

Meet Maimonides - a Living Voice for The Present

Face to Face with Rambam / Shalom Rosenberg

Many 20th century Jewish thinkers have wrestled with the brilliance of Maimonides' thought, but till now no one has ever dared interview the great Judeo-Spanish thinker of the 12th century. But in these days of cyberspace, anything is possible, read on...

Question: Thanks for giving me this interview!

Answer: Well, I always believed in the immortality of the soul, but I never liked dilly-dallying with the spirits of the dead. So if you want to explain the reality of this interview in science-fiction terms, I would prefer it. Believing in the Divine Creation of the Universe, one has to suspend certain beliefs regarding time and space. But anyway, let your readers know that you are a subjective interpreter of my words-they will hear me through your ears.

Q: Many of our most cherished concepts, such as individual autonomy and universal suffrage, did not exist in your own time. What do you make of them?

A: Despite the time barrier, I feel that I can answer. Maybe some will accuse me of elitism or worse, paternalism. But the vast majority of human beings do not base their daily actions in intelligence or reason. They have no long-term perspective. This is precisely the difference between the doctor and the cleric. That is why we must coerce the masses, sometimes. Look at drugs, for instance. If we did not actively and paternalistically prohibit them, people would drown themselves in their narcotic effects, whatever the harm to their health.

In my mind, the ideal leader is a wise man who can really lead the individual along the righteous road of the soul, and that because he knows the soul's inner workings, unlike the paid psychiatrist. You may call this manipulation or guru-worship or whatever you like, but such seers are necessary to aid the individual in his spiritual search. And the true doctor must administer to the sacraments of the soul just as he does to the body. And I have always insisted that anatomy is intrinsically important to us all. If

we want to differentiate ourselves from the mule, who is led along by the reins of his master and by his bridle, (see Psalms 32:9), then understanding is the key. I do not believe that external threats are a proper means of guiding the individual. That person must be guided by the light of his own reason; and that reason must be consciously cultivated, so that he will not choose evil, again, consciously.

Q: And what about democracy?

A: Here my answer is going to get a bit entangled.. There may be a number of ostensibly just regimes, but the key lies in the axiom which teaches: whatever is convenient for the people. The government functionaries must lead in the political sphere, but they must be upstanding individuals, untainted by petty motives. The same applies to religious leaders. I have stated unequivocally that a rabbi must receive no payment for his spiritual services. They are not to be corrupted by filthy lucre. So how are they to physically survive? The community must find its own solution.

The State must be predicated upon moral principals. Firstly, this must be seen on the utilitarian level, in the bond between citizens. And then it must extend to the divine sphere as well, immersing ourselves in the universal love of God's precepts, which of course are beyond morals. And this overweening love imposes obligations upon us, in relation to non-Jews and even in relation to our enemies.

Q: But Rambam, plenty of people have come to diametrically opposed conclusions, reading your very same books!

A: One achieves illumination not only through mere study. The truly wise student, who merits the Hebrew title "talmid chacham", is one who practices what he preaches. Jewish law teaches us that theory AND analysis of the concrete situation in question are BOTH necessary in order to arrive at a correct reading of any experience.

It is not enough to only teach my "Code" on paper! True teaching must include the real applications of my teachings on the human level. You know, one of the great tragedies of great figures is that they become a sort of mirror where all wish to see themselves reflected. And it seems that many would like to rebuild me, after a fashion, in their own image.

Q: Good, but what about the sticky issue of self-realization?

A: I can hack it. And self-realization, of course, is always formed through our moral code. Although self-realization, if you allow me to say so, was hardly the order of the day for the late 20th century. That was a time of immense spiritual sickness, of people succumbing to the madness of their own imaginations. Would you say that a drug addict, submerged in his own fantasies and completely sold on the idea of self-realization, has genuinely achieved his goal? Even if he acts on his own free will?

Q: Could your systematic Code of Law compete with a modern legal code?

A: I already told you that the Code itself is not the issue-reason and analysis are. But you moderns are deluding yourselves. I defined the human species as an economical creature, since humans have this tendency to increase their assets and protect their money. But when you construct all your elaborate social theories, you seem primarily concerned with how not to pay taxes. You use the idea of the ideal man when you legislate in the civil and political sense. But law should not be promulgated on a basis of unreality, but on a clear comprehension of the savage nature of life. And Jewish law, the Halacha, makes no bones about man's essentially immoral and corrupt nature. And the Torah gives its distant advice from God's abode. The Torah sounds less seductive than your ideal jurisdiction, but it is more in keeping with reality than you idealists are.

Q: What do you think of mass culture?

A: The issue is that everybody is evading responsibility and no one system extant provides any real solutions. Did Gutenberg's press facilitate mass learning? Maybe. But television has really dealt a mortal blow to study. As for the rest, if anything is packaged right, the masses buy it, be it moral or immoral. One can write trivial dribble, but if the critics go to town, claiming it to be of monumental importance, then the masses follow suit, regardless of their own opinions. When I wrote the Mishneh Torah, by the way, I did not beef it up with my own legal ponderings. And what made the book a classic was not favorable criticism, but the fact that a genuine and consequent way of life is therein described.

For you, I am some sort of snobbish aristocrat. You speak of democracy and of the right of every individual to decide for himself. But you've fallen into your own trap. Because the average citizen is easy prey to the

manipulations and machinations of the mass-media and its self-appointed spokesmen: journalists, actors, whatever. Why so much hypocrisy? The question is what do the intellectual and economic elites choose: to remain apart from society, or join in and become an active witness and party to its inevitable destruction? My whole system is based upon the principle of a morally responsible elite, not the money-making one you have, which assumes its obligation to educate the people. Your own elites just waste their resources in selfish decadence, in their own petty mouthings and declarations.

I have seen many praiseworthy articles about me in your modern press, but the back was festooned with pornography. And I am not a prude- I was a biologist, don't forget. But I don't see any virtue in letting your passions run wild.

As a youth, I tried to construct a scale of human development:

- a. the rustic, who has only potential, no virtues but at least no defects.
He is not to be labeled good or evil, he is in fact neither.
- b. the ignorant, these are morally upright citizens who will maintain the State structure equitably, although they lack intellectual autonomy.
- c. the wise man: he who has achieved enlightenment on both the moral and the intellectual plane
- d. the automate: the pseudo-intellectual, half developed, with no clear division between virtues and defects
- e. the righteous wise man, who assumes his moral as well as intellectual responsibility and puts it into practice. And this is the highest rung.

The righteous man has achieved true equilibrium, and speaks only truth. Even in a debate, in which one can defeat his opponent by employing a ruse, the wise man would prefer to be defeated than to trick his adversary. This is in direct contrast to the insidious huckster, who uses technology for his own immoral ends.

Q: Are you an optimist?

A: I believe in education. I believe in human development. Remember my little fable, which I included in my commentary on the Mishnah: a young

child is taken to the house of his teacher to study Torah, but being a child, he does not appreciate the great honor bestowed upon him. So the teacher tempts him with prizes that will, quite literally, whet his appetite: nuts or figs, which are sweet but won't ruin his teeth and gums; later on he will captivate the adolescent wit promises of wealthy raiment or money, as an adult he will spur him on to continued study reminding him that he will attain power and respect by means of his erudition: this is learning that has an ulterior motive, not learning for learning's sake. But there is another category, "Torah L'shma" which is learning for learning's sake. I know that the psychologist Skinner was himself delighted by my little parable. Perhaps Skinner diverges from my theories, but I think we both know that at the end of the day the individual has to stop being what you call a robot, and that one must perceive what is beyond the initial phases of development in society: we get stuck in those.

Q: Do you prefer the modern world to your own time?

A: I don't find that anything's changed! Those fortunate countries, which could genuinely produce the mental enlightenment and material well-being of humanity, are still few and far between. And even within their parameters there are only limited possibilities. I never subscribed to those cheap intellectual currents which lauded the physical materialization of God by the uneducated masses. The only means of changing this is by hastening the coming of the Messiah....and there is no way of doing this, other than by righteous action and by extolling the truth....idolatry will not accomplish anything. Of course there are some things in the modern world that I view favorably....others, no.

For example, mass publicity explicitly contradicts the prohibitions of the Torah: "Do not lie to the people, neither to the gentile; not a word of bribery, neither a bluff, all of this is forbidden, you will only speak truth, with candor of spirit and purity of soul."

As I see it, culture itself is in danger. What I observed long ago about the nature of asthma is today quite pertinent, and not only regarding that disease, but also life in general. Man creates his own experience. But real experience is not the miniscule trajectory of the individual's limited span of existence: it is the vast sum total of the culture to which he belongs. And it

is tragic indeed to forego this accumulated wisdom. Because true wisdom is the fusion of learning and science with personal experience. And there is no shortcut to formal study. But the modern world has demonstrated that eating can be as damaging as starvation, if it is in excess. And the idea of nourishing oneself in moderation, in all senses, has been more or less forgotten. Man is his own worst enemy...the atom bomb is proof enough of that!

Q: Is the issue of Jewish identity important to you?

A: Yes, both sociologically and spiritually. You cannot question the need for Jewish solidarity! For all Jews, and all converts to Judaism, are brothers, and if we do not have compassion for our brothers, then who will have compassion for us? But the spiritual component of that identity is decisive: you call it man's attitude towards religion, but you are wrong there again. The Torah is not some external rite. It is not the ritual of fasting which elevates the individual, but correct comprehension of the ritual's meaning. And above and beyond this intellectual strata, lies the deeply emotional love of God. And this is without question, the highest level. And there is no shortcut, the way is arduous, and anyone offering easy-to-swallow solutions is a liar.

Q: Did you know that you are internationally renowned, beyond the Jewish world?

A: Yes, yes, I have heard. Anyway, in my epistle to the Jews of Yemen, I emphasized that there were two kinds of threats to Jewish existence: a) the violent attack, from time immemorial, that of Amalek and Emperor Hadrian; and b) the more sophisticated ambush of representatives of supposedly monotheistic religions, who seek to subvert the arguments of Judaism via well-disguised intellectual folly. Simultaneously-and I already noted this in my "Guide to the Perplexed", we notice the tendency to be amazed by the grandeur of Judaism. I was convinced that the silence which the Torah maintains on the issue of Jerusalem was so as not to awaken the envy of the gentile nations.

In any case, I know that if I had been a complete failure I would be accepted as a Jew. Since I was a raging success the Spaniards can see me as a fellow Andalucian, and some Moroccans even spuriously insist

that I converted to Islam. And now the Israelis also claim me as their own....none of this is accurate...

Q: Is the state of Israel a necessity, in your opinion, or an abstract value?

A: I debated often the need of the individual to channel himself towards that physical space where he could best study Torah. In that optimal living space, the individual would also be able to carry on his daily activities with the minimum of interference. I have always viewed intellectual capacity and Jewish sources as two streams flowing from the same river. From a philosophical point of view there may be nothing special about the soil of the Land of Israel; to my mind a temperate climate is indispensable for a creative civilization. That is why I believed that the greatest level of intellectual creativity would not be found in the extreme's of the globe, neither in the poles or the equator. But the Halacha has urged me to be more specific, and bound me irrevocably to the Land of Israel. So there you have it: Israel, the major irrational component of my rational mental construct!

Q: You can't deny it, Maimonides, a new Hebrew culture is really coming into its own in Israel.

A: Your notion that Jewish culture is identical to a modern-day culture created in Hebrew is quite perverse. In my commentary to Pirkei Avot, I severely reprimanded those among us who warned the Jews to shun all gentile music, even when it deals with uplifting and noble themes, while at the same time all music in Hebrew, even abject nonsense, is permitted. This is sheer stupidity! For my part, I would prefer all nonsense to be heard in foreign languages, while our own sacred Hebrew maintain its limpid and pristine nature. And it appalls me when modern-day Hebrew singers include excerpts from the Bible-it is an absolute profanation of the inviolate text.

In my same commentary on Avot, I condemned quite roundly all "idiocy", and I don't for a minute doubt that all the media falls quite squarely in that category. It goes beyond besmirching someone's reputation. You moderns, with your no holds barred attitude, are guilty of murdering what was created in God's image: within the ink of an eye you raise a person to Olympian

heights only to have him tumble down humiliatingly-all within the media's omnipresent eye.

By the way, that is why our sages prohibited excessive praise-its flip side is defamation.

There's is something else you all need to learn: brevity! You waste so many words on so few ideas! Your books dally with puerile themes: boxing, astrology, junk like that. Even your history is anodyne, it lacks wisdom and depth.

Q: Certainly. My colleague-and rival-Yehudah HaLevy, are the virtual forefathers of Zionism. Halevy saw the enforced exile as a veritable transgression. Emigration to Israel, for him, was a means of bringing redemption speedily in our day. I-by the way, modesty has never been a flaw of mine-felt that the transition from exile to redemption would come about through rationalism and the logic of faith. My approach is, indubitably, more intellectually taxing. I also provided a rational method by which rabbinic ordination could be renewed, and the precondition was that all of the sages agree, for a change! In your post-modern and sarcastic terms, that alone would constitute a miracle!

So many of my disciples have taken up the Zionist gauntlet which I delineated clearly centuries ago. Don't forget that the Spanish thinker Pulqar remarked that the tragedy of the Jewish people lay in stressing the spiritual over the military!

Q: And pertaining to military matters, how do you view Israel's army?

A: In the most positive light, let me assure you! In one of my countless missives, I vituperated the Jewish people for devoting themselves to frivolous matters, such as astrology, instead of focusing on rational exigencies, however distasteful they may be: war and politics. In my mind, the lack of an adequate defense system led to destruction and exile. We wasted too much time in nursery-rhymes and too little in the rational and tactical art of chess. Chess is like war, strategic, planned. Even when it's spontaneous. Critical thinking is crucial to both of them.

Q: What would you say in conclusion, Rambam, to the politicians and military of today?

A: Perhaps the best would be the words of the prayer which I wrote, so many centuries ago, for the good Jewish doctor:

" Help me God, to have success,

Fill my heart with love for my vocation and for your human creation,

Do not allow greed and the pursuit of glory or fame perturb my labor,

Give me strength and vigor of body and soul,

So that I may save the rich and poor alike, the upright and the sinner,

So that I may love...

And so that I never lose sight of the individual when I give orders for his well-being.

Grant faith to those who assist me, have them trust in me and my ideas...

May they listen to my advice and execute my will,

Protect us from the liars and witches, those false soothsayers and tricksters,

Grant me the perception to obey the dictates of the truly wise...

Bestow upon me the ability to ignore the snares of those mediocre minds who would

frustrate me and aggravate me;

Do not let me err on the path of Truth, bereft of iniquity and dishonesty. "