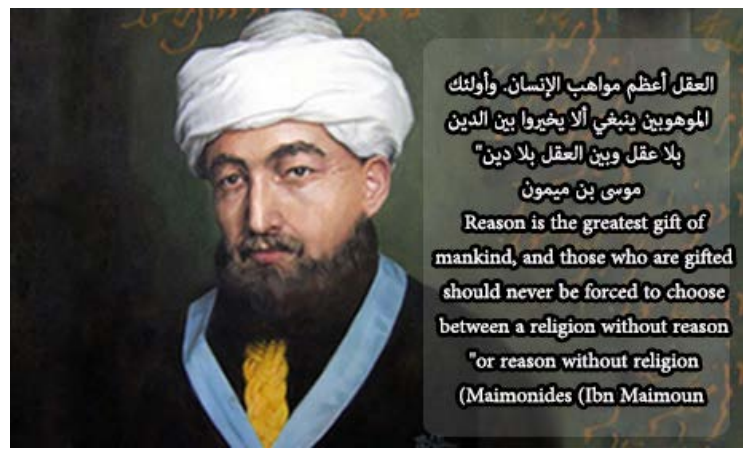


## Inspiring Minds 2: Maimonides

In our second article in the series Inspiring Minds, Ahram Online presents you with Maimonides, the great philosopher and physician

Ahmed Mahmoud , Wednesday 22 Jun 2016



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In the heart of Islamic Cairo lies the Synagogue of Maimonides, Saladin's personal physician, the mass healer whose excellence in medicine weaved endless folk legends about his ability to prescribe the right and effective cure to grave ailments of all Egyptians. He was also the head of the Jewish sect in Egypt during his time in the area.

Known throughout Arabic history as Abi Emran Obied Allah Ibn Maimoun Al-Cordobi, Maimonides was born on 30 March either in 1135 or 1138 AD and died in 1204 AD.

Maimonides, who lived in the Jewish quarter of Cordoba, began his studies by learning astrology, but later shifted his attention to astronomy as a means to study the religious calendar. During this time, he encountered great Islamic philosopher Ibn Baga and astronomer Gaber Ibn Aflah. He wrote numerous books, one of which was *Maqala fi senaat el manteq* (An Essay on the Creation of Reason) and an article on calendars, which was quite interesting because he was among the very few Jewish scholars who did not believe or study astrology

In 1160 AD, Maimonides and his family settled for five years in Fes in Morocco, where he wrote a paper titled For Those Who Are Forced To Change Their Religious Belief in response to encouragement from rabbis that Jews should die rather than change their beliefs. Maimonides, instead, believed that Jews could always hold on to their religious beliefs secretly instead of losing their lives.

In 1165 he moved east with his family, towards Palestine to Akka, and then to Egypt in 1166 AD. He was strongly supported by judge Fadel El-Bisany during the reign of Saladin and soon Maimonides became the head of the Jewish sect in Egypt in 1191 AD, holding the highest judicial ranks in the Jewish community in Egypt

Maimonides married an Egyptian woman at the age of 50 and had a son named Abraham. Maimonides became his family's chief breadwinner after his brother David died, while he worked as a physician in 1177 AD.

In the letter addressed to his student Ibn Yahouza in 1191 AD, Maimonides wrote:" I tell you I've become quite popular in the field of medicine among the men of great status such as judges and the prince; and as

for the commoners, they perceive me as an untouchable person which leads me to spend all day making house calls to nobles and at night studying medical books because it is a necessity to those among me."

Among his most famous books is Dalil Al-Haaerin, The Guide for the Perplexed, which he wrote in the Arabic language using Hebrew letters, functioning as a code that allowed his work to be read only by a small group of the highly educated.

This book, when translated into Hebrew and then into Latin in the 13th century, made quite an intellectual stir and is considered to be his most important book on philosophy.

The book revolves around Jewish scientists that were torn between the revelations of the philosophy of reason and what Jewish religious texts dictate. Maimonides believed that man cannot apply the human description to God, so when the Holy Book states that God talked to prophets, we must understand that it is a different kind of talk, could be in the form of dreams or visions; hence we need to think of it as a metaphor other than take it as it is.

Maimonides went as far as explaining that we should search for metaphor in Biblical stories and parables. He posited that these stories were meant to be figurative and simplified for the masses. Those gifted with reason, however, should read the many layers in the text and not only focus on the explicit meaning of the text.

Conflict resulted between preachers that preach the literal interpretation of texts and philosophers that try to decipher a text's many hidden meanings. In Dalil Al-Haaerin, Maimonides posited that deep, subtle meanings of holy scripture are often more accurate.

"Reason is the greatest gift of mankind, and those who are gifted should never be forced to choose between a religion without reason or reason without religion," Maimonides famously wrote.

"If God embedded reason in human beings, then reason could never contradict divine revelation."

The value of his works resonated with the Islamic philosophy at the time both in its topics, terms and its relationship with Greek philosophy. The book is considered the core of Maimonides' philosophy and a real literary gem of the Middle Ages.

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**Miracles at the Maimonides synagogue; many went there for miracles**

When I was a child my father took me to the Maimonides synagogue. Muslims, Copts and Jews would go there if they were sick and prayed to be healed. Some would sleep there for the night. It left a lasting impression on me.

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