

FROM THE PAGES OF TRADITION

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MOSES MAIMONIDES

The Last Will and Testament of Maimonides

INTRODUCTION

In the ethical instructions to his son Abraham, Maimonides suggests that he would not have admonished his offspring to follow the established rules of conduct unless he had adequately prepared and trained him for their implementation in his childhood. By the same token, one may add, Maimonides would not have included the following regulations in the field of personal ethics for his son to practice unless he, as a father, had pursued the same rules of conduct in his own life. For beyond the rare qualities of his mind, governed by an extraordinary determination to invoke the light of reason in every discipline and scheme of thought, Maimonides possessed an unequalled passion for the qualities of the human heart. Modesty and compassion were part of the generous qualities of his soul. All his severity was concentrated on himself; toward others he was of a most gentle amiability. His scorn he poured out only against false notions and feeble reasoning, but towards people he was forbearing and forgiving. The truths of Judaism, he held, could be exhibited and made convincing by their rational structure and also by the ethical behavior of its adherents. "As a wise man is recognized by his wisdom and moral principles which distinguished him from the rest of the people so ought he to be recognized in all his activities" (*Hil. De'ot*, V:1).

The metaphysical foundation of Maimonides' ethical doctrine, as elucidated in *Moreh Nebukhim* (*Guide for the Perplexed*), may be summarized as a synthesis of Plato's approach to ethics as a world of being and Aristotle's, as a world of becoming. From a life of acting (becoming) we move to a life of knowing which is identical with essence (being).

In the *Guide*, therefore, Maimonides equates the ultimate purpose of man's fulfillment with the intellectual virtues . . . the acquisition of the knowledge of the one Absolute End: God is the final purpose of everything. . . It is the aim of everything to become according to its faculties similar to God in perfection. . . In this sense God is called the end of all ends" (*Guide*, I:69). The stress of ethical value on human perfection presup-

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poses a margin of subjectivity and personal freedom. As we apprehend God's attributes and reflect in our own life the very patterns of His providential ordering of the work of existence, we become God-like and the ethical imperatives are written into the very texture of our being. The Divine Will becomes our will. "The series of successive purposes terminates in God's Will or Wisdom, which in our opinion are identical with His essence and not anything separate from Himself or different from His essence" (*ibid*).

In the *Shemonah Perakim* as well as in *Hil. De'ot* Maimonides lays down a psychological foundation based upon the general notion of Greek thought that virtuous action is a balance, a harmony of the soul just as physical health depends upon the harmonious mixture of the hormones.¹ Maimonides regarded the doctrine of the mean as thoroughly Jewish in thought. It represented the notion of *imitatio dei*, the emulation of God's attributes of grace, compassion, loving kindness — as the mean between excess and deficiency, which is the Good. "As the Creator is called by these attributes which constitute the mean in which we are to walk, this path is called the Way of God" . . . (*Hil. De'ot*, I:7). "These qualities are good and right and a human being should cultivate them and thus imitate God, as far as he can" (*ib. I:6*).

The letter of moral instruction to his son Abraham, while implicitly grounded in the metaphysical-psychological notions expounded in his other treatises, is essentially a manual of intimate personal morality. Like Aristotle, Maimonides held that philosophy meant essentially an understanding of living. The categories of human life are therefore most fundamental in an enterprise such as a philosophy of understanding, of knowing, of talking. Hence, the emphasis is on self preservation, an uncompromising integrity in relationships with other human beings and the fear of God as the underlying motivation, for to sin against God is actually to commit an offense against oneself.

This letter of moral instruction, while addressed to Maimonides' only son, Abraham, was also meant for his spiritual son, Ibn Aknin, and the children of his brother, David, whom he adopted after the latter, who was the main support of the family, was drowned in the Indian Ocean, and all the family assets were lost.

Maimonides had probably married in his youth but his wife must have died early,² and their daughter died in infancy.³ In Egypt, he subsequently married the sister of Abin-Almali, one of the royal secretaries. They were long childless. In 1185, when he was fifty-one years of age, his first and only son Abraham was born.⁴ In his letter to Hasdai, Maimonides indicates that his son

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was sickly. He, therefore, educated him himself in Talmudic, philosophic and medical studies. Abraham became a Talmudic scholar, succeeding his father as head of Egyptian Jewry. He was skilled in medicine, serving as physician to a brother of Saladin. He was steeped in philosophical speculation and wrote a treatise combining the Aggadah with his father's philosophy. He was amiable, peace-loving, a man of learning, but lacked the original intellectual vigor of his great father.

What follows is my translation of the first part of this very moving letter. The second part will appear in a forthcoming issue of TRADITION.

—LEON D. STITSKIN

MAIMONIDES' LETTER OF MORAL INSTRUCTION TO HIS SON ABRAHAM

Praised be the Lord who has counseled me aright and led me in the path of truth. I shall remember always the loving-kindness He bestowed upon me. He chastened me but has not given me over unto death. With His right hand, He held on to me and with its shadow He sheltered me. He rescued me from the vicissitudes of the world and delivered me from its destruction. From the early days of my life He refined me, and from infancy on He cleansed me. He screened me from backsliding and soothed me from my frustrations. He rebuked the enchantments that enticed me. He made me accentuate the pleasant. He raised me from the dust and sat me with princes. The passage of days impregnated me with variegated experiences and the trials of life made me wise. The lapse of time chastened me. He blessed and spared me until now and endowed me with a sympathetic understanding of others and the ability to discriminate between good and evil. He made me aware that my final end was in His hands and that the time of my expiration would be unknown to me.

Accordingly, His love has inspired me, before I am summoned to depart from this world, to exhort the children I was blessed with to observe God's commandments, and to teach them what I was taught and bequeath to them the heritage I received.

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Hearken to me, my children. May you be blessed by the Lord, Creator of heaven and earth! With blessings of the heavens above, and of the deep below, and blessings of the breasts and the womb. Be strong and be men. Reverse the Lord, the God of your patriarchs, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Serve the Lord with a perfect heart out of love and not of fear, for fear only deters one from sin but love activates one to meritorious deeds.

Know, moreover, that everything is under judgment, the known and the hidden, the good and the bad. One who performs good deeds is rewarded in this world. He is held in high esteem by those who behold him and praised by his acquaintances. Upon reaching a ripe old age and preparing to depart from his fellow men, he rejoices over his achievements and is filled with gratitude. Not worried about retribution, he does not dread impending death, but anticipates the just reward merited by all who revere the Lord. His household will be established forever. But the wicked, in pursuit of corruption, will discover that evil follow and catch up with him, destroying his labors. People will mock and slander him and when his end draws near, his flesh will disintegrate and his soul will experience remorse at having walked in darkness, leaving his name shrouded in anonymity and his household shaken.

I exhort you to learn to appreciate the advantage of light over darkness and to despise death and evil. It is in your hands to choose life and the good, for freedom of choice has been given unto you. Habituate yourself to righteous conduct, for man's nature depends on habit formations which are structured into the very fabric of his being.

Know that physical perfection precedes spiritual perfection, the former acting like a key opening the gates of a palace. The major emphasis of ethics is, therefore, on physical well-being, and the perfection of morals is designed to open the gates of heaven for you. Act with self-assertiveness and self-respect and avoid the company of the light-hearted, the street idlers and juvenile games whence emanate only evil. Select always the company of the great and the wise but deport yourself in their presence with humility and in a subdued manner. Exert your mental faculties and open the "ears" of your heart to hear and

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comprehend their words, consider carefully what they reject or accept, weigh probingly one argument against another and then you will be wise. Guard your tongue from entreating them unduly; condense your remarks into one sentence keeping in mind that abundance of speech increases error. Never appear impudent or insolent before them, but at the same time do not be embarrassed to ask questions as long as it is done at the right time and in suitable language. Weigh every word before uttering it, for once articulated it cannot be withdrawn.

Love wisdom, "seek her as silver and search for her as for a hidden treasure" (Prov. 2:4). Gather in the homes of the wise, who study and teach; let their abode be your destination, for there you will derive pleasure, listening to their words of wisdom, of chastisement, of novel interpretations and the casuistic subtlety of the students. Be zealous of the learned and despise the ignorant in your heart. When you ask or answer a question, do not speak in a rapid, confusing, shouting, or mocking tone, but use choice language and articulate clearly in a subdued voice reflecting a contemplative attitude, as one who seeks to learn and discover the truth rather than as a contentious individual who is anxious to prevail over his opponent. The process of learning will prove a pleasant and easy experience if you stay there willingly with the intention of deriving from your studies a higher purpose. However, if you will be distracted from your studies, the value of your stay will be wasted for you will not learn anything and the confinement will be unbearable and injurious to the health of your body. When you finally depart from the house of learning be conscious of what you are taking home with you, fasten it in your mind and deposit it in your heart.

Acquire knowledge in your youth, when you are still inclined to absorb the techniques of others, and when your mind is free, unmarred by fixed thoughts and a feeble memory. For there will come a time when you will want to learn, but lack the ability to absorb and even that which you will be able to acquire will have little value, for it will remain inarticulate and even that which you will apprehend, will not be sustained but easily forgotten.

I want to posit with you this ethical principle: the faculty of

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study is of great value for authenticating truth, setting the mind at ease and dispelling perplexity. When you come upon a difficult verse in the Pentateuch, the Prophets or rabbinical books, which because of lack of insight into its hidden meaning may appear as a contradiction to the very principles of the Torah or as just so much vain talk, let this not shake your faith nor confuse your mind. Remain steadfast, for the difficulty is due to your ignorance, "for it is not a vain word for you" (Deut. 32:47). Let not your lack of knowledge be the cause of the disparagement of your faith, but put the particular perplexity off in some corner of your mind and "God understands her way and knows her place" (Job 28:23).

Love truth and justice and cleave unto them, for in them lies your success. You will then be like one who builds on a strong rock. Despise falsehood and injustice and do not covet their savory delicacies, for you will be like one who is building on and or plastering with saliva. A life of truth and justice should necessarily be more acceptable even if it might appear less profitable than one of falsehood and wickedness, as the wise man said in the book of Proverbs: "Buy the truth and sell it not" (23:23). Know that these qualities constitute the ornaments of the soul which endow the body with strength, confidence and permanence. There is no better antidote to the weakness of the heart than a combination of the qualities of truth and justice. Neither bonds of friendship, nor mighty young cattle nor weapons and body-armour can protect one like the helmet of truth and the shield of justice.

On the day when I shall bequeath to you the heritage vouchsafed to me by the Creator, I shall transmit to you primarily the quality of trustworthiness by virtue of which I acquired these possessions. "For with my staff I passed over" to acquire "the permanent bread and its drink offering" and, alas, the Lord blessed me until now. It was my faithfulness that led me into places where my kinsfolk could never have brought me and bestowed upon me an inheritance greater than that of my parents. It invested me with authority over those greater and better than myself and I prospered and became useful to myself and others.

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Be therefore zealous for the welfare of others even beyond the call of duty; keep your word and do not discredit the evidence of public or private promises made through a note, a witness or a symbolic act of possession. Reject and repudiate fraudulent, sly, underhanded and unlawful practices. Woe unto one who erects his edifice on such dealings. He will be abandoned in the prime of his life and his end will be disgraceful. Pursue a simple, innocent and pure existence. Do not partake of anything big or small that is not yours nor taste anything that is not absolutely your own. Avoid doubts and consider them outside the realm of your concern. Know that one who is in the habit of tasting dubious things will inevitably resort to willful activity, just as one who takes a small amount in the beginning or takes something secretly will eventually take much and in the open until he becomes known as a confirmed liar, robber and embezzler. Run away from such an individual for there can be no delight in any transaction with him. He lives in shame and is consumed in death. "All this I observed and reflected in my heart," one who is pregnant with hay gives birth to straw, one who sows righteousness, harvests kindness. Be proud of your moral values and content in your faithfulness, for there is no greater nobility than ethical idealism and no more glorious inheritance than faithfulness.

Befriend strangers, bow down to the lowly, greet with a smile the downtrodden, pity the poor and the oppressed. Let them rejoice in your festive occasions and remember them in your holidays with appropriate gifts but beware not to embarrass or irritate them therewith. Do not cease doing good with all your ability, and refrain from doing evil to anyone. Despise idleness and abhor a life of ease, for they are the cause of the corruption of the body, of impoverishment, boredom, idle talk, obstinacy, slander, providing a ladder, as it were, to Satan and his cohorts. All this is due to wretched idleness and results in undue pain. Do not contaminate, moreover, your souls with controversies which consume the body, the soul and property — what else is then left? I have seen the way white is turned black, the refined vulgarized, families torn asunder, rulers removed from their high positions, big cities destroyed, communities deserted, the

