

Part 3: A Debate from the Middle Ages

The Maimonidean Controversy: The Rabbinic Debate Concerning the Thought & Writings of Maimonides

I) THE BACKGROUND & THE PLAYERS IN THE DEBATE

Major Players

Rambam/Maimonides

- Born **1138** in Cordova, Spain; Died **1204** in Fustat (Cairo), Egypt
- Son of R. Maimon the Dayyan of Cordova
- In **1148**, Spain was invaded by the Almohades, a fanatic Muslim tribe from North Africa; Rambam's family fled Cordova and moved around for many years until finally settling in Fez, Morocco in **1160**.
- Rambam was educated by his father in Judaic knowledge and counted his father's teachers and the rich rabbinic legacy of Andalusian Spain as his own.
- In Fez, Rambam formally studied medicine which he had begun already in Cordova
- In **1165**, Rambam's entire family left Morocco and briefly stayed in the Land of Israel before eventually settling in Fostat (old Cairo), Egypt around **1166**.
- Around **1171**, Rambam was appointed Naggid – the rabbinic head of the Cairo Jewish community.
- In Fostat, Rambam initially devoted himself primarily to rabbinic study; to sustain his family, they invested their wealth in Rambam's younger brother David who served as a ship merchant; David died at sea on the Indian Ocean around **1177**.
- In **1178**, Rambam began practicing medicine and within a few years, he was the personal doctor to the royal vizier to Saladin, the second most important figure in Egypt.
- In the final decades of his life, Rambam served a dual role as the chief rabbinic and political figure of Egyptian Jewry, as well as the personal physician to Egypt's royal elites whom he attended daily. The only literary output in his last thirteen years were medical treatises.
- Rambam's major works were written at different stages of his life:
 - o Commentary on the Mishnah: initially written while fleeing the Almohads in Morocco, completed in **1168** and edited to its final form in Egypt
 - o Sefer HaMitzvot/Mishneh Torah: Rambam's magnum opus composed over a ten year period upon arriving in Egypt and completed in **1177**
 - o Guide of the Perplexed: written primarily for a student, Yosef b. Yehudah of Alexandria, in the 1180s and completed in **1191**.

R. Abraham b. David of Posquières (Rabad)

- Born in **1120** in Narbonne
- Died **1198** in Posquières in Provence
- Established a yeshiva in Posquières which attracted the greatest of rabbinic scholars from across the Jewish globe
- Although a prolific scholar on his own, he became known to posterity as the “*ba'al ha'hasagot*”, the author of the critical notes to Rambam's Mishneh Torah

R. Jonathan HaKohen of Lunel

- Born in **1140** in Provence (Southern France)
- Student of R. Abraham b. David of Posquières (Raavad)

- Eventually came to be considered the greatest of the many rabbinic personalities of Lunel
- Wrote many works, the most significant of which was a commentary on R. Isaac Alfasi's (Rif) Talmudic Code
- Correspondent of Maimonides and the personal recipient of the *Guide* which was translated from Arabic to Hebrew on his initiative.
- Emigrated to the Land of Israel in **1209**

R. Solomon b. Abraham of Montpellier

- Active rabbinic leader in 13th century Provence
- First to actively campaign against Rambam's philosophic views in **1232**
- Teacher of the famed R. Jonah whom he sent as his emissary to the Rabbis of N. France to rally support for a ban on Rambam's works

R. Jonah b. Abraham of Girona

- Born in Girona, Spain in the mid 13th century and died in **1263**
- Studied in France and was significantly influenced by the French rabbinic ideology
- Active rabbinic leader in 13th century Provence
- Signatore on the **1232** ban initiated by his teacher, R. Solmon of Montpellier, of Rambam's writings
- Instigated a burning of Rambam's works by French Christian authorities in Paris in **1233**

R. David Kimchi

- Born in Narbonne, France in **1160**; died there in **1235**
- Famed author of a commentary on the Tanakh
- Sent by the rabbis of Provence to Northern Spain to garner support for the pro-Rambam camp

R. Moses b. Nahman of Girona (Nahmanides/Ramban)

- Born in Girona, Spain in **1194**; died in the Land of Israel in **1270**
- Was the leading authority of Spanish Jewry in the mid-13th century
- Called upon by R. Solomon of Montpellier to defend him against the ban against him issued by the pro-Rambam camp in Provence.
- Wrote letter to several communities in **1238** in response to this request.



II) THE FIRST STAGE: RABBINIC AUTHORITY & RESSURECTION

Know, because the Mishnah states: one should not make the Torah's spade with which dig, meaning one should not make it a vehicle for earning a livelihood; and the sages explained that anyone who benefits from the Torah, that they cut their souls off from the World to Come. And there are those who have left the plain meaning of these words...and interpreted passages that they do not understand – which I will explain to you [their proper meaning – and fixed for themselves monetary demands from individuals and communities and caused people to think, in utter foolishness, that it is obligatory and proper that they should help sages and scholars and people studying Torah ... all this is wrong. There is not a single word, either in the Torah or in the sayings of the [talmudic] sages, to lend credence to it ... for as we look into the sayings of the talmudic sages, we do not find that they ask people for money, nor did they collect money for the honorable and cherished academies

(1) פירוש המשניות להרמב"ם – מסכת אבות (ד:ו)
דע, כי זה כבר אמר: אל תעשה התורה קרדום לחפור בה, כלומר: אל תחשבה כלי לפרנסה, ובאר ואמר שכל מי שיהנה בזה העולם בכבוד תורה שהוא כורת נפשו מחיי העולם הבא. והעלימו בני אדם עיניהם מזו הלשון הגלויה...ונתלו בפשטי מאמרים שלא הבינום - אני אבארים - והטילו להם חוקים על היחידים ועל הקהילות, ועשו את המינויים התוריים לחוק מכסים, והביאו בני אדם לסבור שטוב גמורה, שזה צריך ומחוייב, לעזור לחכמים ולתלמידים ולאנשים העוסקים בתורה ותורתן אומנותן. וכל זה טעות, אין בתורה מה שיאמת אותו, ולא רגל שישען עליה בשום פנים. לפי שאנו אם נעיין בתולדות החכמים, זכרם לברכה, לא נמצא אצלם לא הטלת חובות על בני אדם, ולא קיבוץ ממון לשיבות המרוממות הנכבדות, ולא לראשי גלויות ולא לדיינים ולא למרביצי תורה ולא לאחד מן הממונים ולא לשאר האנשים...

Why, my son, should you take offense that a man whom people accustom from his youth to believe that there is none like him in his generation; when age, high office, aristocratic descent, the lack of people of discernment in this town, and his relationship with individuals, all have combined to produce this execrable consequence that each and every individual hangs expectantly on each word pronounced from the academy in anticipation of an honorific title from there... – why do you wonder that he has acquired such [evil] traits? How, my son, could you imagine that he should love truth enough to acknowledge his weakness?... This is a thing that a man like him will never do, as it was not done by better men who preceded him...

(2) אגרת הרמב"ם לתלמידו יוסף בן יהודה

He is a very foolish man. He studies very hard at this talmudic discussion and its commentaries, and thinks that he is the greatest of his generation, having already attained the peak of perfection. My esteemed son knows that my appreciation of the greatest of the sages of Israel is such that I evaluate their worth according to their own criteria. They themselves have defined 'the argumentations [havayot] of *Abbaye* and *Rava* [as] a small matter.' If this is a small matter, why should I pay attention to an old man who is really miserable, an ignoramus in every respect? To my eyes he is like a newborn baby; one has to defend him, according to the measure of his [Zechariah's] foolishness

Everything in clear language and terse style, so that the whole Oral Law would become thoroughly known to all, without bringing problems and solutions or differences of view, but rather clear, convincing, and correct statements in accordance with the law drawn from all of these works and commentaries that have appeared from the time of Our Holy Teacher to the present. This is so that all the rules should be accessible to the small and to the great in the rules of each and every commandment and in the rules of the legislations of the sages and prophets: in short, so that a person should need no other work in the World in the rules of any of the laws of Israel; but that this work would collect the entire Oral Law, including the positive legislations, the customs, and the negative legislations enacted from the time of Moshe Our Teacher until the writing of the Talmud, as the Geonim interpreted it for us in all of the works of commentary they wrote after the Talmud. Thus, I have called this work the [Complete] Restatement of the [Oral] Law (Mishneh Torah), for a person reads the Written Law first and then reads this work, and knows from it the entire Oral Law, without needing to read any other book between them.

(3) הקדמה למשנה תורה

כולם בלשון ברורה ודרך קצרה עד שתהא תורה שבעל פה כולה סדורה בפי הכל בלא קושיא ולא פירוק. לא זה אומר בכה וזה בכה. אלא דברים ברורים קרובים נכונים על פי המשפט אשר יתבאר מכל אלו החיבורים והפירושים הנמצאים מימות רבינו הקדוש ועד עכשיו. עד שיהיו כל הדינים גלויין לקטן ולגדול בדין כל מצוה ומצוה ובדין כל הדברים שתיקנו חכמים ונביאים. כללו של דבר כדי שלא יהא אדם צריך לחיבור אחר בעולם בדין מדיני ישראל אלא יהא חיבור זה מקבץ לתורה שבעל פה כולה עם התקנות והמנהגות והגזירות שנעשו מימות משה רבינו ועד חבור הגמרא וכמו שפירשו לנו הגאונים בכל חיבוריהם שחיברו אחר הגמרא. לפיכך קראתי שם חיבור זה משנה תורה. לפי שאדם קורא בתורה שבכתב תחלה ואחר כך קורא בזה ויודע ממנו תורה שבעל פה כולה ואינו צריך לקרות ספר אחר ביניהם.

He (Rambam) tried to fix, but did not fix, because in doing so, he abandoned every rabbinic author that ever came before him, because they

(4) השגות הרמב"ם על המשנה תורה (שם)

סבר לתקן ולא תיקן כי הוא עזב דרך כל המחברים אשר היו לפניו כי הם הביאו ראיה לדבריהם וכתבו הדברים בשם אומרם והיה לו

would bring proof to their comments and would bring their words in the name of those who stated them; and doing so served a significant purpose, because often it occurs to a judge to prohibit or to permit, and his proof will be from a specific place; and were he to know that a greater sage than he differed, he would reverse his position. And with this, I will never know whether I should reverse my position after looking at this author's work; if he that argues with me is of greater stature, all would be well; and I be greater than he, why should I submit to his opinion and surrender my own? Furthermore, there are things upon which the great sages argued with one another, and this author has written in his work only one of the opinions – why should I rely on his judgement? I have no way of knowing whether this opinion is worthy of disputing or not...

In the world to come, there is no body or physical form, only the souls of the righteous alone, without a body, like the ministering angels. Since there is no physical form, there is neither eating, drinking, nor any of the other bodily functions of this world like sitting, standing, sleeping, death, sadness, laughter, and the like. Thus, the Sages of the previous ages declared: "In the world to come, there is neither eating, drinking, nor sexual relations. Rather, the righteous will sit with their crowns on their heads and delight in the radiance of the Divine Presence." From that statement, it is clear that there is no body, for there is no eating or drinking. [Consequently,] the statement, "the righteous sit," must be interpreted metaphorically, i.e., the righteous exist there without work or labor. Similarly, the phrase, "their crowns on their heads," [is also a metaphor, implying] that they will possess the knowledge that they grasped which allowed them to merit the life of the world to come. This will be their crown. A similar [usage of this metaphor was employed by] Solomon [Song of Songs 3:11]: "The crown with which his mother crowned him." [Support for the concept that this does not refer to a physical crown can be brought from the prophecy, Isaiah 51:11]: "Eternal joy will be upon their heads." Joy is not a physical entity which can rest on a head. Similarly, the expression "crown" used by the Sages [refers to a spiritual concept], knowledge. What is meant by the expression, "delight in the radiance of the Divine Presence"? That they will comprehend the truth of Godliness which they cannot grasp while in a dark and humble body.

The words of this man appear to me similar to one who would argue that there is no such concept as bodily resurrection, rather only resurrection for the soul; and this was not the opinion of the Sages...which demonstrates that their bodies would be resurrected and alive...and that it is not meant as a parable.

III) THE SECOND STAGE: THE BATTLE BETWEEN NORTH AND SOUTH

Let a royal command issue forth from you as you become a single group and la lasting bond to destroy an upraised arm, to excommunicate, ban, and place under a curse every tongue speaking arrogantly which God will destroy, one who mocks the *aggadot* or opens hi smouth against *asmakhtot*. As for those who study the *Guide of the Perplexed* in groups, place your fearsome ahnd to their mouth, for the command of the great rabbi who wrote it was: "Do not interpret or publicize it"...

And if you our Rabbis will agree with the Provençal sages and we too will follow in your footsteps, you will strengthen this matter with an excommunication and curse, with thunderous noise, a great roaring sound, the blaze of consuming fire, and sweeping warfare, engaging in pursuit unto death, uprooting, confiscation of possessions, or imprisonment; with this step there will be a sufficient enactment and

בזה תועלת גדולה כי פעמים רבות יעלה על לב הדיין לאסור או להתיר וראיתו ממקום אחד ואילו ידע כי יש גדול ממנו הפליג שמועתו לדעת אחרת היה חוזר בו. ועתה לא אדע למה אחזור מקבלתי ומראייתי בשביל חבורו של זה המחבר. אם החולק עלי גדול ממני הרי טוב ואם אני גדול ממנו למה אבטל דעתי מפני דעתו. ועוד כי יש דברים שהגאונים חולקים זה על זה וזה המחבר בירר דברי האחד וכתבם בחיבורו ולמה אסמך אני על ברירתו והיא לא נראית בעיני ולא אדע החולק עמו אם הוא ראוי לחלוק אם לא...

5) משנה תורה – הלכות תשובה (ח:ב)

העולם הבא אין בו גוף וגויה אלא נפשות הצדיקים בלבד בלא גוף כמלאכי השרת, הואיל ואין בו גויות אין בו לא אכילה ולא שתייה ולא דבר מכל הדברים שגופות בני אדם צריכין להן בעולם הזה, ולא יארע דבר בו מן הדברים שמארעין לגופות בעולם הזה, כגון ישיבה ועמידה ושינה ומיתה ועצב ושחוק וכיוצא בהן, כך אמרו חכמים הראשונים העולם הבא אין בו לא אכילה ולא שתייה ולא תשמיש אלא צדיקים יושבים ועטרותיהם בראשיהן ונהנין מזיו השכינה, הרי נתברר לך שאין שם גוף לפי שאין שם אכילה ושתייה, וזה שאמרו צדיקים יושבין דרך חידה אמרו, כלומר הצדיקים מצויין שם בלא עמל ובלא יגיעה, וכן זה שאמרו עטרותיהן בראשיהן כלומר דעת שידעו שבגללה זכו לחיי העולם הבא מצויה עמהן והיא העטרה שלהן כענין שאמר שלמה בעטרה ושעטרה לו אמו, והרי הוא אומר ושמחת עולם על ראשם ואין השמחה גוף כדי שתנוח על הראש כך עטרה שאמרו חכמים כאן היא הידיעה, ומהו זהו שאמרו נהנין מזיו שכינה שידעו ומשיגין מאמתת הקדוש ברוך הוא מה שאינם יודעים והם בגוף האפל השפל

6) השגות הראב"ד (שם)

דברי האיש הזה בעיני קרובים למי שאומר אין תחיית המתים לגופות אלא לנשמות בלבד, וחיי ראשי לא היה דעת חז"ל ... וכל אלה מוכיחים כי בגוייתם הן עומדין חיים... ולא יהיה משל

7) אגרת הרמב"ן לחכמי צרפת (1238)

ויצא דבר מלפניכם ותהיו לאגודה ולקשר של קימא והיא מן המדה ולא עוסקי ספר מורה הנבוכים כתות כתות תשימו יד מוראכם אל פיכם כי מצות הרב הגדול המחברו היא לאמר 'לא תפרשוהו ולא תפרסמוהו'... ואם אתם רבותינו תסכימו עם חכמי פרובינצה וגם אנחנו נצא בעקבותיכם תחזקו הדבר הזה בחרם ואלה ברעם וברעש ובקול המולה גדולה ולהב אש אוכלה הלא די בזה תקנה וגדר. במרעה השלום תנהלו הצאן ובנאות האהבה תרביצו העדר ועוד ראוי לכם להזהיר בנחת את הכל להניח העסק מכל וכל ירא שמים ישוב וישקוד על ספר תורת שבכתב ותורה

restraint.

Guide the sheep in a peaceful pasture and rest the flock in meadows of love. It is also proper for you to admonish everyone gently to set aside the pursuit altogether, so that a Godfearing individual will return to diligent study of the written and oral Torah, for this is the abode of our life and through this will our standing increase. He who listens will listen, and he who refrains will refrain, for you can not admonish and compel all Israel to be saints. In such fashion were the fathers of the world accustomed to reprove even great scholars to refrain from this, and all the more to prevent beginning students from pursuing philosophy, as I have found in a responsum of R. Hai Gaon of blessed memory to the Nagid, may his rest be honored, in which he wrote him as follows: "The perfection of the body and proper human behavior is [the result of] the pursuit of Mishnah and Talmud; this is what is good for Israel...Anyone who removes his heart from this and pursues those matters *alone* will remove from himself Torah and the fear of heaven; he will ruin himself with those matters written in external books and will entirely remove from himself all the words of the Torah. And this removal will result in the confusion of a person's mind at the point where he will not be concerned about abandoning prayer... If you will see that those people who pursue those matter and the ways of philosophy tell you that this is a paved road which enables them to attain knowledge of God, do not heed them, and know that they are in fact lying to you. You will not find fear of sin humility and sanctity except in those who study Mishnah, Talmud, and wisdom together, not matters of wisdom alone.

שבעל פה כי הוא בית חיינו ובוה מעלתינו תגדל השומע ישמע והחדל יחדל שאי אפשר לכם להוכיח לכוף כל ישראל להיות חסידים ובוה נהגו אבות העולם ליסר מזה חכמים גדולים אף כי למנוע מן ההגיון התלמידים המתחילים ללמוד כמו שמצאתי בתשובת רבינו האי גאון ז"ל לנגיד מ"כ שכתב לו בלשון הזה תקון הגוף ומישור הנהגת האדם הוא עסק המשנה והתלמוד ואשר טוב לישראל כי למוד התורה יועיל לעצמו ולחכמים שכמוהו ויועיל לעמי הארץ כי ימשכם לדברי המצות והתורה ואשר יסיר לבו מזה ויתעסק בדברים ההם בלבד יסיר מעליו תורה ויראת שמים ויפסיד עצמו באותן הענינים הכתובים בספרים החצוניים ויסיר מעליו כל דברי תורה לגמרי ומזאת ההסרה יארע לאדם שישבש דעתו עד שלא יחוש לעזיבת התפלה אבל אשר ימסרו עצמם לתורה וליראת שמים יצא להם מזה כי ינהיגו כל ההמון לאחרית טובה בלי פקפוק ולא ישימו שום ספק בהקב"ה ואם תראה שאותן בני אדם המתעסקים באותן הדברים ודרכי הפילוסופיא יאמרו לך שהיא דרך סלולה ושבזה ישיגו לידיעת הבורא לא תאבה להם ודע כי יכזבו לך באמת ולא תמצא יראת חטא וענוה וקדושה אלא באותם המתעסקים במשנה ובתלמוד ובחכמה יחד לא בדברי חכמה בלבד.