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# The Relele Rambam

*A deeper look at the life and teachings  
of the Rambam, in honor of his  
yahrtzeit on Chof Teves.*









*Rabbeinu Moshe Ben Maimon, known as the Rambam is one of the most celebrated figures in Jewish history, up there with Moshe Rabbeinu, Dovid Hamelech, and Rebbi Akiva. A leader not only revered in his time, but a nossi providing inspiration and example to following generations of gedolei Yisroel.*

What stands out about the Rambam, in ways more than other great Jewish historical giants, is the Rambam's influence and importance in a wide range of areas, reaching and effecting a large number of diverse types of people, both in his own lifetime and throughout the ages. He is seen as one of the greatest Torah authorities to *lamdanim*, a great rationalist to philosophers, a breakthrough physician to doctors, and an unparalleled Jewish leader to historians.

Whether in *chakirah* or *halacha*, philosophy or medicine, the Rambam didn't just leave a mark—he paved the way. The Rambam's courageous and caring leadership of the Jewish people and the individual treatment he gave one and all, both in the material and spiritual sense was outstanding and exemplary, leading to the great impact he had on his many generations of students who merit to gain insight into his greatness through his extensive works and writings.

In the Rebbe's Torah, the Rambam is seen as an

important step in revealing *Elokus* in this world and creating a *dira b'tachtonim*. The Rebbe repeatedly brings lessons from the Rambam's life, his work, and his Torah, teaching us to learn from the Rambam's *middos*, perspectives, and styles in *halacha*.

Above all the Rebbe revealed to us the greatness of the Rambam's watershed work, the Yad Hachazakah—Mishneh Torah, instructing one and all to learn and complete this central and elemental part of Torah. The Rebbe himself spent hours at farbrengens teaching the Rambam's Torah, revealing different rules in Rambam, giving *biurim* in Rambam, and sometimes even illuminating parts of the Rambam according to Chassidus.

The Rebbe's praise for the Rambam is outstanding, to the extent that he said regarding the Rambam "*Lo dumiya tehila*"—it is truly impossible to describe the greatness of the Rambam, because comparable to Hashem, as *tzaddikim domim l'Boram* [*tzaddikim* are similar to their creator], any depiction would be limiting and undervaluing his greatness.

The Rebbe also expounded on the famous unattributed quote, written on the Rambam's *kever* "*M'Moshe ad Moshe lo kom k'Moshe*—From Moshe (Rabbeinu) to Moshe (the Rambam), there was none like Moshe." He explained that since no one protested it, and being that silence is akin to admission according to the Rambam, we must say that all the *gedolei Yisroel* through the centuries that saw this line, accept this statement that the Rambam stood out from all the generations of *nevi'im*, *tana'im*, *amora'im*, and *ge'onim*, as a unique and special phenomenon.

While the Rambam as a philosopher and doctor was



THE MATZEVA OF THE RAMBAM IN TEVERIA.

already well known across the world and through the ages, both through his Hebrew title Rambam, and through the common Greek version of his name “Maimonides,” the Rebbe took this to the next level, encouraging heads of state and leaders both in the Jewish community and beyond, to work to have the Rambam remembered and honored, carrying the Rambam’s influence to unimaginable distances. The Rebbe proved from both the Rambam’s life and Torah, that the Rambam himself had put emphasis on influencing the entire world, non-Jews as well as Jews, to better themselves and unite in serving the Creator.

## Leader of his Generation

While there are many different angles through which one can look at the Rambam, we will begin with the way the Rebbe describes the Rambam as a leader, as the *nossi hador*—the shepherd of his generation. As a true *gadol b’Yisroel* and *manhig*, the care and responsibility for every Yid in his generation and beyond, is evident in everything the Rambam worked on. Both in his writings and his life, the Rambam’s guidance and care is profound.

Beginning with his extensive works and writings, we see in the Sefer Hamitzvos and the Mishneh Torah the Rambam’s success in making Torah and *halacha* easily accessible to every single Jew, no matter their background. Carrying through the Rambam’s famous Igros and the fundamental Moreh Nevuchim, we can see the Rambam’s effort to guide and uplift his generation and provide direction and *chizuk* to every single Jew; not only in his generation, but throughout our entire history, as the Rebbe referred to the Rambam, “*Moreh nevuchim le’doro u’lechol hadoros haba’im achrov*—The guide to the confused in his generation and all the generations that follow.”<sup>1</sup>

Beyond the spiritual and conceptual impact the Rambam had through his Torah, one must not overlook the Rambam’s part as physical protector and healer of his generation. Partly thanks to his position in the Sultan’s court, the Rambam was granted influence and power to fight against decrees and to campaign for the Jewish people before the Sultan. All this was in addition to his full time occupation as physician, spending his time assisting people in need, both Jews and non-Jews, providing them



THE ORIGINAL PORTRAIT THAT HAS COME TO BE ASSOCIATED WITH THE RAMBAM, PUBLISHED IN 1744.

with physical healing, and mental and emotional care.

## The Whole World

As clearly seen in the history of the Rambam’s life, his sphere of influence reached far beyond the walls of his own community, further even then the entire Jewish world. The Rambam was known as a famous healer and philosopher across the entire civilized world. In an edit to an article written about the Rambam that was later published in the “Talks and Tales,” the Rebbe adds that Richard the Lionheart, King of England, sent men to the Rambam requesting a cure for his illness, all the way from London!<sup>2</sup>

While the Rambam’s prominence may have initially been tied to the physical assistance he offered to the royalty in Egypt, the Rebbe points out that as the Sultan’s confidant the Rambam definitely had the opportunity to positively impress on the Sultan and his court the ethics and morals of Yiddishkeit and belief in Hashem.<sup>3</sup> This widened his impact on the people of the entire world, helping them, inspiring them, and leading them to keep the *sheva mitzvos bnei Noach*.

To this point, the Rebbe quotes an account of the Rambam’s day which he himself wrote, where he describes that he’d come home from the Sultan’s palace, worn and weak, and he “would find all the corridors packed with people, both Jews and non-Jews... I would go out to heal them and write prescriptions and directives, treatments for their ailments... till the night.” The Rebbe explained that the Rambam served as a prominent illustration of how one has to help every person, no matter how difficult it may be for them, just as the Rambam dedicated many precious hours to this end.<sup>4</sup>

While the Rambam’s effect on the gentiles of his time



was supreme, he was first and foremost the leader of his own flesh and blood, the Jewish people. The Rebbe learns a *remez* [an intimation] from the term “*parnasas echav*” [support for his brothers] that is mentioned as one of the reasons the Rambam took up the profession of medicine after his brother Dovid passed away, suggesting that on a deeper level, this refers to the Rambam’s “support” of the entire Jewish people—the Rambam’s brothers. This includes both physical support with his influence by the Sultan and spiritual support in strengthening the *emunah* of his generation.<sup>5</sup>

[It is interesting to note that in a number of historical sources, the Rambam was designated by the Sultan as the “*Rayis el Yahud*,” the head of the Jewish community under the Sultan’s command, a position that was later filled by the Rambam’s descendants.<sup>6</sup>]

## Transforming Mitzrayim

The Rambam’s living in Mitzrayim and the great work he accomplished living in that infamous land serves as another significant element in the story of the Rambam’s role as a *nossi* of the Jewish people.

The link between the Rambam and the transformation of the land of Mitzrayim is nearly impossible to miss. Beginning with the Rambam’s birth, on to his life and career, and even through his ultimate passing and burial, this connection is profoundly visible. The Rebbe ties this in with the Rambam’s position as a champion for *geulah* and personal redemption for the Jewish people, starting from each person or community on their level, and ultimately, with readying the entire Jewish people for Moshiach.

This *geulah* component in the Rambam, combating and converting Mitzrayim, begins with his opportune birth on Erev Pesach, symbolizing and encompassing the spirit of *geulah* and *yetzias Mitzrayim*.<sup>7</sup> This point is also displayed through the double meaning of the acronym Rambam, standing for “*Revos mofσαι b’Eretz Mitzrayim*—increasing my miracles in the land of Mitzrayim,” which so acutely represents the Rambam’s toil in the furtherance of *geulah* for one and all, including by transforming the land of Mitzrayim itself.<sup>8</sup>

This also explains why the Rambam only arrived in

Eretz Yisroel after his passing even though he had always wanted to relocate there throughout his life, because as the leader tasked with uplifting and transforming the world, he needed to be in *chutz la’aretz*, specifically in Mitzrayim, the land synonymous with confines and *galus*. Ultimately, in Mitzrayim the Rambam completed his greatest contributions to the Jewish people,<sup>9</sup> most famously, his Mishneh Torah. In Mishneh Torah one can plainly see the Rambam’s catering to every Jew, giving each and every student the opportunity to learn the *halachos* and study Torah on their level, leading to their personal as well as the general *geulah*.

## Choker and Mekubal

Hand in hand with the Rambam’s communal work, there is an equally key element in the Rambam’s life that can be clearly seen in the Rambam’s life and even more so in his written works, and that is the Rambam’s personal world of intellect, study, and Torah.

In every language, the Rambam’s name is synonymous with intellect and genius. The Rebbe terms the Rambam as a man of *sechel*, describing the pain the Rambam suffered being held back from delving into deep thought by his many preoccupations at court and back at home. On another level, we can see the Rambam’s affinity for the pure power of *sechel* all throughout the Rambam’s Torah, exploring his opinions in areas of *chakirah* and *yedias Hashem*. This theme is brought and thoroughly expounded on in Chassidus Chabad.

In addition to his knowledge of Torah, the Rambam’s understanding in all areas was outstanding. The Rambam was a master in philosophy, medicine, astronomy, just to name a few. In fact, the Rebbe edited into the “Talks and Tales” article on the Rambam that the Rambam actually wrote a number of books on medicine and philosophy.<sup>10</sup>

[Regarding the Rambam’s knowledge of secular subjects, there is another interesting edit on the above-mentioned article. The writer wrote about the Rambam that he “also studied medicine, and became such a great doctor that the king...” The Rebbe put a line through that sentence and wrote instead, “*bachar umnus rofeh limkor parnasaso* - he chose the profession of physician as a source of income.”]



Based on the Rambam's knowledge of philosophy and his logical and rational approach to many areas in the topics of belief, faith, and the mitzvah of knowing Hashem, the Rambam's first four *prakim* of Sefer HaMada and his principal work in *chakirah*, the Moreh Nevuchim, have often caused a bit of a stir, with some thoroughly rejecting parts of these works, and others cautiously refraining from learning or teaching them. This, of course, says nothing about the Rambam's impeccable stature throughout all the generations spanning all different *gedolei Yisroel* from all backgrounds.

In Chassidus Chabad as well, we find a nuanced approach to the Moreh Nevuchim; from a warning not to learn it until age 20 in Beis Harav, on to the Alter Rebbe and Tzemach Tzedek's affinity for the *sefer*, a *chavrusa* that they had in the *sefer* regarding which the Alter Rebbe explained that he was being *metaken* the Rambam, a similar *chavrusa* with the Rebbe Maharash, concluding with

the Rebbe's take on Moreh Nevuchim, explaining that after learning Chassidus, there is much to be learned from it.<sup>11</sup> This fascination with the Rambam's *chakirah* goes hand in hand with a line that the Frierdiker Rebbe brings in a *sicha* that the Rambam was able to grasp up to levels in *Olam HaBriah* through *sechel* alone.<sup>12</sup>

## The Rambam and Kabbalah

While it may look like the Rambam was well-versed specifically in the world of *chakirah*, in fact, the Rambam was also a great *mekubal*. The Rebbe Maharash conveyed to the Rebbe Rashab, at one of their joint sessions in learning Moreh Nevuchim, a tradition that he had received Rebbe from Rebbe up to the Baal Shem Tov, that



THE REBBE PAUSES FROM LEARNING RAMBAM IN HIS CAR TO WAVE TO CHILDREN AT THE LAG B'OMER FAIR OF 5744\*.



the Rambam was “*A groise mekubal* - a great Kabbalist,” and explained that the Rambam was very careful not to even hint to this fact, because at that stage in time, it was considered dangerous to reveal aspects of Kabbalah even through a hint or clue.

While in the Rebbe’s Torah it is generally taken as a given that the Rambam learned and knew Kabbalah, this was not necessarily the accepted opinion of all *gedolei Yisroel* throughout the generations. For example, the Shalshes HaKabbalah and Rabbeinu Shlomo Alkabetz both wrote clearly that the Rambam didn’t learn Chochmas HaEmes [the true wisdom i.e. Kabbalah], though the Chida brings from a number of sources that later in the Rambam’s life, the Rambam had in fact learned Kabbalah.<sup>13</sup>

In a *sicha* from Shabbos Parshas Va’era 5746\*, the Rebbe discusses the debate whether the Rambam saw and learned the Zohar, and brings that most opinions hold that the Rambam had in fact seen the Zohar. One of the primary proofs is that there are a number of *halachos* in Sefer HaYad that their only source is from the Zohar. However, the Rebbe also brings the minority opinion that the Rambam didn’t learn Kabbalah but points out that being that *nigleh* and *pnimiyus* haTorah correspond, there can still be a Kabbalah way of understanding the Rambam.<sup>14</sup>

Most famously, the Rambam’s familiarity with the Zohar and Kabbalah is highlighted in regards to the opening words of the Yad HaChazakah, “*Yesod Hayesodos V’amud Hachachmos* - The foundation of the foundations and the pillar of the wisdoms,” the *roshei teivos* of which spell out the name of Hashem. The Rebbe even suggests that this opening line is actually a translated quote from the Zohar on Parshas Vaeira, “*Pekuda da kadmaah lechol pekudin* - This command comes before all other commandments.”<sup>15</sup>

The Rebbe also points out that the one who first

shifted our attention to this acronym in the opening of the Rambam was the Rambam’s own grandson, Harav Dovid Hanagid.

Elaborating a bit more on this subject, there is the *sicha* from the Frierdiker Rebbe from the summer of 5700\*, where he shares things he heard from his father, the Rebbe Rashab, during their summer in Marienbad 5668\*.

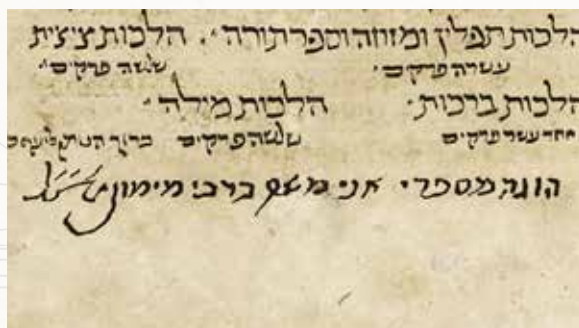
He tells that the Rambam was able to grasp intellectually up until *Olam HaBriah*, and was even able to explain it in the Rambam’s standard terminology. It was just that the generation was not worthy of it. He then adds that the Rambam’s understanding was *Daas Elyon* [Heaven’s perspective], and was actually able to understand and grasp the *afisas hakochos* of *Olam HaAtzilus* [loosely translated: “the nothingness of the dynamisms in the world of Atzilus], and that the Rambam’s *avodah* was *Yichuda Ilaah* [the higher level of unification]. He ends off explaining that the Rambam converted aspects and terms from *chakirah* such as *yesodos* and *amudim* (foundations and pillars), making them a vessel for Hashem’s name - *Shem Havaye*.

This last point, referencing the Rambam’s fusion of *chakirah* and Kabbalah is a very interesting theme that we find in general in Chassidus Chabad, and to some extent in the Rebbe’s Torah as well. In truth, many conclusions and products of this fusion can be found in the Rambam’s Sefer Halachos as well, bringing the Rambam’s learning and his effect on the world of Jewish thought and Jewish practice full circle.

An example of this idea is found in the beginning of Sefer HaMada where the Rambam brings the four elemental foundations. The Rebbe explains that even though it may look like the Rambam took it from secular schools of philosophy and physics (as some have suggested), in reality this cannot be the case in regards to rules of science that are brought in a *sefer halacha* (in contrast to rules of medicine). Instead, the Rebbe suggests that the source is actually from Zohar.

## The Rambam’s Perspective

By looking at the backlash and opposition that the Rambam’s unique and breakthrough style drew, we also see another remarkable *midah* by the Rambam, (one that is shared with the Alter Rebbe), and that is the aversion



THE RAMBAM’S SIGNATURE



to *machlokes*. While the Rambam held his ground and never backed down from a halachic or *hashkafic* stance, the Rambam did not take those who opposed him to task. The Rambam handled each criticism and outright disapproval calmly and peacefully, all while standing with resolve for halacha and true *emunah*.

The sometimes hostile opposition that the Rambam had to put up with during his life is just one of the terrible difficulties and hardships he had to endure. From his tumultuous and frightful youth, to the death of his closest family members, on to a taxing and strenuous daily regimen, wearing down and weakening the Rambam, stealing him away from his world of Torah and intellect, the Rambam suffered quite a bit. Yet, this did not change his view of reality; the Rambam continued to see the world with a positive view, seeing the good in everything.

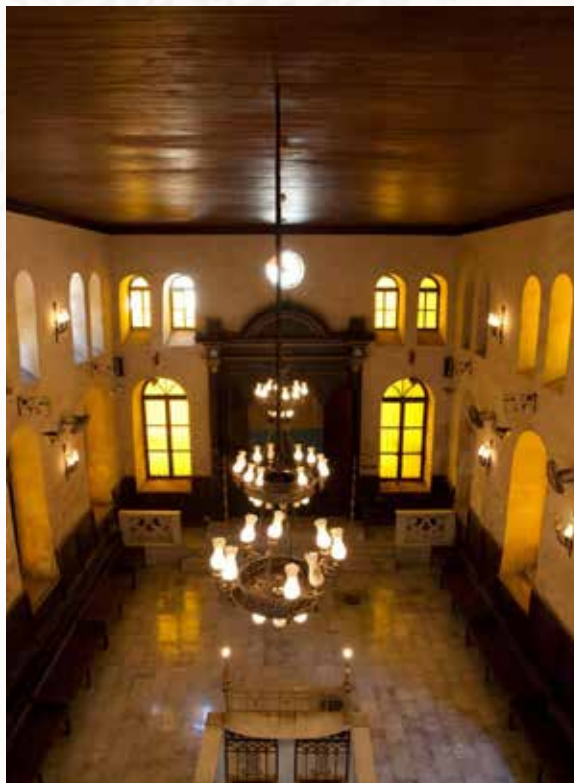
The Rebbe points out that while in the *halachos* of Geirus the Rambam paskens that we must tell any gentiles that want to convert that the Jewish people are “*dvuyim u’schufim* - worn out and broken,” - and that is truly one of the perspectives to see the world through - nevertheless, although as mentioned, the Rambam had more than enough reasons to resolve to see the world in that negative light, he writes in *Moreh Nevuchim* that a person is meant to look at everything with a good eye, with good hope, and strong faith, resulting in a an *avodah* based on happiness and positivity<sup>16</sup>.

## Conclusion

The Rebbe’s incessant talk and portrayal of the Rambam and the Rebbe’s explanations throughout the years about different elements in the Rambam’s personality and life story paint the larger-than-life image of the Rambam that we have become accustomed to.

In many ways, it seems almost like a mirror image of this depiction of the Rambam can be seen in the Rebbe’s *nesius*.

In addition to the depth and vastness of the Rambam’s and Rebbe’s Torah and the great excitement and desire for *geulah* as seen in both the Rambam’s and Rebbe’s teachings, we can also see it in the Rebbe’s care for each and every person, in the Rebbe’s influence on the world’s “movers and shakers,” and in how the Rebbe strengthens the *emunah* in thought and practice for the entirety of the Jewish people. Above all, this is expressed in the Rebbe’s fusion of physical and spiritual care, strengthening the



THE SHUL THE RAMBAM USED IN CAIRO, EGYPT

*neshama* while caring and uplifting the *guf*, extending a term that the Rebbe beautifully uses to refer to the Rambam—the “*rofeh neshamos v’gufim*—healer of bodies and souls<sup>17</sup>. **T**

1. Yud-Beis Tammuz 5728, Sichos Kodesh 2, p. 277.
2. Published in Kfar Chabad 947, p. 60.
3. Yud-Gimmel Nissan 5746, Toras Menachem 3, p. 100.
4. Yud-Aleph Nissan 5745, 1710.
5. Yud-Gimmel Nissan 5746, Toras Menachem 3, p. 100.
6. Based on findings in the Cairo Geniza, published in Katedra 40, p. 72-80.
7. Tzav, Shabbos Hagadol 5748, Sefer Hasichos p. 366.
8. Shemos, 21 Teves 5752, Sefer Hasichos p. 104-105.
9. Sefer Hasichos 5751, p. 96.
10. Published in Kfar Chabad 947, p. 60.
11. Likkutei Sichos, Chof Vov, p. 39.
12. Sefer Hasichos, Kayitz Tof Shin, p. 41.
13. Ibid. fn. \*27.
14. Toras Menachem 5746 2, p. 19.
15. Sefer Hasichos 5748, 2, p. 239-240.
16. Yud Shevat 5732, Sichos Kodesh p. 364-5.
17. Sichos Kodesh 5739 2, p. 512.