

FROM THE PAGES OF TRADITION

Leon D. Stitskin

MAIMONIDES'S LAST TWO RECORDED LETTERS

Maimonides Reveals the Real Purpose for Writing His Books

INTRODUCTION

The last two recorded letters of Maimonides were addressed to Rabbi Jonathan Hakohen of Lunel in 1199 and to the leaders of the same community in 1200, four years prior to his death on December 13, 1204, at the age of seventy. The letters were permeated with pathos and a sense of urgency similar to the farewell admonition of *Moshe Rabeinu*, calling upon his followers to remain firm and of good courage in support of our religion. "You, the members of the congregation of Lunel, and of neighboring towns, stand alone in raising aloft the banner of Moses," he wrote in desperation to the leaders of the community whom he regarded as "the saving remnant."

The letters were sent by Maimonides in response to twenty-two questions posed by Rabbi Jonathan Hakohen on a variety of subjects arising out of the *Mishneh Torah*, as well as to a request by the scholars of Lunel for a Hebrew translation of *The Guide*. Before departing for the Holy Land in 1210, Rabbi Jonathan ben David Hakohen was the head of the Provencal Congregation of Lunel and undauntedly defended Maimonides against the severe attacks of *Rabad* (Abraham ben David of Posquieres), author of a commentary on Alfasi's work. Rabbi Jonathan Hakohen was best known, however, for the eloquent tribute he paid Maimonides. In that tribute he compared Maimonides' achievements to *Moshe Rabeinu*—a comparison which later became proverbial: "From Moses unto Moses there are none like Moses."

His tribute to Maimonides is most noteworthy. This is in part what he wrote: "Where is to be found a man like him? A man so full of Divine vision? . . . He is unique—our teacher Rabbi Moses over whose head the sacred ointment is poured out, the son of the venerated saint, Rabbi Maimon . . . He is indeed worthy to bear the name Moses because he drew his people out of the sea of error . . . With the light of his book, *Mishneh*

From the Pages of Tradition

Torah, he has illuminated the darkness of the world . . . Thou holy man of the Lord, our teacher and master, thou luminary of the exile, grant the request of thy servants who are eager to do Thy will and let us find nourishment in *The Guide of the Perplexed*. Thou hast gained fame through the treasure of thy learning everywhere . . . The work of thy hands come to us like the dew of heaven . . . We approach thee, therefore, praying that thou send us also thy other books . . . Our souls are linked with thy books in love. If they are here, everything is here. All is then certain, firm and true, we are not lacking in anything. There is no need for any other elucidation. The fountains of life rise from them."

Maimonides was especially touched by the tribute accorded to his work as constituting an authentically self-sufficient exposition of Halakhah and Jewish thought. "There is no need for any other elucidation," said his correspondent. This actually reflected his deepest desire and purpose for writing his works. Maimonides expressed these sentiments often inadvertently but unmistakably in response to the scholars of Lunel. After bemoaning the fate of the Jewish communities in all Eastern lands, he recounted gleefully the incident of some philanthropists who had purchased three copies of his *Code* and distributed them to those countries. This act alone, he maintained, was sufficient to "illuminate their vision, and the religious life in the communities as far as India, would be revitalized."

It should be noted that it was not until after two or three years upon receiving the letters that he responded to them. These letters may well be regarded as Maimonides's farewell. His health declining by overwork, they were written with the presentiment of the approaching end. My translation of both epistles follow.

LEON D. STITSKIN

LETTER TO RABBI JONATHAN HAKOHEN

To Rabbi Jonathan ben David Hakohen. Your questions are very significant and I have answered them all.¹ Unfortunately my response was delayed due to my prolonged illness and unfavorable times. I was laid up almost a year and even now, although out of danger, I still have not recovered sufficiently to get out of bed completely. Compounding my physical condition, I am burdened with a multitude of patients, who exhaust me and give me no respite day and night. Alas, one has to pay

a price for a reputation that has spread to even neighboring countries.

I am experiencing all the symptoms of a physical deterioration. My youthful energy is gone, I am constantly short of breath, my tongue has lost its elasticity, my fingers are shaky to the point of finding it hard to write even a short letter. Forgive me then for asking someone else to write the detailed answers to your questions. Lately I found it also difficult to write my manuscript myself due to the pressure of time, physical weariness, impatience and the heavy demands of my professional duties.

There is one thing, however, I should like to share with you, Rabbi Jonathan and all your colleagues who read my works. Although from my childhood the study and dissemination of Torah and Talmud have been my major preoccupation to which, as it were, I was betrothed as the "wife"² of my youth in whose love I found constant delight, "strange women" from Moab, Ammon, Edom, Sidon, and Heth whom I first took into my house to serve as my wife's handmaids³ have become nevertheless her rivals and take up much of my time. While the beauty and charm of my "wife" continued to enchant my heart, I was at the same time distracted by a variety of disciplines and sciences.

I am sure you realize how I labored day and night for almost ten years to compose the *Code*. Men of your scholarly attainments appreciate the significance of this work. I have gathered scattered materials from a variety of sources and attempted to arrange them into a systematized, scholarly *Code*. Is it any wonder then that some errors might have crept into such a complicated study, especially at my age when one is apt to forget certain references? For these reasons I would admonish every student of my work to investigate scrupulously the text and check out the content and conclusion reached. Let no one feel restrained from examining critically every detail of the book. They have my unqualified permission to do that.

Clearly, you have rendered me a great service with your critical observations and by the same token, I shall appreciate the efforts of anyone who will emulate your example and point

out any error he may find in the book. In this manner every ambiguity and confusion will be removed from the text and my principal reason for writing the *Code* will be accomplished: to clear the path and remove the stumbling blocks in order that students of the Law should not tire of intricate discussions requiring long hours of study which may cause one to render an erroneous judgment.

May the Lord help us to study His Torah and acknowledge His Unity everlastingly so that in our time we shall behold the fulfillment of the verse:⁴ "I place my Torah within them and upon their heart will I write it."⁵

MAIMONIDES'S LETTER TO THE LEADERS OF LUNEL
(FROM CAIRO in 1200)

Who is this that shineth forth like a morning dawn, beautiful as the moon, bright as the sun, awesome as armies encamped around their banners?⁶

This Biblical imagery is reminiscent of the sacred community, which constitutes the chief cornerstone upon whose heart the Torah is engraved and whose bows in the battle for Torah are fashioned out of bronze and whose leaders alone are in our day its authentic representatives. Alas, it is the community of Lunel with its esteemed scholars and distinguished leaders, may the Lord forever take them under His protection and may peace increasingly reign within their borders.

This comes from Moses, son of Maimon, who prays for your abiding welfare and the strengthening of the edifice of wisdom through your efforts.

I received your letters signed by men of such high rank, all of whom I bless collectively and individually with the ancient salutation, "The Lord, the God of your fathers, make you a thousand times so many more as you are and bless you as He hath promised you."⁷ Your words expressed in verse and in the form of questions disclose a love of Torah, an intense pursuit of wisdom and an unquenchable desire for knowledge. I am, of course, aware that the signers of the letters represent our notables, priests and levites, all of whom are community lead-

ers, men of distinction and intellectual excellence. May their fame continue together with other men of high repute in the land.

My esteemed friends, let not the delay of my answer disturb you. I have already indicated the reason for this in a letter to the esteemed scholar, Rabbi Jonathan Hakóhen, may his life be prolonged and God's treasure prosper through him. Amen. I have already responded to your doubts and I enclose with this letter the third part of the *Moreh Nebukhim* written in Arabic. As for your request that I translate for you the Arabic text into the holy tongue, would that I were young enough to be able to comply with your request with regard to this and other books which I composed in the language of the *Kedar*.⁸ Living among the latter casts darkness upon the rays of the sun.⁹ Indeed I would have rejoiced to rescue the precious from the worthless and restore the stolen goods to the proper owner. But the distressing circumstances of the times prevented me from doing so. I do not even have the time to examine or proofread for publication the commentaries and the other works I composed in the rabbinic language that may contain some obscurities, to say nothing of translating them from one language to another. Alas, my honored friends, I do not even have the leisure to write a small chapter and it is only out of respect for your congregation that I have painfully exerted myself to write you this epistle with my own hand.

But there is among you the learned, blessed son, esteemed student R. Samuel ben Judah [ibn Tibbon] whom the Lord has endowed with understanding, breadth of heart, correct insight and perfect penmanship necessary for the translation you requested. I have already communicated with him regarding this matter.

As for yourselves, my esteemed friends, be confident and strong of heart! For, alas, I am constrained to inform you that in our day the people of your community and only a few of the neighboring communities stand alone in raising the banner of Moses and engaging in the study of the Talmud and in the pursuit of wisdom. Your people are preeminent in cherishing knowledge and wisdom. But in other communities in the East,

the study of the Torah has ceased and especially is this true in most of the larger cities where a process of spiritual decay has set in. In all of Palestine there are only three or four Jewish places that have survived, and even they are spiritually impoverished. In Syria, as well, there is only the community of Aleppo where some people are still engaged in the study of Torah, although they are not prepared to sacrifice themselves for it. In the Babylonian Diaspora there are only two or three grapes [men of learning]: in Yemen and the rest of Arabia they know little of the Talmud save for having some superficial acquaintance with Aggadic expositions.

Recently, however, some philanthropists, may God bless them, contributed toward the purchase of copies of my *Code* and dispatched messengers to these countries to distribute at least one copy to each community. This act helped to illuminate their vision and the religious life in their communities, as far away as India, would be revitalized. For the people of India were completely ignorant of the Torah and all religious observances. They practiced only the laws of the Sabbath and circumcision. In the towns of Turkey which belong to the realm of Islam, the Jews pursued only the Written Law and observed its commandments according to their literal meaning. As for the Western cities (in North Africa), the punishment inflicted upon them for their sins [of neglecting the Torah] is well known.¹⁰ Thus there remains no one in support of our Torah except you, my redeeming brethren.

Be therefore strong and fortify yourself for the sake of our people and our God. Strive to be courageous men, for everything depends on you. Upon you devolves the command of fulfilling the levirate precept. Do not rely upon me to carry on the battle as I can no longer navigate. I am an old man and grey, not from aging but from a weak, worn out body. May the Creator support your efforts and "render you a famous name and praise you in the midst of the earth."¹¹

NOTES

1. Maimonides has reference here to the series of twenty-four questions addressed to him by Rabbi Jonathan.

TRADITION: *A Journal of Orthodox Thought*

2. Maimonides is inclined to use this kind of a simile which he has drawn from the Book of Proverbs comparing matter to a faithless wife. See *The Guide* III, 8.

3. Maimonides is referring to his medical profession which became an almost unbearable burden due especially to the many patients that came to him from neighboring countries.

4. Cf. Saadia's similar plea to scholars to read his work critically and in case they discover some errors to make the proper corrections on the basis that "the wise have a tender solicitude for wisdom," (*Emunot, Prolegomena*, p. 33).

5. Jeremiah 31:32.

6. Song of Songs 6:10.

7. Deuteronomy 1:2.

8. Reference here is to the Arabic language — "Kedar" is the name of a nomadic tribe of Arabs. The reason he uses *Kedar* in this context is because of the simile that follows with reference to darkness.

9. See *Guide* III:8 "I have also a reason and cause for calling our language the holy language . . ." There are apparently several reasons he gives for not having written his works in the Hebrew language which he would have preferred as it is the holy tongue. The usual explanation is that he wanted to be understood by the masses. In this letter he seems to indicate that the hostile environment he was living in was responsible for the choice of language.

10. Maimonides obviously has reference to the persecution of the Almohades.

11. Cf. Zechariah 3:19, 20.