to say that in all of the Jewish history. Maimonides gave this name to *Mishneh Torah* (it means the Second Torah) and advised an ordinary Jew to begin this work after the Torah reading. In his introduction of the book, he says, “One should read the written Torah and then read *Mishneh Torah*. Then he will know the Oral Torah in its entirety, without needing to read any other text besides.” Thus, he aimed to be reached Jewish culture by the public easily, who are far from the Talmud’s voluminous books and its commentaries.

Mishneh Torah is divided into fourteen booklets. The first one is the Book of Knowledge that describes the fundamentals of the Torah and the nature of Jewish life which must follow all Jews in every step of their lives. Then it goes to prayer and daily rituals that lead every Jew closer to his God (The Book of Love). The third section is the Book of Times that examines Jewish festivals. Then it moves to marriage and the Jewish family matters (the Book of Women). To protect the person from diving into the materialistic world, Maimonides suggests getting away from the world and seclusion from the world (asceticism) in the Book of Holiness and the Book of Vows. In the Book of Seeds, he describes the laws related to agriculture and calculate Jubilee year. The second half of his work is related to the national administration of the Jews. The Book of Sacrifices starts with the Temple and the ritual of public sacrifices and then moves to the cleaning of body and etc. (the Book of Purity). And the next one is about the laws of damages (the Book of Torts). The other section (the Book of Acquisitions) reviews trade laws. The Book of Justice examines leasing, credit and lending issues. The final section, the Book of Judges, tells two vital institutions for the nation of Israel; monarchy and the Sanhedrin. The book ends with the longing of the Messianic Era that occupies an important role in Jewish life.

² In Judaism, it is accepted as the living body of beliefs and practices that include morals and rituals.

Although *Mishneh Torah* is generally related to Halaka, its philosophical aspects are also remarkable. However, the author's philosophical interpretations and rationalist ideas have been interspersed in various parts of the work. In these chapters, the author tries to rationalize the view of the Jewish people who do not have sufficient knowledge in religion and ethics, to reveal the ultimate religious meaning in human actions and pursue wisdom (hokmah) and to stay away from strict literal approaches that he sees them equivalent with ignorance. According to him, a man should dedicate one-third of his educational life to Mikre (reading and seeking knowledge), one third to Mishnah, one third to learning Talmud. To bring wisdom forward and go after it, it is necessary for religious perfection and it is a vital gain for humans.

Maimonides makes a philosophy of history in *Mishneh Torah* as well. According to him, the three phases of the history of humanity's belief draw attention:

- (1) The emergence and development of paganism.
- (2) Abraham's opposition to his pagan society.
- (3) Selecting and sending of Moses and giving Torah.

Thus, he evaluates the abandonment of God's faith, in other words, to shift into idolatry as a human fault in the form of worship.

Maimonides has been influenced by the ideas of Muslim philosophers because he was living with a Muslim environment. Same as in Islamic philosophy, and in particular in Ibn Rushd's opinions, Maimonides emphasized that there were two separate paths of the truth; one for the intellectuals and the other one for the ordinary people. According to this, intellectuals should use the process of interpretation (observation) that reconcile mind and religion. Maimonides thinks that religion and philosophy can be reconciled and implies in all his works that such a peace is possible. He states that we must determine the wisdom and reasons of religious orders as much as we can and to understand

the relations between these orders and their relations with the principles of faith.

As a result, Maimonides saw philosophy as an instrument for the religious experience otherwise it is not possible to reach the peaks of the love of God. That is why he emphasized great importance to study philosophy, even according to him, studying philosophy is a religious duty like studying of Torah. Therefore, without philosophy, knowing, loving and fearing of God is not possible. Based on this, in early volumes of *Mishneh Torah*, he described God in a philosophical way in terms of essence and existence.

With all these features of Mishne Tora is a unique work. it is difficult to find such rabbinic literature in the Jewish tradition that is the systematizing system of the Talmud without neglecting philosophy.