

## 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<sup>1</sup>. 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 Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn ((1138-1193) and his son al-Malik al-'Aziz (d.1198)<sup>2</sup>. 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 *Mishneh Torah* (Also known as *Ha-Yad Ha-Hazagah*); *Sefer ha-Mitzvot* (the Book of Precepts); a philosophical treatise called *Dalālat al-Hā'irīn* (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 Tehiyyat 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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<sup>1</sup> The assertion that Maimonides and his family converted to Islam, as made by some historians, has never been attested. Cf. Hitti, p.584.

<sup>2</sup> Op.cit.

### 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 off as garbage) has been told and re-told by scholars innumerable times during the last two centuries<sup>3</sup>, 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<sup>4</sup>:

- 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 N°10Ka4.1 which contains a draft of the first page of his famous work *Dalālat al-Hā'irin* 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 state his opinion in brief, using no argument or explanation which should indicate how he had reached his decision. Fragment N° T-S12.202 is no doubt a good example. The document tells us about a person who wished to marry his nephew's widow,

<sup>3</sup> See the book by S.C. Reif, *A Jewish Archive...*

<sup>4</sup> 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 defamation 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 Zifta, 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 N° 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 N° 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 quantity, 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.

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## Texts

## T-S 12.202

בש רח  
 מא תקול הדרת יקרת צפירת תפארת  
 מדינו ורבינו אדונינו משה הרב הגדול  
 בשראל סנהדרא רבא יחיד הדור ופלאו  
 ממורח עד מבואו פי ראובו כאן לה אבן  
 אן תופא ובלף דוגה וולד פעאש אלולד  
 בעד מות אביה סנה ואחרה פראם ראובן  
 אן ידוג בדוגה אבן אביה פלם ימכן מן  
 דלך יודינו שמר צור וזל יוגב אלשרע  
 ללשכץ אלמדכור אן יזוג בזוגה אבן אביה  
 ולא יכון עליה פי דלך אנכאר ושכרו כפול  
 מן השמים

אלגואב

יגה לה זואגהא וכתב משה

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

מא תקול הדרת יקרת צפירת  
 תפארת מרור אדונינו משה הרב הגדול  
 בעם האל שר כל בית ישראל יהי שמו  
 לעולם פי רגל יהודי כשר וזו מלמד  
 תינוקות ותורתו אומנותו וזא ערפת לה  
 קס צבוה וזו הולך בתום וקד ארעת  
 אמרה ארמלה עגנו גיר משבהה אנה  
 קד עבת בכלאם מעוהא פי טלב מצאנעתהא  
 ולם יכוך להא בדלך שאהר ולא דליל ולם  
 יגרא מנה קס הרה אלחאלה בל הרה  
 אדעא ארעתה לקצר מנהא לאריתיה וכסר  
 כלמתה וקסע רצקה וכגלה עגד אלגאס  
 פדל יכוך כלאמהא עליה מצדק אם לא ואו  
 אראד אלדגל אלמדכור אן יברי נפסה  
 הל לה אן עוקע זרם ברבים עלי כל מן  
 ארעא אנה עמל הרה אלחאלה או מן  
 ארעא אנה עמל הרה אלחאלה או מן  
 כרב עליה ואתהמה במא לא עגדה אם לא  
 יודינו רבינו ושכרו כפול מן השמים

אלגואב

כלאמהא גיד מקבול ולכל שכץ אן יחרם  
 באסם מן אכרב עליהשם רע וליס לה אן  
 יחרם עלי מן יתהמה ואלצואב פי הרה  
 אלגוהו קסע אלכלאם ואן לא יוקע זרם  
 ולא כלאם ברבים וכתב משה

## T-S 12.203

ב"ד

כי יי יהיה בכסלך ושמר רגלך מלכר  
 שלום שום לרחוק ולקרוב אמר יי וגו'  
 ואמרתם כה לוי ואתה שלום ובינתך שלום וגו'  
 אלעזאלם אלה תעאלי מא עלי קלבי מן אלתאסוף ואלוחשה  
 למפארקה אלאך אלשוק ואלחודו אלשפיק כפאני אלה פיה אלאסוא  
 וגמע ביני ובינה במצר אן שא אלה  
 ואלךי אעלמן בה אנני עלי גמלה אלסלאמה  
 משה בר מימון דצ"ל

## T-S 12.192

אסאל אלה בקא חצרה עמאני וסגרי אלשך אלתקה  
 אלאמין ואראם עזיח מגלהא עבדהא משה יסלם  
 עליהא ניסתוחש מן בעדהא ויסאל תפצלהא פי  
 מסאעדה מוצלהא יצחק אלךרעי לאנה מן מעארפנא  
 ותכלם אלהבר ש"צ ליכלף אלגמאעה אמרה חתי  
 יתחצל לה ענדכם באליה לאן עליה ועלי אבנה באליתיך  
 ואן אמכן אלהצרה אלסעי ליך ענדכם פי מגיה זפתא  
 תתפעל לאנה טארי ומא ון ללאן שי וחו יתוגה לרמיאט  
 לאשר מדם לנא ופי רגועה יעעמל לה חסב אלמקדרה  
 ושלומה ירבה ושלום החבר ובנו ושלוםבנה ש"צ  
 משה בר מימון דצ"ל

## T-S 10K8.14

בשמ' רחמי' שלום רב לאוהבי תורתך  
 ואיךך למו מכשול  
 גיך כאף ען הדרת יקרת צפירת תפארת מרנו  
 ורבינו אור עינינו נשף חשקנו צניף ראשנו  
 ותפארתנו יחד דורנו אדוננו משה הרב  
 הגדול המעו המגדול אות הזמן ופלאו  
 ממזרח שמש עד מבואו בר כג"ק מרנו  
 מימון הרב הגדול בישראל נ"ע [כתרת]  
 שוקי אליהא וארתיאחי נחוהא ואספי [עלין]  
 מא יפות מן קרבהא פאללה תע' קים גמל  
 אלקהילות בהא ויתוגהם בחיאתהא אמן  
 ואעלמהא תבת אלה סעדהא מא גרא עלי  
 מן חואדת אלזמאן מן שדיך ואמראף מא  
 אשגלני ען מכאתבתהא פלמא אכר אלה פי  
 אלאגל וסמח לכאטר במושח ל' אחר גלות  
 סוד מה אטמין וג' יתצמן בעף אנצאפהא  
 חסב שוקי אליהא ומחבתי פיהא ויתלוה  
 עלי אלחן מכפר צלוי מאורות ואללה  
 שאהד עלי אן יחרך פי אלרוח אלא אלה  
 תע' ומחבתהא

## T-S 8 J14.18

Recto

פצל

וכאן אלפכר ש"צ מענט למא  
 רחמא אלי ר' משה וקעד הו  
 עלי באב אלדאר וגזמא אמא  
 האגלאל ובסתו ידה אלשריפה  
 ולקאמא במלקא טיב גדא  
 וקאל אטלעאגלס ר' טוק  
 ואומא אליי אן אקעד עלי  
 טרף אלאיואן אלדי כאן  
 גאלסא פיה מקאבלה  
 פאנה כאן גאלס עלי טרף  
 אלאיואן פקעדת וקרא אלורקה  
 אלתי אעטייה מן אולהא  
 אלי אכרה ופרח באלחואיג  
 ולעב מע אלגלאל ש"צ ומא כאן  
 פי אלאיואן גאלסא אלא הו  
 ור' אברהם ואמא

Verso

וגרי מא לא ימכן שרחה  
 פי כתאב וקדם אלעלב  
 וצאר יאכל מן אקראץ אללימ[ן]  
 וקעדנא זמאן ועמד יעקני  
 ותחדתנא זמאן סרא פיטיב  
 אלמולי קלבה וכאן אלגלאל  
 קד עלמה ר' אברהם ש"צ  
 כלאם יתכלמה בין קי  
 ר' משה פתכלמה וצחך  
 ואעגבה ולאעבה  
 וכאן גזתו אמא אולה ווקף  
 אלגלאל יחדת אלברתדאר  
 פי אלדהליו פקאל ר' משה  
 לר' אברהם אין הו אבנה  
 פקאל עלי אלבאב פקאל  
 אטלבוה והו קד דכל וענד  
 אלאגתמאע קאל אלכלאם  
 ושלוס

## T-S 1080 J88

אלי חצרה אבי נצר בן כג"ק מר' רוב' אלישע פאר  
 הלויים הירא שמים הנדיב יברכו צורו  
 ויעזרו [ ויגן בעדו ויזכהו לראות



שמת חמודו ותורתו ואריכות ימיו  
 אמן סלה לי מן אלשוק מא לו שרחת כלה למא  
 וסעה אלסגלאת ואללה עאלם צחה דלך וגמע  
 ושמל בחצרתהא עלי אסר חאל [ ] וגיר  
 דלך אן אתצל באלכאדם יום אלארבעה אלוואחד  
 ועשרין מן חדש תמוז כבר מזעג ומקלק ען  
 סידנא רבנו משה יחי לעד יטלב אלכאדם אן  
 יטלע מא קדר עלי דאבה בסבב אלעלה  
 אללה תעלי יכפי אלמלה פיה אלאסווא ויגן בעדו  
 ומוצל הדא אלכדמה אסמעיל בן אלמלמד  
 בן אלסדלו צעלווך מעול חצר עלי בלביס חצל לה  
 בעץ גאליה וקאל אן אלמולא אוועדה יחצל

### 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 levels 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.

Moshe 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

*Fasl*

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 21<sup>st</sup>. 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.