The "Contribution" of Maimonides to the Cairo Genizah

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Introduction

a. Maimonides
Moses the son of Maimon, who is known to Jewish scholars in his acronym Ha-Rambam and to non-Jewish scholars as Maimonides, is regarded as the greatest Jewish scholar of the Middle Ages. Born in Cordova in 1135 into a family of dayyanim, that is to say, Jewish court judges, Maimonides began his education at the age of three. However, his childhood was marked by emigrations and wanderings with his family, first to Fez in Morocco in 1148, then to Palestine in 1165, and, a few months later, to Cairo. During his wanderings, Maimonides proceeded with his studies, learning nearly all 'academic' subjects known at the time, such as: medicine, pharmacology, philosophy, theology and astronomy, so that when finally his family settled down in Egypt, Maimonides began to write important treatises in all these fields of knowledge, gradually gaining fame as a scholar and an authority in Jewish law (Halacha). In addition he began to practise medicine, becoming one of the private physicians of the famous Ayyubi Sultan Salah al-Din (1138-1193) and his son al-Malik al-'Aziz (d 1198). In 1177 Maimonides became the official spiritual leader of the Jewish community in Fustat, holding the title of Nagid.

However, owing to his reputation as a scholar and codifier, questions concerning the Jewish law were regularly addressed to him not only by the Cairo community but from many other Jewish communities.

Maimonides' literary crop and research includes 464 responsa, which are referred to in Jewish religious courts even in our time; commentary on the Mishna; Fourteen-volume work called Mishned Torah (Also known as Ha-Yad Ha-Hazagah); Sefer ha-Mitzvot (the Book of Precepts); a philosophical treatise called Dalalat al-Ha'irin (Guide for the perplexed); a book about asthma; a treatise on the calendar and several letters and epistles which he sent to individuals or to different Jewish communities, such as Iggeret Teiman (the Epistle for the Yemen) and Iggeret Tehiyat ha-Metim (The Epistle on Resurrection). Maimonides died on 13 December 1204 and was buried, according to the Jewish tradition, in Tiberias, Palestine.

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1 The assertion that Maimonides and his family converted to Islam, as made by some historians, has never been attested. Cf. Hitti, p.584.

b. The Cairo Genizah

The background story of the Cairo Genizah (Genizah in Hebrew means ‘depository’, usually for worn out holy books and documents which carry God’s name, and therefore are not meant to be disposed of as garbage) has been told and re-told by scholars innumerable times during the last two centuries, especially if we take into consideration accounts written by travellers, such as Jacob Sapir (1822-1885), who visited the Ben Ezra Synagogue in Cairo and relates his experience in his published diary Even Sappir. But it was not before Solomon Schechter’s removal of the Genizah fragments from Cairo to Cambridge in 1897 that scholars began to appreciate the real value of this incredible treasure. Out of more than two-hundred thousand documents found in the Genizah, about 140,000 are now at Cambridge University Library, where scholars from all over the world have been engaged in studying them since their arrival.

Maimonides in the Genizah

The documents relating to Maimonides found in the Genizah may be divided into five types:

a. Parts of works written by him
b. Some of his responsa
c. Letters written by him
d. Letters addressed to him
e. Letters and other materials written by other people mentioning him or referring to his works

a. Examples for parts of works written by Maimonides and found hitherto is fragment No.10Ka4.1 which contains a draft of the first page of his famous work Dalālat al-Ḥā’irān with corrections in his own hand, and his Hilchot ha-Yerushalmi (T-S Ar.34.169). The number of amendments made by Maimonides indicate his meticulous character and at the same time his keenness on the simplification of complicated issues.

b. The Genizah has about a dozen of responsa by Maimonides out of 464 responsa by him known to us from other sources. However, the most striking characteristic feature of Maimonides’ responsa is their conciseness. That is to say, his replies usually sate his opinion in brief, using no argument or explanation which should indicate how he had reached his decision. Fragment No T-S12.202 is no doubt a good example. The document tells us about a person who wished to marry his nephew’s widow,

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3 See the book by S.C. Reif, A Jewish Archive...

4 Cf. Kraemer, Six Unpublished... p. 61, whose division is only slightly different from mine. For information about the publication of the documents, see S.C. Reifs. Published Material...
but was denied permission by the rabbinic court, who referred the case to Maimonides. His laconic reply was simply: Yes. He may marry her.

Fragments T-S 10 K 8.3 and T-S 8 K 13.8 contain a question addressed to Maimonides about an old widow who claimed that a member of the community had approached her, expressing his desire to have sexual intercourse with her. The woman had no witnesses, and since the man was a respected teacher and well-known for his integrity, it was clear to the court that she was attempting to tarnish his reputation. The question was, therefore, whether the man could use his right to demand her excommunication on the grounds of defemation or not. Maimonides’ reply was that a man may demand the excommunication of another person who smeared him, but not a person who levels an accusation against him. The court should therefore reject both the accusation and the demand for excommunication.

c. The Genizah and other sources show that Maimonides was engaged in a wide correspondence with communities and individuals. Letters to communities, usually known as iggrot (epistles), were sent with the purpose of consolation and encouragement, while letters to private people mainly involved requests for financial help for the needy or for payment of ransoms.

The first example (T-S 12.203) is Maimonides’ last letter to his brother, David, who was on a business trip to India in 1169, and, unfortunately, drowned when his ship was wrecked near the Indian coast. The letter expresses Maimonides’ great concern about his brother’s voyage and hope to meet in Egypt soon.

Another example is a letter (T-S 12.192) which he probably sent to his father-in-law who lived in Minyat Zifia, south to Cairo, requesting financial help from the local community for the bearer of the letter, Yitshaq al-Dar‘i, who owed the community poll-tax for himself and his son. This letter and other indicate yet another facet of Maimonides’ personality: his great interest in the welfare of other people and his readiness to leave no stone unturned in his endeavours to help them.

d. The Genizah provides us with a number of letters, usually from common people who approached Maimonides for medical or financial help, or for expressing their gratitude and admiration for him. However, there is no doubt that in the case of some correspondents it was trust in him that motivated them to write to the great man to share their feelings and thoughts. It seems that while Maimonides was dealing efficiently with genuine requests, he was not ready to waste his time on ‘naggers’. He therefore used to delay his reply or politely used his heavy communal commitments, and later, his illness as an excuse for not responding earlier or for his refusal to meet them.

Document No T-S 10K8.14 in which the writer apologises for not writing to Maimonides owing to personal problems and bad health, will suffice as an illustration.
e. It is not surprising that there are in the Genizah scores of fragments which relate to his works. However, there are, in addition, few fragments which mention him, his friendliness or his illness. Those documents clearly demonstrate the writer’s care, affection and admiration for Maimonides. Document T-S 8 J 14.18 tells us, for example, about a meeting between the writer of the letter and Maimonides held in the house of the latter. The writer was impressed by the warm reception and his host’s friendliness and informality, when he played with the guest’s young son while eating lemon cakes which were on the table...

Document No T-S 1080 J 88 expresses the writer’s great concern about Maimonides’ bad health.

Conclusion

While one may be disappointed with the fact that out of 140,000 fragments found at Cambridge, less than fifty documents were indeed written by Maimonides himself, and that, apart from one page of his Guide for the Perplexed, no complete work, or part of an unknown work by him have been found in the Genizah hitherto. Still, the relatively few letters by him, to him and about him are enough to enable us to reach some firm conclusions about this unique personality. Moreover, although we know from other sources that Maimonides did not see eye to eye with some dignitaries of the Jewish community, no document found in the Genizah reflects the tensions and conflicts between him and members of the community in Cairo or outside Egypt. The Genizah also fails to provide us with information regarding his private life, and except for three letters, one to his brother and one to his sister and one from his brother, we know nothing from the Genizah about his relations with his family and friends. Hence, even if some documents are believed to have belonged to his private archive, the meagre quantity discovered hitherto fails to represent an archive of a personality of the calibre of Maimonides.

Indeed, the Genizah has enabled us only to peep at some hidden corners of the personal world of Maimonides, through his responsa, letters and his image in the eyes of those who had met him or corresponded with him. Therefore, the ‘contribution’ of Maimonides to the Genizah, though small in quality, is invaluable in its quality, and since research is still in progress, the Genizah may have more surprises for us, concerning a man who was a legend in his own life time.

Bibliography


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Avi Shvilel

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Texts

T-S 12.202

טנוק תדה טקית סתרב

T-S 10K8.3 / T-S 8K13.8

וית הל האובד הכובד משם
כתיבת מאיר מכבר

T-S 12.203

כ ב

וכי כי היה מבשל הש掣 רצליה מלך

שלמה מושדק וקיק והiram רחמים

ונביה קיבר לה אתנה שלמה נבחי שלם וית

לא�名אל סאליגל נמא על קהל מקויאצק אולוה

ליירחאק אוליאק אולרייגי אולפושי קמעא אולמל ואולאמו

ונבכי בינא לכלך קא איא אוללו

ואכז אoltipל נב𦡇 נפי עול גמל סאליגל

מהשות בד פסיון זיל

T-S 12.192

אולמל סאליגל בקא תפרה טומיאי טומי אולשיק אולף腺

אלאמיא אולאהב והבגמל סעדה סמעה סוסל

שלמה קמעוליא מכי בדאדיו אולראמה מפי

 createStackNavigator יצק אולריאלי לאמא מקאו

חוכל אולריא שיב לולאב אולגאמיה אובד וית

היישוב על הבגמה אולמל ארעי אולעג אולבישי

ומ אמס אולאמשי אולשיק אורבם מנייה מרגא

סמטיק אולגמ אמי אק טליאס פי וית ירבג ל equalTo

לאפר ממס לא פי רמזיה קוני היל המכ אולמייד

שלוחה יימ ששהל וברכי סאוליבנען פל

מהשה בד פסיון זיל

T-S 10K8.14

בשמם הרוח שלום רב קלארביה תודידי

פורקן לא סוסל

כן יכול זו הדרך עקיפה מפרורה זלה

רוב סי איינש יושא קוסקוק ארב קארש

היפראנסថ דודו איזוטוט שמעה רבר

תוד calloc סמגמל זרא פמוטה זלא

סמטיק שרוך דע מנבר ברי כלכ מרכ

פורקן בור חיגול בכרואל ל"ז (ברוח)

שחקו אייזיאף ואתראטף זראפיפ "ילך"

מכ פורקן קרבון סקלה עלי די ממל

אלקזילוח באז היזוטה ברהיאמה קארש

אולימפלס בתו סל應用 מזי אול עלי

אם ואוליס אולאמו מפי שרייא אופדא

אלוכל אולקמת לכאו במשה לאריך קארש

סיד אירפיאק ליז אמא קטן אופדא

שבח שחקו אתראטף פיסא יתוכל

עד אולאמס כמרכז צבי סאהד אולמל

שאדה עלי אחדר פי אייזיאף אלא אולמל

ענ.BackgroundColor
T-S 8 J14.18

Recto

פצל
כאמ האייאר ש"י מעשה טמא
ורחצ לא ימשה קדש וה
על חומ אלדיא נווג אנא
אתלכלל בכותה עד החשיפה
הכפים מקסים כיי
קצוא somewיתש đu תוך
אמרות אליא ראש דלי
שני איאיאיאי אליאי
גלאתו פית מקסבה
פואה צא אליא על דלי
אותיאיאיאי פקזת קרא איאיאיאי
אותיאיאיאי ישウィף מActionTypes
אליאי הליאי זכר באיאיאיאי
ליבע מן אתלכלל ש"י מעשה טמא
פץ אתיאיאיאי יאותר אליא וה
ור אדברי זאא

Verso

גרר מי אל מי אל שורית
פי חקוק ידיא אליאיאיאי
[ארק יבככל יأجرיא אלאיאיאיאי]
תקדושו ז kvinne המתע ק ICommand
התרדשות מאס רס פשיו
אותיאיאיאי קבציה אתלכלל
כד אػהך ר אברום ש"י
בלא הייאיאיאי וי
 данном פחכמה מוחך
אותיאיאיאי יعلوم צלי
ארק גנטיא איאיאיאי
אתלכלל חיזד איאיאיאי
פי אליאיאיאי פקזת ר משיג
לר בבוזים איה וח אבון
פקזאל ליאיאיאי פקזאל
איאיאיאי וה דלי דלי
אתיאיאיאי יאותר אתיאיאיאי
אתיאיאיאי יאותר אתיאיאיאי
וחולש

T-S 1080 J88

אליע התור אז יטיב ב בור איאיאיאי פאר
החלים תיה שמשנשככי ביבר זומ
ויורו [ יות ביבי יהכה פלאת

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Avihi Shivtiel

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Translation

T-S 12.202

What will you, our honourable, dear, glorious, eminent teacher and master Moshe the grand rabbi in Israel, the great judge, unique in his generation and its wonder, from East to West, say with regard to Reuven who had a nephew who died and left a wife and a son. The son lived one year after the death of his father, and Reuven wanted to marry his nephew’s wife, but he was not allowed to do so. Please instruct us, may your Rock protect you, if the law allows the above-named person to marry the his nephew’s wife without being disgraced. May your reward be paid by heaven twofold.

Reply

He is allowed to marry her. Signed by Moses

T-S 10K8.3 / T-S 8K13.8

What will you, our honourable, dear, glorious, eminent teacher and master Moshe the grand rabbi of the people of God, the prince of all the house of Israel, may his name be preserved for ever, say with regard to an honourable Jewish person, who teaches children and his scholarship is his craftsmanship, who was never reputed to be involved in any love affair, and who is an upright man. An old widow, that no man could be suspected as having any intentions towards her, libelled that he had flirted with her, proposing to have sexual intercourse with her. The woman has no witness or evidence, and the man has never been involved in such a situation. This is a libel she spreads against him with the intention of harming him and tarnishing his reputation and ruining
his livelihood and putting him to shame in public. Are her words trustworthy or not? and if the named person wishes to exonerate himself from blame, is he allowed to demand that any person who libels him that he has committed this offence should be excommunicated, or any person who calumniates or accuses him of committing an offence, or not. Please our master instruct us, and your reward will be paid by heaven twofold.

Reply

She should not be believed. Any person, however, has the right to demand the excommunication of another person who has damaged his reputation, but he is not allowed to demand the excommunication of someone who levells an accusation against him. The correct solution in this case is to stop speaking ill of anybody and not to impose excommunication and put an end to gossiping. Signed by Moses

T-S 12.203

In the name of the Lord
For the Lord will be at your side, and he will keep your feet clear of the trap.
Peace for all men, both near and far, says the Lord. Etc.
You are to say: All good wishes for the year ahead. Prosperity to yourself, your household, and all that is yours. Etc. The Lord, may He be exalted, knows the sadness and longing I have in my heart for the departure of my 'blood' brother and beloved friend. May the Lord protect me from any bad news about him and may He unite us in Egypt, God willing I wish to tell you that I am well.

Moses the son of Maimon, of blessed memory.

T-S 12.192

May the Lord prolong the life of my honourable pillar and support, the trustworthy and pious elder and keep his vigour forever. His admirer and servant Moses sends him his regards and stresses how much he is missing him because of the long distance which separates them. He seeks his kindness in helping the bearer of this letter, Yitzhaq Al-Dar'i, because he is well-known to us. Could he also speak with the head of the community, may his Rock protect him, to entrust the community with the task of paying the poll-tax on his behalf, since he and his son owe two payments of the poll-tax. And if it is possible, Sir, could you try to allow him to pay you the tax in Minyat Zifta, since he is a new member and has not yet paid the tax up until now. He is going to Dhumyat in an important mission, and when he comes back, please help him as much as possible. May your health increase and the health of the head of the community and his son and the health of your son, may the Rock protect him.

Moses the son of Maimon, of blessed memory.
T-S 10K8.14

In the name of God. «Great peace have they who love your law and therefore they will never stumble over an obstacle». Our honourable, dear, glorious, eminent teacher and master, the light of our eyes, the breath of our wish, the laurel on our head and our grandeur, unique in his generation, our master Moses the grand rabbi, the stronghold and tower, the marvel and miracle of the time, from East to West, the son of the honourable, eminent and holy, our teacher and master, Maimon, the grand rabbi in Israel, may he rest in peace, —is undoubtedly aware of my deep feelings and gratification towards him, and my sadness for what I miss by not being closer to him. May God the Sublime perpetuate the communities as a whole through him and crown them during the time of his living. Amen. I would like to let him know, may God consolidate his happiness, of the troubles and illnesses which preoccupied me, thus preventing any correspondence with him. And since God postponed our date of meeting and brought to mind the verse: «why should I conceal what has been known» etc., which contains some of his qualities which I desire and love, followed by the music of (mukaffir?) the prayer of the lights. God is my witness that only He, the Sublime, and my love for you recover my breath.

T-S 8J14.18

Recto

FasI

Al-Fachr, may the Rock protect him, was with us when we went to meet Rabbi Moses who was sitting at the door of the house while I and al-Jalal came. We approached him and I kissed his noble hand. He welcomed us warmly, and said to me: «Young Master, come and sit here», indicating to me to sit at one side of the room opposite where he was sitting. I sat and he read the letter I gave him, from beginning to end. He was pleased with things and played with al-Jalal, may the Rock protect him. No one else was present in the room except him, Rabbi Abraham and me.

Verso

And suddenly something which cannot be described even in a book happened: he offered us a box of lemon cakes which he started to eat himself. We sat for a long time but he insisted that I should stay, and we spoke about confidential matters, while the master was enjoying himself. Rabbi Abraham, may the Rock protect him, taught
al-Jalal to say something to Rabbi Moses, and he said it. Rabbi Moses laughed with joy and he played with him. I went out first while al-Jalal stopped to speak to the porter at the entrance hall. Rabbi Moses asked Rabbi Abraham: «Where is his son?» And Rabbi Abraham answered: «He is at the door». While Rabbi Moses was back inside the house he said to Rabbi Abraham: «Call him!», and when he stood again before Rabbi Moses he repeated the words (which amused Rabbi Moses before). Goodbye.

T-S 1080 J88

To the honourable Abu Nasr the son of the honourable, eminent and holy, our teacher and master Rabbi Elisha' Pride of the Levites, the godfearing and distinguished, may the Rock bless, help and protect him and grant him the chance to see the joyous days of his beloved son, his great knowledge of the law and long life. Amen. Selah. [My yearning (to see you) is so much] that if I tried to describe it in detail, many scrolls will not be enough. God knows that I speak the truth, and may He reunite us on the happiest occasion. Your obedient servant received on Wednesday the 21st. Tammuz disquieting and worrying news about our master Rabbi Moses, may he live forever, summoning your obedient servant to go to see him immediately because of his illness.

May God the Sublime save the community from any evil thing happening to him and protect him. The courier who brings this information is Isma'il the son of al-Melamed the son of al-Sadalu, beggar and family provider, who moved to Bilbays where he obtained some money to pay his poll tax, and said that our master promised him more money.