The Last Days of Maimonides

There is a very interesting letter that Maimonides writes for one of his students, Shemuel Ibn Tibon, who was translating "The Guide of the Perplexed" from Arabic to Hebrew. Ibn Tibon lived in Provence, France, and wrote to Maimonides in 1199, stating his intention to travel to Egypt to visit him, study with him for a few days, and asking him some questions regarding certain difficult passages of his Guide. Maimonides replied with a famous letter where he reveals his complex life and his extraordinary kindness.

"I live in Fostat and the sultan resides in Cairo…my obligations to the Sultan are many. I visit him every day, early in the morning; and when he or any of his sons, or any of the women in his harem are indisposed … I stay in the palace most of the day. It also often happens that one or two court officials become ill, and I must attend to them and heal them. Therefore, I usually arrived in Cairo very early in the morning and do not return to Fostat until late in the afternoon.

In our last article we discussed this aspect of Maimonides' daily life, his work as a court physician of the famous Sultan Saladin.

DOCTOR WITHOUT BORDERS

What follows is less known. Maimonides relates in this letter what he did once he returned home, and after having worked all that day; today we would say: "in his free time".

[Upon arriving at my house in Fostat] I'm starving… I find the hallways of my house full of patients, both Jews and Gentiles, nobles and common people, judges and bailiffs, friends and enemies, a mixed crowd waiting for the moment of my return. I dismount my animal, wash my hands, approach my patients and beg them to be patient with me while I take a light snack, the

only food I eat in twenty-four hours. Then I go out to see my patients and write prescriptions and instructions for their various ailments. Patients come and go until nightfall, and sometimes, I solemnly assure you, up to two hours or more once night falls. I talk to them [about their ailments] and prescribe their medicines while I lie down from exhaustion and when night falls, I am so tired that I can hardly speak.

Maimonides had a "free" medical clinic at his home, where he cared for all kinds of patients: Jews, Gentiles, friends and enemies, poor and rich.

THE UNFINISHED WORK

Maimonides did not have extra time to waste. In fact, his literary work was still unfinished. Among his plans was to devote himself to writing a commentary on the Babylonian Talmud.

He also wanted to write a book on the Midrashim and Hagadot of the Talmud, where he would explain the logic behind the rabbinic metaphors and the Talmudic stories that seem to be fictions (something his son, Rabbenu Abraham, did briefly in his Ma-amar 'al Hagadot Chazal)

But the most urgent thing he had to do was to protect the credibility of his most important work, "Mishna Tora", the book that presents exhaustively all the articles of Jewish law. Some contemporary rabbis in Europe criticized this work because although it presented the final law, it did not show the specific sources from which there author had drawn his verdicts. And although leaving the sources out, and presenting the settled law was the deliberate intention of Maimonides' code, he thought that the acceptance of his book by European Jews depended on quoting the sources of his Halakhot, and he intended to do so.

Now we can better appreciate the following point: how is it that with so much work left to do, Maimonides dedicated his free time to medicine instead of writing his books?

Because Maimonides decided that it was time to put into

practice all that he had learn and taught in his innumerable writings. His precious time would now be devoted to something he could do better than any other man of his time: healing the sick.

HOW DID MAIMONIDES DIE?
Maimonides lived the final days of his life doing this monumental work of kindness, which costed him his life. Most of Maimonides' biographers do not go too far explaining what the cause of Maimonides' death was and merely indicate the exact date of his departure: December 13, 1204. Although a historian of the early twentieth century, De Goeje, points out that Maimonides died of "physical exhaustion".
Hakham Yosef Faur z"l in his class on" The Four Giants of Sepharad" reveals a very important detail, that today, in times of COVID19, we can appreciate better than ever: it is documented that Maimonides died as a result of an epidemic. Maimonides refused to stop caring for his patients, he became infected with a disease and after a while died for this reason (listen here, 1.17m)

Our Rabbis explain that the Tora begins with Chesed (benevolence) and ends with Chesed. And the examples of benevolence that the Sages bring are not acts of kindness performed by human beings, but by the Creator himself. In its beginning the Tora tells us that HaShem provided clothing for Adam and Eve, and providing cloths for those who do not have what to wear is indeed an act of Chesed, and the Tora ends by telling us that the Almighty buried Moshe Rabbenu. Burying the dead is another act of Chesed.

In the last years of his life, Maimonides reinvented himself. And he went from the studying to practicing the Tora, imitating God's Chesed with His creatures.

I present below the "PRAYER FOR A DOCTOR" attributed to Maimonides . Thousands of doctors, Jews and Gentiles, in Israel, the United States and the rest of the world, recite

this prayer every day, before beginning their medical work.

Master of the Universe, before I begin the sacred task of healing Your creatures, I express my plea before You, and beg You to grant me the courage and strength to do my medical work with integrity, and that the desire to accumulate wealth or gain fame won't be guiding my work or blinding my eyes.

Master of the Universe, it is known by all Your subjects that You are the One who inflicts suffering to those who deserve it, and You are the One who takes pity on those who suffer. And with Your infinite Wisdom, You wanted me, Your humble servant of flesh and blood, made of dust and ashes, with my limited knowledge and my poor intellect, to have learned about the body and the mind of the human being that You created in this material world.

And behold, following Your orders and Your commandments and counting on Your help, I'm preparing myself to heal, according to the scope of my knowledge and knowing that ultimately, life, death and the cure of diseases are in Your hands and that it is You who determines the success or failure of my healing.

Lord of Heaven, Eternal King, may it be Your will to grant Your servant the strength and ability to continue learning the art of healing for the rest of my life from those who know more than I do.

Help me so that I never cease to feel compassion for all who suffer, and grant me the wisdom to assist those who come to consult my medical advice, without differentiating between the rich and the poor, the friend or the enemy, the good man and the bad man, so that when someone needs my help, that I only see the human being who suffers sickness and pain.

May my love for the art of healing give me the courage so that the truth may be the light that guides me, because I am aware that my negligence in my medical work can result in the

suffering or death of the work of Your hands.

I beg you, Oh God, You compassionate and merciful, to grant strength to my body and courage to my mind, and implant in me a spirit of integrity.

Blessed are You, Master of all works, Creator of all living beings.