



born: Cordova, Spain, 1135

died: Cairo, Egypt, 1204

Popularly known as Rambam (after the initials of his name) and Maimonides (Greek for "son of Maimon"). Halachist, commentator, philosopher.

In about 1170, Rambam began to write his monumental *Mishneh Torah*, a compendium of all Jewish laws extracted from the Talmud and the works of the Geonim. The work consists of fourteen volumes and is also called *Yad Hachazakah* (the word *yad* in Hebrew is written the same as the number 14, an allusion to the fourteen volumes of his work). For short it is often referred to as *Yad*, or simply the *Rambam*. It was completed in 1180 and written in a lucid and concise mishnaic Hebrew. It was the first comprehensive codification of all Torah laws. It includes both the laws of immediate relevance, such as the laws of Shabbat and family purity, and those pertaining to the Messianic Age, such as laws of the Temple service and sacrifices. Yet, *Mishneh Torah* is not a dry, legalistic book of statutes and ordinances. Its rulings are interspersed with ethical insights and philosophical teachings that infuse it with vitality and spirituality. Vast in scope, it has never been equalled or surpassed by any other work. Rambam has omitted mentioning his sources. This has become the subject of numerous commentaries that attempt to identify the references on which Rambam's rulings are based. Hundreds of thousands of Jews throughout the world daily study one or more chapters of *Mishneh Torah*.<sup>1</sup>

Rambam received his first Torah instruction from his father, a noted scholar who traced his ancestry back to **Rabbi Yehudah HaNasi**, compiler of the Mishnah, and King David. When he was thirteen, Cordova was conquered by the invading Almohads, a fanatical Moslem sect. The family was forced to flee, wandering from place to place for twelve years, ultimately settling in Fez, Morocco. In 1165 Rambam settled in Cairo, where he found asylum and religious freedom. At age 23 Rambam began writing his commentary on the Mishnah, *Peirush Hamishnayot*, in Arabic.<sup>1</sup> It is appended to the Vilna edition of the Talmud. The work analyzes each mishnah and provides an introduction clarifying fundamental tenets of Judaism. Rambam's philosophical treatise in the introduction to the tractate *Berachot* is known as *Shemonah Perakim* (Eight Chapters). It deals with the diseases and cures of man's soul, prophecy, reward and punishment, free will, and the rule of the "golden mean." In his commentary on *Sanhedrin* 10:1, he enunciates the thirteen principles of the Jewish faith. When his brother David, who supported the entire family, perished at sea, Rambam began to study medicine and became a physician of note. He was appointed as doctor to the court of Sultan Saladin. He used his influence to help his fellow Jews. In about 1170, Rambam began to write his monumental *Mishneh Torah*,<sup>2</sup> a compendium of all Jewish laws extracted from the Talmud and the works of the *Gaonim*. The work consists of fourteen volumes and is also called *Yad Hachazakah*.<sup>3</sup> For short, it is often called *Yad*, or simply the *Rambam*. It was completed in 1180 and was written in a lucid and concise mishnaic Hebrew. It was the first comprehensive codification of all Torah laws. *Mishneh Torah* immediately gained immense popularity. It became the most authoritative text on *Halachah*, and over 325 commentaries were written on it. Over the centuries, no novella was written, no talmudic discourse was given without discussion of the relevant rulings in *Mishneh Torah*. Rambam's *Sefer Hamitzvot*, written in Arabic, enumerates and elucidates the 613 precepts of the Torah. In 1185 Rambam wrote a major philosophical treatise, *Moreh Nevuchim* ("Guide of the Perplexed"), written in Arabic and translated by Shmuel ibn Tibbon.<sup>4</sup> It addresses the persons who were baffled by seeming contradictions between the teachings of the Torah and Aristotelian philosophy. Rambam demonstrates that there is no conflict between the two if the fundamentals of both are properly understood and interpreted. The book gave rise to bitter controversy. Rabbi Shlomoh of Montpellier in Provence was joined by many other scholars in his opposition to the study of philosophy in general and *Moreh Nevuchim* in particular. Despite the acrimonious discord, Rambam has remained the undisputed Torah authority. His supremacy as a scholar is best expressed in the famous dictum, inscribed on his tomb, "From Moshe (Moses) till Moshe (Rambam), no one arose like Moshe."

## THE FOURTEEN BOOKS OF MISHNEH TORAH

### 1. Knowledge—Sefer Hamada

ספר המדע  
Basic Principles of the Torah  
Ethical and Moral Conduct  
Study of the Torah  
Idolatry  
Repentance

### 2. Love of God—Sefer Ahavah

ספר אהבה  
Recitation of the *Shema*  
Prayer  
Tefillin, Mezuzah, and Torah Scroll  
Blessings  
Circumcision

### 3. Seasons—Sefer Zemanim

ספר זמנים  
Shabbat  
Repose on the Festivals  
*Matzah*  
Shofar, Sukkah, Lulav  
Sanctification of the New Moon  
Fast Days  
Reading of the Megillah and Chanukah

### 4. Family Life—Sefer Nashim

ספר נשים  
Marriage and Divorce  
Levirate Marriage and *Chalitzah*  
Virgin  
Suspected Adulteress

### 5. Holiness—Sefer Kedushah

ספר קדושה  
Forbidden Intercourse  
Forbidden Foods  
Slaughtering

### 6. Utterances—Sefer Hafla'ah

ספר הפלאה  
Oaths  
Vows  
Naziriteship  
Valuations

### 7. Seeds—Sefer Zera'im

ספר זרעים  
Mixed seeds  
Gifts to the Poor  
Tithes  
First Fruits  
*Shemittah* and *Yovel*

### 8. Service—Sefer Avodah

ספר עבודה  
The Temple  
Vessels  
Sacrifices  
Yom Kippur Service  
Trespass

### 9. Sacrifices—Sefer Korbanot

ספר קרבנות  
Passover sacrifice  
Festival offering  
First-born  
Errors  
Substitute offerings

### 10. Purity—Sefer Taharah

ספר טהרה  
Uncleanness of the dead  
Red Heifer  
Uncleanness of Leprosy  
Uncleanness of Foodstuffs  
*Mikva'ot*—Immersion Pools

### 11. Torts—Sefer Nezikin

ספר נזיקין  
Damages  
Theft  
Robbery and Lost Property  
Wounding and Damaging  
Murder and Guarding Life

### 12. Acquisitions—Sefer Kinyan

ספר קנין  
Sales  
Acquisition and Gift  
Neighbors  
Agents and Partners  
Slaves

### 13. Judgments—Sefer Mishpatim

ספר משפטים  
Hiring  
Borrowing and Deposit  
Creditor and Debtor  
Pleading  
Inheritance

### 14. Judges—Sefer Shofetim

ספר שופטים  
Sanhedrin  
Witnesses  
Rebels  
Mourning  
Kings and Wars



Title page of *Moreh Nevuchim*, "Guide of the Perplexed," by Maimonides, his answer to Aristotelian philosophy. Commentaries by Efudi, Shem Tov, Ibn Crescas, and Don Yitzchak Abarbanel.

Excerpt from *Shemonah Perakim*, constituting the introduction to his Commentary on Tractate *Avot* (Ethics of the Fathers), Chap. 4—Concerning the Cure of the Diseases of the Soul

Good deeds are those that are balanced, forming the mean between two extremes that are equally bad—the too much and the too little. . . . Thus, generosity is the mean between stinginess and extravagance; courage, the mean between recklessness and cowardice. . . . The medium course is the one that is truly praiseworthy. It is the one to which everyone should strive, always carefully weighing his actions so that they are balanced. . . . The perfect Torah that leads us to perfection recommends none of these things (such as the practice of mortification, excessive fasting, going into seclusion, etc.). On the contrary, the Torah's intent is that man follow the path of moderation, in accordance with the dictates of nature, eating, drinking, having marital relations, all in moderation, and living among people in uprightness and honesty, but not dwelling in the wilderness or in the mountains, or wearing a hairshirt or afflicting the body. The Torah even warns us against such practices.<sup>5</sup>

Even here, however, the Torah is not perfect. . . .

Excerpt from Commentary on the *Mishnah Sanhedrin* 10:1, The Eighth Principle of Faith

Every word of the Torah is full of wisdom and wonders for one who understands it. It is beyond human comprehension, wider than the earth, broader than the sea. All we must do is follow in the footsteps of David, the anointed of the God of Jacob, who prayed, "Open my eyes that I may behold the wonders of Your Torah (Psalm 119:18). The traditional commentary of the Torah is also the Word of God. The sukkah we build today, or the *lulav*, shofar, tzitzit, and tefillin we use have the same forms as the ones God showed to Moses, which he faithfully transmitted to us. This fundamental principle is taught by the verse, "This shall demonstrate to you that God sent me to do all these things and that I did not do it on my own accord" (Numbers 16:28).<sup>6</sup>

Excerpt from *Moreh Nevuchim*, Part 3, Chap. 51

Know that all the practices of worship, such as reading the Torah, prayer, and the performance of the other commandments have as their only purpose to train you to occupy yourself with God's commandments and to turn away from worldly concerns. . . . But if you pray by merely moving your lips while facing the wall and your thoughts are on your business, or if you read the Torah with your tongue but your mind is on the house you are building and you do not consider what you are reading; and likewise, all the commandments you only perform with your limbs, as if you were digging a hole in the ground or chopping trees in the forest, without reflecting on the meaning of your action or on Him who commanded you or on His purpose, do not think that you have achieved your goal. Rather, you are much like those of whom it is said, "You are near in their mouth but far from their reins" (Jeremiah 12:2). . . . The first thing you should do is that when you recite the *Shema* and pray, you should empty your mind of everything. You should not be content with concentrating on the first verse of the *Shema* and saying the first blessing [of the *Shemoneh Esrei*].

Excerpt from *Iggeret Teiman*, Rambam's famous letter to the Jews of Yemen who were suffering religious persecution. His words of encouragement inspired them to remain true to their faith. <sup>7</sup>

Remember, my brethren, this great, incomparable, and unique historical event<sup>8</sup> is proved by the best evidence. For never before or since has an entire nation witnessed a revelation from God or beheld His glory. The purposes of [the revelation] were to strengthen us in our faith so that nothing could change it and to reach a level of certitude that would sustain us in these trying times of fierce persecution and absolute tyranny, as it is written, "For God has come to test you" (Exodus 20:17). The Torah means that God revealed Himself to you thus in order to give you strength to withstand all future trials. Now, do not stumble nor err, be firm in your religion, and persevere in your faith and its duties.

היינו ודאי כי אלהינו אלהים אחד ואלהינו נבחרים לו

So-called  
Golden Mean  
- adopted  
highly from  
A

Excerpt from Rambam's *HaMitzvot* (Book of Commandments)<sup>2</sup>

*The Groundrules:* I shall begin by saying that the sum total of the commandments that God has commanded us, as contained in the Torah, is 613. Of these, 248—corresponding to the number of limbs in the human body—are positive commandments; 365—corresponding to the number of days in the solar year—are negative commandments. This number, 613, is mentioned in the Talmud at the end of Tractate *Makkot* 23b, where it says, "Six hundred and thirteen mitzvot were given to Moses at Sinai: 365 prohibitions corresponding to the days in the solar year, and 248 injunctions corresponding to the limbs in the human body." Homiletically, the sages have said about the number of positive commandments corresponding to the limbs in the human body, that it is as if each and every limb says to the person, "Perform a mitzvah with me"; and about the number of negative commandments corresponding to the number of days in the solar year, they said, "It is as if each and every day says to the person, 'Do not do a transgression this day.'"

Excerpt from *Mishneh Torah*, Book 2, *Ahavah* (Love of God), Laws of the mezuzah 6:13

A person should be careful in the observance of the mitzvah of the mezuzah, for it is an obligation perpetually binding on everyone. Whenever you enter or leave through a door with a mezuzah on its post, you will be confronted with the declaration of God's unity, and remember His love, and will be aroused from your slumber and your mindless interest in momentary vanities. You will realize that nothing lasts forever except knowledge of the Creator of the world. This awareness will immediately bring you back to your senses so that you will walk in the path of righteousness. Our sages of old said, "He who has tefillin (phylacteries) on his head and arm, tzitzit (fringes) on his garment, and a mezuzah on his door may be presumed not to sin, for he has many who caution him—angels that save him from sin—as it says, "The angel of God encamps around those who fear Him and he releases them" (Psalm 34:8).

Excerpt from *Mishneh Torah*, Book 14, *Shofetim* (Judges), Kings and Wars 12:4

The sages and prophets did not yearn for the days of the Messiah in order that Israel might have dominion over the entire world, or rule over the heathens, or be exalted by the nations, or to eat, drink, and celebrate. Rather, they desired to be free to devote themselves to Torah and its wisdom, with no one to oppress or disturb them, so that they would be worthy of the World to Come.



Page of Rambam, *Mishneh Torah*, *Sefer Hafla'ah*, Book of Utterances, Laws of Valuations 5:1. From a copy of the standard edition.

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Excerpt from *Mishnah Torah*, Book 5, *Kedushah* (Holiness), Laws of *Shechitah* 1:4

This method of slaughtering, which is mentioned in the Torah without definition, must be explained, in order to know on what organ of the animal the *shechitah* must be performed; the parameters of the *shechitah*, with what instrument, when and how it must be performed, what things make it invalid, and who may perform it. All these matters are included in the general Torah commandment, "Then you shall slaughter of your cattle and your small animals . . . in the manner that I have prescribed" (Deuteronomy 12:21), which means that Moses was commanded all these rules orally, as is the case with the rest of the Oral Law.

Excerpt from *Mishneh Torah*, Book 11, *Nezikin* (Torts), 13:1

If, on the road, you encounter a person whose animal is lying under the weight of its burden, you have the obligation to unload the burden from the animal, whether the burden is suited to it or too heavy for it. This is a positive commandment, for it is written, "You must make every effort to help him unload it" (Exodus 23:5).