

## A Glimpse at the Man HaRambam

We are obsessed with understanding HaRambam's ideas, philosophy and his various works and we neglect attempting to know the man, HaRambam. What was his temperament and disposition like? Did he have a patient and pleasant personality or was he a social misfit a genius who cannot relate to the average person? Most if not all of the material that speaks to his character and personality are hagiographic in nature and are written by people who lived many years after HaRambam had already died.

HaRambam's halakhic and philosophical material betray his humanity while his letters and personal correspondences present a more related person but one who is occupied both mentally and physically by his onerous work schedule.

The short letter below affords us a completely different perspective on the man HaRambam. This letter was discovered in the Taylor-Shechter *Geniza*<sup>1</sup> collection and translated and edited by Professor Paul Fenton.<sup>2</sup>

The letter below describes the visit to the home of HaRambam by a man and his son.<sup>3</sup> He was greeted warmly by his host and his son Abraham. The last line of the letter is precious. The author of the letter was commissioned to deliver a note to the great master HaRambam and expected to simply deliver the note and leave. To his surprise HaRambam invited him and his son al-Galal into his home. The guest is overwhelmed by HaRambam's hospitality and proudly describes how the master even confided in him regarding the content of the letter that was delivered. All the while Avraham, HaRambam's son entertained al-Galal by teaching him how to address the great master HaRambam.

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<sup>1</sup> Plates 1-11. Geniza Collection are Jewish writings found in Egypt from the late 800 that give a detailed picture of economic, cultural and social life in this region. These documents include all sorts of writings from literature, to court documents and personal notes

<sup>2</sup> Fenton Paul, "A Meeting with Maimonides" in *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London* Volume 45 No. 1 (1982) pages 1-4. For other such Geniza letters that describe HaRambam's personality see Goitein S. D. "Moses Maimonides, Man of Action: A revision of the Master's Biography in Light of Geniza Documents" in *Hommage a George Vajda* (Louvain, 1980) Pages 155-167

<sup>3</sup> This was ratified by Professor Goitein per Professor Paul Fenton.

The original letter is written in Judeo-Arabic, the common language of the Jews of medieval Egypt. In this letter we learn that HaRambam enjoyed lemon candy and that he lived in a roomy home.

#### Meeting With Maimonides (Plates I-II)

We set out for Rabbi Moses' house

He remained at the entrance to the house while I and Al Galal proceeded to enter. I kissed his noble hand, and he received us with a most cordial welcome. He said to me: "Come and be seated young man" beckoning me to sit on the edge of the Iwan, opposite where he himself was seated.

I sat down while he read the message I gave him from beginning to end. He was delighted with the presents and started to play with Galal – may God protect him.

Then there transpired that which a book would prove insufficient to describe. Next, platters were brought and he began to eat lemon cakes. We stayed just for a while but he detained me in order that we confer a moment confidentially. In the meantime, Rabbi Abraham may God protect him, had taught Al Galal a term with which to address Rabbi Moses. Upon his reciting it Rabbi Moses laughed with amusement and played with the child.