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The Great Islamic Rabbi

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Did one of Judaism's most venerable sages live as a Muslim?

Reviewed by Shaul Magid
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MAIMONIDES

The Life and World of One of Civilization's Greatest Minds

By Joel L. Kraemer

[Doubleday](#). 621 pp. \$35

There are few things all Jews can agree on, but one may be that there is no figure in Judaism in the last 1,000 years who is as revered as Moses ben Maimon (1135-1204), better known by the Greek form of his name, [Maimonides](#). Reformers and ultra-traditionalists, rationalists and mystics claim him as their inspiration. He created the template for medieval and modern Jewish thinking on matters stretching from law to science, medicine to philosophy, messianism to politics.

Joel L. Kraemer's extensive biography *Maimonides* brings this venerated rabbi and physician to life for a new generation of readers. It is the work of a scholar deeply engaged with Maimonides' ideas and the world in which he lived; the book is lucid, entertaining and incisive. While many biographies of Maimonides have been written, Kraemer does what few have attempted: He presents the great Jewish sage as deeply embedded in an Islamic cultural, religious and intellectual milieu.

The book is divided into two parts: an analysis of the Islamic context in which Maimonides lived, describing in detail the places he frequented (Spain, Morocco, the Holy Land and Egypt) and the people he met; and a survey of his writings, including volumes of letters and records of his extensive medical practice as well as his 14-volume code of Jewish law, *Mishneh Torah*, and his philosophical masterwork, *The Guide for the Perplexed*.

Among Maimonides scholars there is a long-standing debate regarding the allegation that as an adolescent he and his family converted to Islam (either in his Spanish hometown of Córdoba or later in the Moroccan city of Fez) to avoid the ire of the Almohad dynasty, and that he lived as a Muslim until early adulthood. No credible evidence of this exists in Jewish sources. We know,

however, that many in his family's social class did feign conversion to survive the militant Islamic regime that expanded across Northern Africa and much of the Iberian peninsula in his lifetime. Citing four Arabic sources, Kraemer surmises that Maimonides "practiced Islam in Fez and eventually left and sailed to Acre. We do not know whether he was already a practicing Muslim when he came to Fez."

The Jewish position has been that Maimonides did not convert but rather engaged in "taqiyya" or dissimulation and, at most, lived *as if* he were a Muslim, something quite common of Jews in that perilous period. As I read Kraemer, that distinction (outright conversion vs. dissimulation) may be important to many Jews, but it is practically irrelevant to this biography. By Kraemer's lights, Maimonides did not simply live and work among Muslims; his entire worldview was infused with Islamic methods, ideas and ideology. The author argues, for example, that the subtle balance in Maimonides's legal code between "preservation of tradition on one side, and change and progress on the other" stems from his melding of the Talmudic tradition with key principles of Islamic legal interpretation.

I, too, have sensed the Islamic influence on Maimonides, especially when reading his works with Muslim colleagues. Once, when discussing passages from *The Guide for the Perplexed* and *Mishneh Torah*, a Muslim scholar insisted that Maimonides' positions were "pure Islam" and that "Ibn Maimun" -- as he is known in Arabic -- "is a small 'm' Muslim," citing chapter and verse of thinkers Maimonides never mentions.

The fact that Maimonides cites some Islamic sources, especially the philosopher Abu Nasar al-Farabi (c. 870-950), is well known. More subtle is the way even his ostensibly Jewish positions, and the methods he uses to reach them, appear to be taken, sometimes verbatim, from the Muslim tradition. One of Maimonides' great theological innovations, for example, was his *Thirteen Principles of Faith*, a list of Judaism's central beliefs. As Judaism is a religion founded on law and not on belief per se, no such creed had been attempted before. But the notion of principles, or pillars, of faith had existed for some time in Islam, and Kraemer contends that several of Maimonides's specific articles of faith -- including the first (God's existence), second (divine unity) and particularly the third (God is not a corporeal being) -- reflect the influence of such Islamic thinkers as al-Farabi, Ibn Sina and Ibn Tumart, founder of the Almohad movement.

Two ironies emerge from Kraemer's book. First, that the great architect of medieval and modern Judaism seems to have lived for a time, at least outwardly, as a Muslim; whether this was a feigned or true conversion, he was an insider in Muslim culture. And second, that what is often considered

original in Maimonides is not very original at all. Throughout the book, Kraemer shows how many of Maimonides' contributions are derivative, not just of Aristotle and [Plato](#), but also of Muslim thinkers. He notes that Maimonides's discussion of the five types of speech in Jewish law employs the same five categories contained in Islamic jurisprudence. He shows that Maimonides's prohibition of using sacred poems for mundane purposes (such as setting them to music at communal gatherings) is taken directly from a commentary on Plato's *Republic* by the Muslim philosopher Averroes.

Kraemer's subtitle, *One of Civilization's Greatest Minds*, is unfortunate, because the book undermines this claim throughout. Kraemer shows that for Jews and Judaism, Maimonides was certainly an innovator, and the depth of his knowledge and compassion was truly astounding. But as a contributor to the ideas of Western (including medieval Islamic) civilization, he did not have much new to offer. ·

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