Maimonides (1135-1204), Sultan Saladin's Personal Physician

Apart from being one of the most important Talmudists and jurists in the history of the Jewish people, Maimonides was also a famous doctor. His father, Ribbi Maimon, was probably the one who introduced him into medicine, which was a very common profession among Spanish Jews until the time of the expulsion in 1492.
At an early age, Maimonides had to leave Cordoba, Spain, due to the religious persecutions of a fundamentalist Muslim group: the Almohades. Maimonides' family arrived in the city of Fes, Morocco and remained there for seven years. In Fes Maimonides had the opportunity to deepen his medical knowledge by training with Jewish and non Jewish experienced physicians. In 1165 he arrived in Egypt. Maimonides always opposed practicing the rabbinate professionally, and for many years he supported himself thanks to his bother and business partner David, who traveled the world for this purpose. But after his brother tragically died when his ship sank, Maimonides dedicated himself to practicing medicine for a living. And he was extremely successful.

In Egypt, he was called to work as the main doctor at the court of Sultan Saladin the Great (1138-1193 , famous for his wars against the crusaders and for having reconquered Jerusalem. Upon the capture of Jerusalem, Saladin summoned the Jews and permitted them to resettle in the Holy city). Being the court physician was not an easy job. In addition to examining and taking care of the Sultan Maimonides also had to take care of his entire family – his wives and children – and the officials of the royal court.
Maimonides was the most respected physician in all of Egypt. And many of Saladin court sages and advisers were very jealous

of him and many times tried to conspire against him.

Many years ago my uncle Hakham Yosef Faur z ”l told me a few stories of Maimonides and the constant harassment he suffered from the envious sages of the court. I remember five stories. Let me share with you one of them.

In his medical books, Maimonides stated that blindness from birth could not be cured. The court sages and advisers challenged him and said that they had developed a surgical operation that could restore sight to the blind, and that they were ready to demonstrate their claim. They arranged for a special session where the Sultan and Maimonides were present. When the day came, the advisers brought a patient with his face and eyes covered and claimed that he was blind from birth, and had just undergone surgery. The bandage was removed and the man began to shout: *“I can see, I can see! These sages have cured me! ”* The sages then demanded the Sultan to expel Maimonides from the court for his ignorance and stubbornness. Maimonides asked the Sultan for permission to examine the patient. He asked him: *“Sir, is it true that you are blind from birth?”* And the man replied: *“Yes! I was never able to see, since I was born until this very moment”* Then Maimonides took a red handkerchief from his pocket and asked: *“If you can really see, could you tell me what color is this cloth?”* . *“Red!”* said the patient with great enthusiasm. *“This cloth is red!”*. Maimonides then told the Sultan : *“Your majesty, a person who sees for the first time does not know the colors, and cannot possibly identify or describe them: this man is an impostor!”*

Some of Maimonides’ medical works

1. “Excerpts from Galen or the art of healing”, a summary of the extensive writings of the famous Greek physician.
2. “Commentary on the Aphorisms of Hippocrates,” which Maimonides combines with his own views.
3. “Medical Aphorisms of Moses”, 1,500 guidelines

describing various medical conditions.

4. “Treatise on Hemorrhoids” also discusses the mechanism of digestion.
5. “Treatise on Cohabitation” recommendations for a healthy sex life.
6. “Treatise on Asthma”, where he discusses how climate and diet affects asthma.
7. “Treatise on Poisons and Their Antidotes”, this toxicology book remained popular for centuries.
8. “A healthy regime” a discourse on healthy living and the mind-body connection.
9. “Discourse and explanation of moderation”, advocates for a healthy life and teaches that one of the fundamental principles of preventive medicine is to avoid excesses.
10. “Glossary of drug names” presents a pharmacopoeia with the names of a large number of drugs in Arabic, Greek, Syrian, Persian, Berber (Moroccan dialect) and Spanish.