

FROM THE PAGES OF TRADITION

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A LETTER OF MAIMONIDES TO R. JOSEPH IBN AKNIN

INTRODUCTION

The letters of Maimonides give us a penetrating insight into the personal life and high objectives of this great sage. The letters to R. Joseph Ibn Aknin, his beloved pupil whom he called "my son," and for whom he actually wrote his *magnum opus*, *The Guide for the Perplexed*, are especially revealing in their attempt to formulate a set of ethical norms calculated to endow us with a glimpse of a noble vision and a high pattern of excellence.

What follows is a translation of the major portion of his epistle. The last part will appear in a forthcoming issue.

L.D.S.

I have already admonished you about the importance of ethical norms. Our religious commitments make it incumbent upon every rational person to direct his steps in the path of righteousness and walk therein.

As you probably know, I never doubt that my predictions will be borne out in time as I always attempt to charter a true course. My present disposition, however, is unlike that of my loving son, may he live long. For I am now bent low by weary years and the vicissitudes of life's experiences as well as by the meticulous demands of speculative pursuits and philosophical knowledge. I am also generally inclined to forgive and pardon insults heaped upon me. The son, however, enraged by a youthful hot temperament cannot endure such vituperation.

Heed, therefore, the following principles which I give you. In the first place, you should realize that I did not write my work (*Mishneh Torah*) in order to excel or to be glorified by my fellow Jews. The Almighty knows that my original effort in writing the book was directed for my own personal use. I

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wanted to be relieved of the involved investigations and subtle intricacies required to discover a necessary point. When I grew older, I became aware that my people was without a comprehensive book of law which would embrace definitive concepts without controversies and textual errors. Hence, I set out to do what I did for the sake of God. This is the first observation.

The second general observation to remember is that I was aware when I wrote my work that it would undoubtedly fall into the hands of evil obscurantists who would deliberately vilify its beauty and deprecate its value, thus reflecting their own shortcomings and ignorance. I likewise knew that the book would serve no purpose in the hands of the ignorant, incapable of evaluating its merit; or the confused upstart, unable to comprehend many passages because of a lack of fundamental assumptions, preventing him from grasping basic insights; or the self-styled intellectual — this group will probably constitute the majority — accusing me of heretical tendencies in my basic beliefs.

I was confident, however, that my work would be acceptable to a select few who pursue truth and justice, and who will properly appraise my work and efforts upon due reflection and probing. I am glad that you are one of those. And let me assure you that if there be no one else beside you in our time, it would be sufficient for me. I am pleased, however, by the correspondence of some learned scholars of France and others in communities where my work was distributed, extolling its content and asking that it be completed. Thus, the book has found its way into some sections of the Jewish settlements and is constantly in demand by those who heard of it but have not seen it as yet.

Now since this enthusiastic response is already apparent in our own time, I am certain that in the future, when such envy and lust for power will disappear, all our people will seek out my book exclusively and abandon other works, except for those of our people who wish to while away their time idly and have no concern to discover anything meaningful in their probings. This general rule should explain the reason why I am not indignant at my critics.

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Rule three: Surely you will agree my work is not greater than that of Moses, our teacher, whose Torah was revealed by the Almighty, expounding to all creatures and nations wisdom and truth; neither can it be compared to the words of the prophets and yet only some, even of our people, studied them while others abandoned them. How then can those who do not understand God's Torah evaluate my work? If one, therefore, were to become indignant against those who are ignorant of the truth, one would spend his entire life in a spirit of anguish, irritation, and pain, and this is not proper.

The fourth rule I wish to establish has to do with some of my character traits which you had a chance to observe when you were with me. Note that there are people in my own city who have no reputation, no respect, and no wisdom, but are full of envy and competitiveness. They refuse to look into this monumental work and never even bothered to see it, lest it might be said that they profited from its content. They are devoid of learning and wisdom, not dissimilar to the inferior masses of people who, like the blind, grope in darkness. Nevertheless, I pay no attention to them. Why then are you so surprised, my son, at the misbehavior of one of those people who has been raised from childhood in such a devious manner, especially when in his generation and in his place of residence, which is completely devoid of knowledge and understanding, there is no one like him in terms of old age, prominence, and pedigree. And because he needs favors from people, he finds it necessary to ingratiate himself by indoctrinating them with confused and distorted notions. The general public devours it, thinking that it emanates from a high academy of learning or from some eminent scholar. They are even under the impression that the very laws of nature substantiate his foolishness.

Under these circumstances, how could you conceive, my revered son, that he had reached that degree of excellence to realize his own deficiencies and thereby deprecate himself and his pedigree? This is inconceivable even in the case of one of his predecessors who may have been more accomplished than he. I am, moreover, convinced that the more my reputation grew, the more he was compelled, together with his followers

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and well-wishers anxious to make him the leader of the masses, to conceal my treatise and appear so sophisticated and wise as not to have to refer to the book at all. They even claim for each member of the group the capacity to write a book that would surpass my work in terms of content and time. And if the time and conditions warrant it, they would fabricate lies about my religious convictions and behavior, but all this has not damaged me nor made me indignant. Even if I were to see him in person and be exposed to his vilifications I would pay no attention to his harangues but submissively answer him in a humble, gentle tone confining my remarks only to the subject matter or I would be silent altogether. For his ignorance of the truth is more damaging than his slurs upon my honor. To maintain my intellectual and ethical integrity is far more important than to prevail over the foolhardy with insults.

To be sure, we are told that the Almighty is solicitous of the honor of learned scholars and by the same token, my son, God bless him, to whom I am a father and teacher, is justifiably indignant and cannot tolerate my embarrassment. I am nevertheless grieved that you are taking this matter so much to heart. It is far better for you to devote yourself completely to study and research and attempt to acquire the adequate fount of knowledge needed in order to exert an influence on others than to engage in recrimination and contend with others. Alas, this man — R. Zechariah — regards himself as an important personality. Having followed some intellectual pursuits, he believes that he is the only intellectual of his generation. My dear son knows of the high esteem in which I hold men of learning when I discover the merit of their words and works. But how can I pay attention to an unfortunate, wretched person who is intellectually impoverished and immature like a child? What is more, all his confusions and questions are answered in my commentary on the Mishnah and I shall also comment on them in their proper places

The Almighty knows that most of my critics are followers of the Gaonim such as R. Nissim of *Megillat Nistarim* and R. Cheifetz of *Sefer ha-Mitzvot* and others whose honor I want to spare by not mentioning their names. If I were to assume

the role of a critic, I would not boast, for one thing, that I had attained perfect excellence, nor that I never committed any errors. On the contrary, should an explanation come to light from any source either from myself or from someone else, other than I had chosen or written about, I would withdraw my original opinion, be it in the area of my creative work or my ethical behavior or even my character.

I received his letter (Zechariah's) written in a tone of humility and apology. Likewise, a second epistle reached me from the head of the Yeshiva (R. Shemuel Ben Eli). I am aware of the intent of those letters and their desire for my response. I beg of you, my precious son, not to enter into any polemics with him. For if he has no wisdom, he has old age. May the Almighty protect you from an arrogant pretender who may think much of himself and even be held in esteem by others but in reality does not merit it. I would counsel you rather to respect a person who is humble in his own eyes and even in the eyes of his fellow man.

You are irritated by his insulting letter. Far be it from you to be indignant or to raise questions about his sense of justice and faith. For he and his ilk and even his superiors hold that the canons of justice apply only to major offenses. This is the general impression shared by the masses of people who likewise are prone to divest the elements of religious commitment from ethical conduct. Unlike erudite scholars and accomplished men of letters, they are careless about their utterances of ethical norms. Especially when their leadership is threatened they lose all their gentleness and humility. None of them would emulate the characteristics of Chaninah b. Dosa and Pinchas b. Yair; nor would they ascribe lack of religious commitment to unethical behavior.

I plead with you, therefore, if you are truly my disciple, that you follow in my footsteps and adopt my standards and all will be well with you. Let them scorn you but you must not be scornful; let them humiliate you, but you must not humiliate. Be sparing in your words. Think first of God and you will be a wise man, a scholar, an ethical individual reaching out toward ultimate perfection.