



Maimonides at Work: A Rabbi's Workday in Medieval Egypt

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1: Letter to Samuel Ibn Tibbon, September 1199

Now G-d knows that in order to write this to you I have escaped to a secluded spot, where people would not think to find me, sometimes leaning for support against the wall, sometimes lying down on account of my excessive weakness, for I have grown old and feeble.

But with respect to your wish to come here to me, I cannot but say how greatly your visit would delight me, for I truly long to converse with you, and would anticipate our meeting with even greater joy than you. Yet I must advise you not to expose yourself to the perils of the voyage, for beyond seeing me, and my doing all I could to honor you, you would not derive any advantage from your visit. Do not expect to be able to confer with me on any scientific subject for even one hour either by day or by night, for the following is my daily occupation:

I reside at Misr [Fustat, or Old Cairo] and the sultan resides at al-Qahira [New Cairo]; these two places are two Shabbat days' journey [about 1.5 miles] distant from each other. My duties to the sultan are very heavy. I am obliged to visit him every day, early in the morning; and when he or any of his children, or any of the inmates of his harem are indisposed, I dare not quite Cairo, but must stay during the greater part of the day, and even if nothing unusual happens, I do not return to Fustat until the afternoon. Then I am almost dying with hunger. I find the ante-chambers filled with people, judges and bailiffs, friends and foes— a mixed multitude, who await the time of my return.

I dismount from my animal, wash my hands, go forth to my patients, and entreat them to bear with me while I partake of some light refreshments, the only meal I take in twenty-four hours. Then I attend to my patients, write prescriptions and directions for their various ailments. Patients go in and out until nightfall, and sometimes even, I solemnly assure you, until two hours and more into the night. I converse with and prescribe for them while lying down from sheer fatigue, and when night falls I am so exhausted that I can scarcely speak.

In consequence of this, no Jew can have any private interview with me except on Shabbat. On that day the whole congregation, or at least the majority of the members, comes to me after the morning service, when I instruct them as to their proceedings during the whole week; we study together a little until noon, when they depart. Some of them return, and read with me after the afternoon service until evening prayers. In this manner I spend the day. I have related to you only a part of what you would see if you were to visit me.

2: Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah*, Laws of Torah Study

3:7 Make your study of the Torah paramount and your secular work incidental, and do not say, when I will be unoccupied then I will study, lest you will never be unoccupied.

3:10 Nevertheless, whosoever sets his heart to pursue the study of the Torah but do no secular work at all, and permits himself to be supported by charity, behold him, he blasphemed the Name, and degraded the Torah, and shadowed the light of religion, and caused evil to be brought upon himself, and deprived his own life from its share in the world to come; because it is forbidden to enjoy aught in this world in return of the study of the words of the Torah. The sages said: "Whosoever enjoys aught in return of the study of the words of the Torah takes his own life away from the world" (Pirke Abot, 4.7). They have, moreover, commanded and said: "Thou shalt not make them a garland by which to be considered great nor a spade to dig with them" (Ibid.). Again they have commanded and said: "Love manual labor and hate rank". (Pirke Avot, 1:10); whosoever studies the Torah and does not acquire at the same time a manual trade his knowledge of the Torah will be nullified and bring about sin" (Ibid. 2.2.). The end of this will be that he will rob people for his living.

3:13 Although it is mandatory to study by day and by night, no man acquires most of his wisdom at any but during night-time. Therefore, whosoever desires to attain the crown of the Torah should take care of all of his nights, not to spend even one of them in sleeping, eating, drinking, conversation, or in like matters, but in study of the Torah and in matters of wisdom.

3: Maimonides, *Eight Chapters*, chapter 5

The practice of medicine brings much in the way of virtue, knowledge of G-d, and attainment of true perfection, and [medical] study and inquiry are among the greatest of works.

4: Maimonides, *Medical Aphorisms*

I too have not seen it [a particular illness] in the West nor did any of my teachers under whom I studied mention that they had seen it. However, here in Egypt, in the course of approximately ten years, I have seen more than twenty people who suffered from this illness.

5: Maimonides, Letter to Yefet ha-Dayyan

But the heaviest blow, which caused me more grief than anything I had ever experienced to this day, was the death of the most saintly man I knew [referring to his younger brother, David], who was drowned in the Indian Ocean. With him went down a considerable fortune belonging to us as well as to others. His little daughter and his widow were left to me...

Close to eight years have now elapsed and I still mourn for him, for there can be no consolation. What can possibly comfort me? He grew up on my knees, he was my brother, my pupil. He went abroad to trade so that I might remain at home and continue my studies. He was well-versed in Talmud and Bible and an accomplished grammarian. My greatest joy was to see him. Now every joy has been dimmed. He has departed to his eternal life and left me confounded in a strange land. Whenever I come across his handwriting in one of his books my heart turns within me and my grief reawakens.