

AFTER FINISHING MAIMONIDES

For Arthur

Early in 2015, my editor at Yale University Press, Ilene Smith, suggested that I write one of the volumes for the Jewish Lives Series that she was directing. She gave me a choice between Spinoza and Maimonides. I had studied a few pages of Spinoza in high school and found them too rigorous and forbidding. I had a vague notion of who Maimonides was and I remembered the intriguing title of his *Guide of the Perplexed*, but little more. I thought that Maimonides might be more suitable to my condition of permanent perplexity. I chose Maimonides.

In 2015 I had left my house in France, packed up my library and sent the boxes of books to be stored at the warehouse of my Quebec publisher in Montreal. I accepted a couple of teaching positions in New York (a city in which I had never lived before) and settled in the small apartment of a professor on sabbatical. I began to plan my reading of Maimonides. I filled in a reader's card at the Jewish Society Library, I sifted through the shelves of Judaica at the Strand Bookstore, I got permission to take out books at the Columbia University Library. I started to read several biographies of Maimonides, histories of Arab societies in al-Andalus, North Africa and Egypt, books on Arab philosophy, books on the Talmud and Jewish law, histories of medieval medicine. The more I read, the more I realized the little I knew about my subject.

My Jewish culture was (still is) seriously wanting. I came from a Jewish family but I had no idea I was Jewish until I was eight, after an anti-Semitic incident, when the bewildering accusation "Your father likes money, doesn't he?" had to be explained to me. A very old great-uncle, the brother of my father's

mother, gave me a few lessons to prepare me for my Bar-Mitzvah and I learned by heart a few words that I recited without understanding them in the synagogue on my thirteenth birthday. I still remember the words “*Baruch atah Adonai, Eloheinu melekh ha'olam*” that, I learned, many decades later, were the first words of the Shehecheyanu blessing.

Maimonides was educated in society in which several cultures were in constant though sometimes acrimonious dialogue. The Islamic, Jewish and, to a lesser extent, the Christian communities interacted and learned from one another. And even when religious politics forced Maimonides into exile, first from al-Andalus (his Sepharad), then to North Africa, Palestine and finally to Egypt, he never stopped learning from the cultures he encountered, in the fields of religion, philosophy and medical science. Every Jew, from Exodus onwards, is to some degree an exile and, though the story of the Eternal Wanderer is, for writers as different as Homer, Dante and Joyce, emblematic of human life, for the Jew the story is contaminated by the experience of persecution and enforced suffering born from ancestral, irrational hatred towards the children of Moses.

But not every wandering is due to persecution. In my case, the many places in which I lived and then left, never seemed to me enforced habitations. Rather, for multiple reasons, they were the result of conscious choice. Nevertheless, reading about Maimonides peregrinations, I identified with the experience of a constantly changing landscape, changing voices and features, changing customs and languages and skies. I often wondered how the changes were affecting me, to what extent a change of vocabulary and tone and style changed my way of thinking and interpreting. I discovered that, for Maimonides, these changes enriched his own thoughts and expressions through contact with, for instance, the science of astronomy in (possibly) Seville, Islamic legal systems in Morocco, Christian

politics in Palestine, Arab medicine in Egypt. But his core texts remained the same: the Torah, the 613 commandments of Jewish Law, and both Talmuds. What kept changing was his dialogue with those texts through his newly acquired knowledge, thereby enriching his reading and his commentary on his reading. After following Maimonides, I became more conscious of how the different experiences of place had affected me and my relationship to my books. I was not the same reader of my own core texts—*Alice in Wonderland*, Dante's *Commedia*, Borges and Stevenson and *Don Quixote*—before leaving Argentina in 1969, after living in Paris and London and Milan and Tahiti in the seventies, after becoming Canadian in the eighties, after returning to France in the late nineties and later settling in New York in 2015, and finally in Lisbon in 2020. Wandering changed not only the way in which I read, but the identity of the books themselves.

I think this accounts for Maimonides' occasional contradictions and (especially in his *Guide*) deliberate ambiguity. Rooted in one place from cradle to grave, eating nothing (as the Romans enjoined) that had not grown within a narrow circle around your birthplace, caring about nothing (like Dickens' Mr Podsnap) that is not endemic, must produce a single-mindedness and stringency of purpose that hardly allows for digression and healthy curiosity. After reading Maimonides, I saw reflected in his writings my own mania for putting things in order (as in his *Mishneh Torah*), my own incapability or unwillingness to keep my thoughts confined to the straight and narrow (as in his *Guide*), my own tendency to respond in writing to things that worry me in the outside world (as in his *Letter on Apostasy*). Of course, I'm not suggesting a comparison between Maimonides work and my scribbles, simply that after finishing my biography of him, I became more aware of this quirks in my writing.

Reading Maimonides, and following him through the various stages of his exile, I wondered about he managed. The time of exile has a peculiar quality. While it was still possible for me to travel, before the epidemic constrained us all to stay indoors, I know that I measured the passing of days through airport clocks, computer hours, the spinning needles of my wrist-watch, backwards or forwards to the correct time of the new place. But after the epidemic started, far from hustling crowds and honking traffic, the sound of silence echoed the ticking of my pulse that marked the drift of time, like sand in an hourglass (an hourglass has sat on my desk for decades now.) In my childhood, time was made present by the chimes of the ormolu clock in the living-room, or the electric bell at school. Later, the peal of the church bells of my French village started and ended every day, twice, in case you hadn't begun to count at the first chime. Much the same, the muezzin's call to prayers must have marked the hours for Maimonides throughout the days of his journeys in Arab countries. And when he stopped for a time, wondering whether this might be at last the place allotted to him, Maimonides might have counted the hours as the water ran down a clepsydra built perhaps by Al-Jazari, or as the sand trickled down the hourglass, a timepiece that a Frankish monk had invented four centuries earlier. And he might have remembered a passage in Al-Ghazzali's book on dream interpretation, stating that, when seen in a dream, the two inverted glass bulbs represent two sons, or two siblings, a reminder of his love for his lost brother. He must have reflected on the relationship between time, space and memory, and how each infects the other with its intrinsic qualities, time as the destroyer, space as the container of the destruction, memory as the builder. Maimonides believed, following Aristotle, that time is composed of time-atoms which, because of their infinitely brief span, cannot be divided, like space and movement. Time, space, memory and movement, are for Maimonides of the same nature.

I too, confuse them. In the time-broken year that just went by, travelling on a piecemeal itinerary from New York to Lisbon via Montreal where my books, and therefore my physical memory, were kept, I had the steadfast impression of living inside a time-space continuum like that described in handbooks of astrophysics, a dimension in which yesterday and tomorrow, back there and beyond the horizon, were mingled notions, like water and ink in a glass. What I did and what I remembered doing were not the same thing. There is a sense of this, I think, in the letters Maimonides wrote from Fustat, for instance, recalling the tragedy of his brother's death while trying to keep up with his duties as court physician, and attending to the concerns of the Jewish community. He gives the impression of everything being in swirl, and he himself being caught in it and struggling to be reasonable and thoughtful, swimming against the sluggish current of time. He must have died of exhaustion.

Maimonides taught me also to think about repenting and consider it an active verb with myself as both subject and object. Repentance (*teshuvah* in Hebrew) is a term difficult to translate into English. As the Hebrew root of the word indicates, repentance is a return, a going back to something we have done in order to consider that action again, critically and sincerely. Repentance, in this sense, is the reversal of a temporal glitch, making possible that a sinful action be revisited. Maimonides notes that the laws regarding repentance are not identified or grouped in any single tractate of the Talmud, and he sought to reunite them and present them as a coherent set of rules in the *Mishneh Torah*. He describes the process of repentance as having three stages: first confession, then regret and finally a vow not to repeat whatever it was we did wrong. The true repentant, according to Maimonides, is the someone who has the opportunity to commit the same sin again declines to do so. "The key and the beginning is the *feeling* one has when learning the teachings of the Sages and texts of ethical wisdom, reviewing

them time and time again until they act upon a person and cause one to sense one's own personal flaws. From there one moves to the second level, which is the *conquering of one's inclinations*. The third level is *repairing one's inclinations* such that a person become *joyous, and delights in the service of God.*" This speaks to me.

According to Jewish tradition, on Rosh Hashanah, God inscribes every person's fate for the coming year in the Book of Life, but He waits until Yom Kippur to seal the verdict. During that time, Jews must try to amend their behavior and seek forgiveness for any wrongs done against God and against other fellow humans. At the close of Yom Kippur, it is hoped that the transgressions of which one has truly repented have been forgiven. This enables the miracle of emending our past. In this, I believe.

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