Maimonides (1135 -1204). Elitism and Rationalism?

As many of my readers might have noticed, in these last days I am writing in honor of my uncle the Hakham Yosef Faur haLevi z ”l, commenting on one of his classes called “Four Giants of Sepharad”. So far we have mentioned Rabbi Ibn Paquda, Rabbi Yehuda haLevi and Rabbi Abraham Eben Ezra. And now, in this last presentation, we will write about the “giant among the giants”: Maimonides.

Ribbi Moshe ben Maimon, also known as HaRambam or Maimonides, was born in the city of Córdoba, Spain, in 1135 and died in Egypt in 1204.

It is impossible and absolutely unfair to dedicate a simple email to describe the life and work of one of the most important rabbis of all time. Aside from being a great rabbi and community leader, Maimonides was also a famous philosopher, a great doctor – the pioneer of preventive medicine – and had a vast knowledge of mathematics and astronomy. But today we will focus on a different angle of his personality: Maimonides as a jurist and legislator.

THE TALMUDIC OCEAN

It is not possible to appreciate the monumentality of Maimonides’ work if one does not have a clear idea of what the Talmud is (and vice versa).

The Babylonian Talmud, with its 63 treatises and 2,711 pages, records the Jewish oral tradition and is the basis of biblical and rabbinical jurisprudence. The Talmud or Gemara, cites the Mishna, the oldest edition of Jewish oral law, and then registers a large number of debates in which that Mishna is exhaustively analyzed in terms of its authorship, language, scope, application , its exceptions, etc. It is necessary to develop a special way of reasoning (which is acquired as one

immerses himself in the Talmud) to understand the Talmudic thinking . And although today we have many good translations and explanations, it is not easy to keep up with the Talmudic methodology and rhetoric. Apart from that, a topic that has to do, for example, with the laws of Shabbat can be found or redefined not only in the tractate of Shabbat but also in a completely different treatise as the Talmud analyzes a case of damages or perhaps ritual sacrifices. And in order to establish what the law is, which is not normally presented in the Talmud, one not only needs to understand the specific text but to know the Talmud exhaustively, since, as we explain, the references might be in multiple texts. Maimonides, who had a superb memory and an exhaustive knowledge of the Babylonian Talmud (and the Jerusalem Talmud, and Tosefta, and Baraytot, and Midrashe Halakha, and Geonim, etc.) identified all the laws, formulated them in perfect and very clear Hebrew, and reorganized them in 14 treatises, with 1,000 chapters with an average of 16 Halakhot, or “articles of the law” in each chapter.

WAS MAIMONIDES AN ELITIST ?

In my own words, the Talmud is like a vast sea with tens of thousands of beautiful pearls that are very difficult to collect. The pearls, which are at the bottom of the sea, sometimes under layers of sand, are also scattered many kilometers apart. Maimonides did the impossible and the unimaginable. He dedicated his life to diving at the bottom of the vast ocean of the Talmud and he collected one by one “all the pearls of the Talmudic sea”. He brought them to the surface, processed them, examined them with extreme care, classified them by colors, size, shape, weight, etc. and finally presented us with a beautiful 14 volumes catalog with 1,000 categories and more than 16,000 specimens of the precious pearls.

One of the aspects that Hakham Faur discusses in this class, is Maimonides’ supposed “elitism”. When in fact it was the

opposite. For centuries the common Jew had no direct access to Jewish law. There was no way to know the details of the Law that he or she so much wanted to observe and fulfill, because access to the Talmud was very limited and even if you would understand the Talmud, you still someone to delve into it and brought from the depth even the simplest Halakha. Maimonides, far from perpetrating what might be perceived as “elitism”, i.e., that only the Talmide Hakhamim ‘elite’ had access to the knowledge of the Halakha, , he codified and presented the law in a style and language that was accessible to ALL people, even to the simplest Jew. You cannot be less elitist than that!

WHAT DOES RATIONALIST MEAN?
Hakham Faur also demonstrates the fallacy behind Maimonides’ supposed “rationalism”. In his book “Homo Mysticus”, where Hakham Faur exposes Maimonides ideas and beliefs as per his “Guide for the Perplexed”, he explains this topic in detail.

There are 3 levels of “thought” or intellectualism. .

IMAGINATION

The vast majority of human beings are carried away by their imagination, impressions, feelings, irrational fears, impulses, herd culture, popular opinions, etc. Very few people stop to think in order to act strictly following their common sense. How many people, for example, eat using strictly common sense? Consuming “only” what is good for them and avoid eating anything that is not beneficial for their health?

RATIONALISM

On the next level, superior to the first, we find intelligent, rational people, who only do, say and act according to their intellect and reason. Not only do they “know” what is right: they also acquire the discipline to improve their character, control their impulses, and be guided by their reasoning. A person who is guided by his or her reason is a “rationalist”.

The epitome of a rationalist was Aristotle.

REVELATION

But for Maimonides, although reason is a higher level than that of the imagination, it is not the highest level that a human being can reach. There is something above human reason, that is, Divine Revelation. The Creator’s Wisdom is revealed in the Tora. Divine Wisdom is not determined or limited by reason. Proof of this is that we Jews guide ourselves by commandments that we understand but also by Divine commandments that are beyond our limited reasoning. Maimonides was not a rationalist, he was post-rational man or a “revelationist” . In medieval Hebrew: “Torani” (guided by the Tora).

It is quite possible that those who imagined Maimonides as a rationalist were based on the fact that Maimonides strongly rejected all kinds of nonsensical “superstitions”, including religious superstitions, very fashionable in his time (some of which, incredibly, persist to this day). For Maimonides astrology, necromancy, divination, and other superstitions were vestiges of the ‘aboda Zara (idolatry) and represented the thinking of the most primitive, pre-rational man.