

Medicine in Stamps

Moses Maimonides (1135-1204): Rabbi, Philosopher, Physician

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Islam's ascendancy during the Middle Ages extended to Western Europe, and Spain came under its rule in the 8th century. Islamic hold over the Spanish citizenry, a fifth of whom were Jews, led to cultural and intellectual growth, with Jews, Muslims, and Christians living in peaceful coexistence. In the Spanish town of Cordova, a bastion of Spanish learning, a historic event took place at the turn of the millennium. There, in the year 1135, a Jewish mother gave birth to Moses Maimonides who was destined to become one of the greatest Jewish thinkers of all time.

Born on the eve of the Passover, Maimonides faced numerous setbacks and tragedies before he emerged as the Jewish leader of the Middle Ages. His mother died during childbirth. And in 1148, a fanatic revolutionary group called the Almohades began its persecution of the Jews, forcing the Maimon family to leave the country. Young Maimonides was barely a teenager at the time, and together with his family spent the next twelve years leading a nomadic lifestyle before settling in Fez, Morocco. Fortunate to be able to count on the support of his younger stepbrother David, Maimonides soon began his medical studies, but peace and quiet proved elusive. In 1165, the family was again forced to flee, purportedly because of Maimonides' vocal cries for religious freedom. After a disappointing visit to the Holy Land, the dissatisfied Maimon family moved yet once more, finally settling in Fostat, Egypt (present day Cairo).

Shortly after their arrival in Egypt, tragedy struck. Maimonides' father died and his brother David was killed in a shipwreck. Maimonides, now left to support his extended family, had to discontinue public service as an unpaid rabbi, and so turned to his medical calling. Apart from the religious and medical undertakings of this great man,

little else is known about Maimonides' personal life. He was apparently twice married, and fathered a son named Abraham.

The Doctor that was Maimonides: History records Maimonides as a clinician of great skill and caring. His renown resulted in an appointment as court physician to the Sultan Saladin, even as he declined an invitation to serve as personal physician to King Richard the Lion-Hearted. Yet he catered to royalty and common folk alike. He treated both rich and poor, Jew or Gentile. Medicine was a sacred calling. He disapproved of the use of charms and amulets, denounced the practices of charlatans and quacks, and taught his students to always treat the patient as a whole person.



Maimonides was certainly busy in his dual role as rabbi and doctor. In a letter to his friend and fellow-rabbi Samuel ibn Tibbon, he spoke of a typical day: "My duties to the sultan are very heavy. I am obliged to visit him every day, early in the morning; and when he or any of his children, or any inmates of his harem, are indisposed, I dare not leave Cairo, but spend the greater part of the day in the palace... I repair to Cairo very early in the day, and even if nothing unusual happens, I do not return to Fostat until the afternoon. Then I am fatigued and hungry. I find the antechambers filled with people, both Jews and Gentiles, nobles and common people, judges and policemen, friends and enemies – a mixed multitude who await the time of my return... patients go in and out until nightfall... I converse with and prescribe for them while lying down from sheer fatigue, and when night falls I am so exhausted that I can scarcely speak..."

Still, Maimonides found time for medical scholarship. He wrote some ten treatises, including

a commentary on the aphorisms of Hippocrates. His dissertations were on subjects as diverse as haemorrhoids, sexual intercourse, asthma, poisons, and fits; he even compiled a regimen of health and a glossary of drug names.

Maimonides' *Regimen of Health* was written for the overindulgent son of Sultan Saladin who often suffered from episodes of depression. He discouraged excessive sexual practices and prescribed a healthy diet and frequent exercise. It is in this treatise that we find his attention to psychosomatic medicine, an area neglected by Hippocrates and Galen, but well recognised by Arabic physician, Avicenna. Maimonides wrote that a healthy body could reduce one's disturbed state of mind, and conversely, happiness and joy could lessen the severity of a physical disease. The impressed Muslim poet, Alsaid ibn Sina Almulk, penned these lines in praise:

“Contrast Maimon's with famed Galen's art
Health to the body Galen can impart,
But the wise Hebrew with the two-fold skill
Relieves both mind and body of ill!
Shows how base ignorance can hurt the soul
While wisdom counteracting it makes it whole.”

Maimonides was a public health clinician, and recommended fresh air, clean water, and a healthy diet. These were not new ideas. However, he placed these principles in the context of particular diseases such as asthma. He also gave practical advice such as fumigation, drying agents and sweet scents as air-pollution control measures. He understood hygiene and sanitation, and specified that toilets should be built as far away from the living areas as possible.

In his *Treatise on Asthma*, Maimonides devoted only two of thirteen chapters to specific medical treatments of the disease. The other eleven chapters covered dietary, environmental, and psychosomatic factors. He detailed what and when one should eat, emphasised moderation in all things, and even included a recipe for the Jewish cure-all – chicken soup!

By far, his best known medical work is the *Medical Aphorisms of Moses Maimonides*. In it, he covered twenty-five different areas of medicine and accurately described various diseases. For example, he recognised that stroke patients had the worst prognosis when impaired respiration accompanied the stroke, and he accurately listed pneumonia's symptoms as “acute fever, sticking pain in the side, short rapid breaths, serrated pulse, and cough, mostly associated with sputum.”

Maimonides, the Quintessential Jewish Philosopher:

Even as he healed and wrote, Maimonides was first and foremost the Jewish religious thought-leader of his day. His two religious works, the *Mishneh*

Torah and the *Guide for The Perplexed* were major theological achievements. Andrew Heinze, Director of the Swig Judaic Studies Program at the University of San Francisco, says of the man, “Maimonides took the best of Western rationalist tradition and combined it with Judaism in a way that continues to speak to Jews nearly a millennium later.”

In the *Mishneh Torah*, Maimonides successfully organised the Jewish biblical and rabbinical laws, its religion and its ethics. He spent ten years at this task, and brought clarity and coherence to the subject. Known also as the *Code of Maimonides*, this work complemented and illuminated the sometimes confusing Talmud, the Jewish oral law.

But it was the *Guide for the Perplexed* that brought him fame as a philosopher and thinker. How could one reconcile the biblical account of creation with the Aristotelian idea of eternalism? How could a divine being transcend its divinity (a distant God) and still show concern for the human race (the biblical God)? At the crux of the matter was whether one could believe in God and still be a scientist and philosopher. Maimonides used the biblical account of creation and the biblical account of the chariot (when God seemed to take a human form to the prophet Ezekiel) to try and reconcile the two schools of thought. His *Guide* was highly regarded, and it influenced many great thinkers such as Aquinas.

With courage, Maimonides applied his philosophy and ethics to difficult issues. Abortion was an example. The rabbis of his day believed that a foetus did not attain status of *nephesh*, i.e., a living being, until it breathed air, and so the foetus was to be considered a part of a mother's body until its birth. The death of foetal life, whether accidental or deliberate, was therefore not the killing of a human being. On the other hand, the Church's teaching was for the unborn child to be brought into the world and be baptised, in order for its soul to ascend to heaven. Accordingly, abortion, for any reason, was wrong. If the mother died in labour, the child's life could then be saved by a postmortem caesarean section.

In reconciling these divergent positions, Maimonides reasoned that abortion may be justifiable, but only in the context of a conflict arising between the life of the mother and that of the unborn foetus. This view, though not universally held, is now incorporated into most rabbinical and Christian teachings.

However, not all of what Maimonides wrote has withstood the changing mores of time. His views on women appear particularly harsh and outmoded. He believed that the wife should be largely confined

to the home and be subjected to the commands of her husband, even to the extent of enduring physical punishment for unfinished work.

The Oath: Maimonides' greatest medical legacy is probably his oath, which exhorts physicians to seek knowledge and to treat the patient with compassion and humility. There is a companion prayer that is also attributed to the "Jew of the Millennium," but this may actually have been written by the 18th century German physician-scholar, Marcus Herz. A 1917 version of the oath of Maimonides is reprinted below. Notice the emphasis on life-long learning.

THE OATH OF MAIMONIDES

"The eternal providence has appointed me to watch over the life and health of Thy creatures. May the love of my art actuate me at all times; may neither avarice nor miserliness, nor thirst for glory or for a great reputation engage my mind; for the enemies of truth and philanthropy could easily deceive me and make me forgetful of my lofty aim of doing good to Thy children.

May I never see in the patient anything but a fellow creature in pain.

Grant me the strength, time and opportunity always to correct what I have acquired, always to extend its domain; for knowledge is immense and the spirit of man can extend indefinitely to enrich itself daily with new requirements.

Today he can discover his errors of yesterday and tomorrow he can obtain a new light on what he thinks himself sure of today. Oh, God, Thou has appointed me to watch over the life and death of Thy creatures; here am I ready for my vocation and now I turn unto my calling."

REFERENCES

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