The Confidence to Lead: HaRambam's Varied Responses to Criticism[1]

By Rabbi Yamin Levy

Choosing the rabbinate means accepting the fact that criticism will come from congregants, colleagues, scholars, communal leaders, and sometimes even from one's closest supporters. No rabbi, regardless of scholarship or piety, escapes critique. The real measure of rabbinic leadership is not whether criticism arises, but how one responds to it. In this regard, the life of HaRambam offers a profound and instructive model.

HaRambam faced significant criticism during his lifetime. Criticism is, in general, a healthy and necessary thing. At its best, it leads to growth, refinement, greater clarity, and higher quality standards. Serious scholarship, authentic leadership, and meaningful religious life all depend upon the ability to question, challenge, and evaluate ideas honestly.

The real question, however, is not whether criticism exists, but how it is expressed and what motivates it. Is the criticism offered constructively and with integrity, or is it driven by ego, rivalry, resentment, or the desire to undermine? In one instance, HaRambam reports "having been the target of (*moserim*) informers who tried to destroy him."[2] Genuine criticism seeks truth and improvement; destructive criticism often seeks victory, humiliation, or control.

This distinction is crucial when studying the controversies surrounding HaRambam. Some of his critics raised thoughtful and substantive concerns worthy of consideration, while others appeared to be reacting to the immense authority, originality, and influence of his work. Understanding the difference between principled disagreement and opposition rooted in ulterior motives is essential for appreciating both the criticism itself and HaRambam's varied responses to it.

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[1] The following study is based on years of careful engagement with the letters and *Teshuvot* of HaRambam. While the footnotes are not presented with the exhaustive detail expected of a fully refereed article, the arguments and conclusions offered here are grounded in sustained textual study and reflect what I believe to be both historically responsible and intellectually accurate. The purpose of this overview is not merely academic; it is also instructional. HaRambam's responses to criticism, communal conflict, theological confusion, and intellectual decline continue to offer profound insight into Jewish leadership, religious integrity, and the pursuit of truth.

[2] Probably Zuta, Abu Zikhri, see Davidson page 52

Shortly after completing the *Mishneh Torah*, HaRambam wrote to his student Yosef ibn Yehudah that he expected the work to become the target of criticism. In that same letter, he refers to individuals in Fustat who refused even to study or look at his writings so that it could not be said that "Moshe ben Mimon had taught them anything."[3]

His philosophical writings, legal rulings, communal authority, and even his style of scholarship generated opposition in various circles throughout the Jewish world. Yet his responses were neither simplistic nor uniform. Most of the time, he refused to engage in bitter denunciations and personal vilifications. He preferred a neutral stance as he proceeded with his planned efforts to preserve the Andalusian religious-intellectual tradition. And yet there were times when he did respond directly to his detractors. Most of the time, he answered with patience, humility, and lengthy clarification; at other times, he responded with sharpness and unwavering intellectual confidence. Often, he addressed the critics' issues in letters to friends, colleagues, and supporters, explaining his intentions, defending his methods, and reaffirming what he believed to be essential truths.

There is substantial historical evidence that HaRambam continually revised, corrected, expanded, and refined his writings throughout his lifetime. There is also strong evidence that he welcomed serious scholarly comments and criticisms—even when he rejected them. This emerges from his letters, manuscript traditions, Genizah fragments, and the differences between early and later versions of his own works.

Tracing how HaRambam responded to criticism offers more than historical insight. It provides a window into the emotional, intellectual, and spiritual burdens of rabbinic leadership itself. He understood that many of the attacks directed against him were rooted not merely in personal disagreement but in larger anxieties about change, authority, tradition, and the future of Judaism. He affirms that he never engaged in *Lashon HaRa*, and ignored the rumors and reports people spread about him.[4] In his mind, he was confronting a Jewish world facing intellectual decline, theological confusion, superstition, weak reasoning, fragmentation of Torah knowledge, and a

[3] Shailat Yitzchak, Letter and Essays of Moses Maimonides, Hebrew, (Jerusalem, Ma'aleh Adumim, 1986-1987) 3rd edition, Volume 1 page 303; see also Abraham s. Halkin, see Epistalae 53-54, see also by A. S. Halkin, "Sanegorya al Sefer Mishneh Torah," *Tarbiz* 25, (1965) pages 417, 423

[4] Yitzchak Shailat, Volume 2, Letter to Pinchas HaDayan page 436

growing tendency toward religious fanaticism. Perhaps most remarkable was HaRambam's style of argumentation. He rarely responded emotionally or polemically for its own sake. Instead, he argued structurally, philosophically, textually, and logically. He consistently demonstrated confidence that truth could withstand criticism and that careful reasoning would ultimately prevail over confusion and misunderstanding. His confidence, which some would call boldness, became one of the defining characteristics of his legacy. For HaRambam, criticism was not necessarily evidence of failure; often, it confirmed for him the urgent need for intellectual and religious reform within Jewish life.

His responses, therefore, emerged not only from personal conviction but from a profound sense of responsibility toward the preservation of authentic Judaism.

For contemporary rabbis, the study of HaRambam's responses to criticism remains deeply relevant. His example demonstrates that leadership requires resilience, clarity, humility, and, at times, the courage to stand alone. Criticism, when approached properly, can refine a rabbi's thought, deepen his self-awareness, and sharpen his ability to communicate truth with wisdom and compassion.

Shemuel ben Ali and the Problem of *Tehiyat HaMetim*

Intentionally or not, HaRambam's failure to formulate the rabbinic doctrine of bodily resurrection that will take place during the Messianic era explicitly, became the source of some of the fiercest attacks against both him and his rabbinic authority. The criticism was launched by none other than the saintly Shemuel ben Ali, one of the most respected rabbinic figures of the age. Ben Ali carefully examined HaRambam's presentation of eschatological matters and concluded that the "Spanish" scholar had deviated from accepted rabbinic belief.

This controversy struck at the very heart of HaRambam's credibility. Questions regarding resurrection and the World to Come were not viewed as secondary theological matters, but as defining principles of Jewish faith. Consequently, accusations of deviation carried enormous religious and communal weight.

It is therefore significant that this was one of the rare occasions in which HaRambam felt compelled to respond directly and publicly to his critic(s). In his famous *Essay on Resurrection* (*Ma'amar Tehiyyat HaMetim*), he clarified his position, reaffirmed his belief in bodily resurrection, thereby defending himself against charges of heresy. At the same time, the episode reveals how deeply criticism affected him when he believed his words had been misunderstood or when his commitment to foundational rabbinic beliefs was called into question.

Several observations stand out in this treatise. For starters, HaRambam never mentions Shemuel ben Ali by name. We know for a fact that he was aware of Ben Ali's attacks because HaRambam mentions him in various correspondences to colleagues and supporters. The absence of Shemuel ben Ali's name from the *Treatise on Resurrection* itself is noteworthy. It suggests that HaRambam wanted the essay to function not merely as a personal rebuttal (which would give Ben Ali too much credit), but as a principled theological clarification addressed to the broader Jewish world.

HaRambam generally avoided naming his opponents directly. Instead, he refers more broadly to those who misunderstood, distorted, or maliciously interpreted his words. This indirect style is characteristic of many of his polemical writings. Even when deeply wounded by criticism, he often preferred to address arguments rather than publicly embarrass specific rabbinic figures.

That said, in private correspondence and in references preserved elsewhere, HaRambam clearly alludes to Shemuel ben Ali and his camp with much sharper language. Some sources preserve remarks in which he describes Ben Ali dismissively and criticizes the intellectual quality of the attacks against him.

Noteworthy is the fact that while the *Treatise on Resurrection* is indeed provocative, it has rarely been studied as a philosophically significant work in its own right. Its true value may lie elsewhere. More than anything, the document provides profound insight into the personality of HaRambam, his intellectual posture, and his relationship to the broader masses whom he knew would be reading the treatise.

The essay is interspersed with revealing comments regarding his literary and pedagogic methods, the intellectual standards he expected of his readers, and the goals that animated the composition

of the *Mishneh Torah*. Throughout the work, HaRambam repeatedly returns to questions of interpretation, method, language, and the dangers of superficial reading. One senses that he is deeply frustrated by readers who approach complex theological subjects without sufficient intellectual discipline or philosophical sensitivity.

What ultimately emerges from the treatise is not merely a defense of bodily resurrection, but a broader defense of HaRambam's method, his philosophical conception of religion, and his overall intellectual project. In many respects, the work reads less as a narrow rebuttal to criticism concerning resurrection and more as a passionate attempt to explain how Judaism itself must be studied, understood, and transmitted.

> The fact is that when we ventured forth in a pioneering effort to compose a work concerning the laws of the Torah and the elucidation of its commandments, we intended thereby to fulfill the will of God, blessed be He, not to seek recompense or honor from men, but to smooth the path, interpret, and, as we thought necessary, help those who could not understand the words of Torah scholars, of blessed memory, who preceded us, to understand the….
>
> But if it proves otherwise, and we have not succeeded in clarifying or simplifying the subject to any greater extent than our predecessors did in their works, then we have at least earned God's reward; as the Talmud teaches, 'God desires the heart.'[5]

Following the publication of *Ma'amar Teḥiyyat HaMetim*, several Yemenite scholars reached out to HaRambam and requested further clarification on aspects of his position on resurrection and the World to Come.[6] HaRambam responded at length, carefully restating and refining his views. He emphasized that the resurrection of the dead is a genuine miracle and a foundational principle of Judaism, *one that cannot be fully rationalized nor reduced to metaphorical or figurative interpretation*.

At the same time, HaRambam continued to distinguish between the temporary miracle of bodily resurrection and the ultimate spiritual nature of *Olam HaBa*, which he consistently understood as

[5] *Ma'amar Tehiyat HaMetim*, see Introduction
[6] As noted by HaRambam in his letter to his student see Shailat Volume 2 page 310

an incorporeal state of intellectual and spiritual bliss.[7] This distinction, however, only deepened the suspicions of some of his critics.

The response eventually reached Shemuel ben Ali, who reacted sharply. He accused HaRambam of concealing his true beliefs and insisted that, despite his clarifications, HaRambam did not genuinely affirm bodily resurrection in the traditional rabbinic sense. According to Ben Ali, HaRambam's true position reduced ultimate reward to a purely spiritual existence in *Olam HaBa*, thereby undermining the classical rabbinic doctrine of resurrection.

Ra'avad: "He intended to improve but did not improve."

One of the sharpest and most sustained criticisms directed against HaRambam during his lifetime concerned his deliberate omission of Talmudic sources in the *Mishneh Torah*. Among the earliest and most forceful critics was Abraham ben David of Posquières, France, known as Ra'avad. His critique was sharp, persistent, and at times deeply confrontational. In one of his early *Hassagot*, he castigates HaRambam for "forsaking the way of all the authors and scholars who preceded him."

> He intended to improve but did not improve, for he forsook the way of all authors who preceded him. They always adduced proof for their statements and cited the proper authority for each conclusion; this was very useful, for sometimes the judge would be inclined to forbid or permit something, and his proof would be based on some other authority. Had he known that there was a greater authority who interpreted the law differently, he might have retracted. Now, therefore, I do not know why I should reverse my tradition or my corroborative views because of the compendium of this author. If the one who differs with me is greater and I, fine, but if I am greater than he, why should I annul my opinion in deference to him? Moreover, there are matters concerning the Geonim who disagree with this author. It is as if he chose one opinion over the other. Why should I rely upon his choice when it is not acceptable to me, and I do not know

[7] See MT Hilkhot Teshuvah chapters 8 & 9; Commentary of Mishna Sanhedrin chapter 10; Moreh HaNevuchim 1:74, 3:27 & 3:51 and more.

whether the author of this compendium is competent to select? **It can only be that 'an overbearing (bad) spirit is in him.'**[8]

At the heart of Ra'avad's criticism stood a profound methodological concern. By omitting citations, proofs, and the names of earlier authorities, HaRambam presented rulings in a definitive and highly authoritative fashion. Ra'avad feared that readers would come to regard the *Mishneh Torah* as the final and unquestionable word in Halakha, detached from the Talmud's dialectical process. For Ra'avad, this represented not merely a stylistic issue, but a dangerous transformation in the nature of Torah study and rabbinic authority.

Ra'avad therefore insists that HaRambam's rulings should not be accepted uncritically or authoritatively, precisely because the work does not disclose its sources or argumentative foundations. He goes so far as to state that after reviewing the *Mishneh Torah* in its entirety, he found rulings that were mistaken, others based on faulty inferences, and still others that merely reflected one possible conclusion arbitrarily selected by the author from among competing Talmudic interpretations.

The intensity of Ra'avad's critique reveals the revolutionary nature of the *Mishneh Torah* itself. HaRambam was not merely writing another halakhic commentary; he was attempting to reorganize and systematize the entirety of Jewish law into a clear, accessible, and self-contained code. To admirers, this was an act of genius. To critics such as Ra'avad, it risked severing Halakha from the living discourse and argumentative texture of the Talmudic tradition.

Once this criticism was articulated, it reverberated throughout the Jewish world and was repeated for centuries thereafter. The charge that Maimonides had omitted the Talmudic sources underlying his rulings became one of the defining critiques of the *Mishneh Torah* and continued to shape rabbinic discussions for nearly four hundred years.

What is particularly noteworthy is that this criticism was not limited to HaRambam's adversaries. Even admirers of the *Mishneh Torah* and devoted students of his thought acknowledged the

[8] *Hassagot HaRa'avad* Introduction to the Mishneh Torah, also see MT Hilkhot Teshuvah 3:3, 6:5 and Ishut 3:20

problem. Thus, Menahem ben Solomon Meiri, one of the great medieval French luminaries and an admirer of HaRambam, also noted this deficiency in the *Mishneh Torah*.[9]

Even the illustrious Rabbi Yoseph Karo, author of the Bet Yoseph, Shulkhan Arukh, and Kesef Mishneh, admits that he would have liked to have seen the sources in the Mishneh Torah.

> Because he brings only one opinion, while I had to elaborate and write the opinions of other codifiers and their reasons.[10]

In the introduction to his Kesef Mishneh, he describes some of the inherent difficulties with HaRambam's Mishneh Torah and his intention to correct them. There he writes:

> The generations that followed him could not understand his works well…for the source of every decision is concealed from them…One wrote a commentary called the Maggid Mishneh in which he cited the sources of every law, but he only illuminated six (of the fourteen) volumes, so I, the youngster, arose to write the source of every decision and explain his statements.[11]

There were detractors who were so persistent in their criticism that they even took offense at the very title HaRambam gave to his legal code, *Mishneh Torah*. To many of his opponents, the title itself reflected an audacious and troubling presumption: namely, that the *Mishneh Torah* could serve as the sole companion to the biblical text, thereby diminishing the centrality of the Talmud and its vast interpretive tradition.

HaRambam himself famously writes in his introduction that a person should first study the Written Torah and then turn directly to the *Mishneh Torah*, without needing any other book in between. To his admirers, this statement reflected a bold attempt to organize and preserve the entirety of Halakha in a clear and accessible form. To his detractors, however, it sounded dangerously close to replacing the Talmud's living discourse with a single authoritative code.

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[9] Menachem HaMe'iri Bet Habechira Introduction
[10] Bet Yoseph, Tur Orach Haim Introduction
[11] Yoseph Karo, Kesef Mishneh, Introduction

The opposition, therefore, was not merely about style or citation. It reflected a deeper anxiety regarding rabbinic authority, intellectual independence, and the future of Torah study itself. Critics feared that students would no longer immerse themselves in the Talmud's complexity, debate, and dialectical reasoning, but would instead rely exclusively on HaRambam's conclusions. In this sense, even the title *Mishneh Torah* became symbolic of the larger controversy surrounding the revolutionary nature of his project. In many European circles, the Mishneh Torah was referred to as the *Yad HaChazakah* and was never called by the title HaRambam chose.[12]

The persistence of this critique demonstrates how revolutionary HaRambam's literary project truly was. By presenting Halakha in a clear, systematic, and self-contained form, he created a work of unprecedented accessibility and authority. Yet precisely because of that clarity and decisiveness, many scholars feared that the dialectical process of Talmudic study—the very give-and-take that defined rabbinic learning—would gradually be eclipsed.

HaRambam's Response

HaRambam was fully aware of this critique. He addresses it in several places throughout his writings and appears to have anticipated such a response from certain segments of his readership even before the *Mishneh Torah* began circulating widely.

He takes these accusations regarding the composition of the *Mishneh Torah* seriously. He insists that he did not author the work for personal glory, prestige, or dominance.[13] Rather, he explains that he composed it out of a practical need—for both himself and others—to create an accessible and organized reference work on Jewish law. He emphatically denies any intention to replace or supersede either the Torah or the Talmud. Instead, the *Mishneh Torah* was meant to serve as a guide through the overwhelming complexity of rabbinic literature, preserving Jewish law by rendering it coherent, systematic, and usable for the broader Jewish community.

In a now-famous letter to Pinchas ben Meshullam, HaRambam admits that the Mishneh Torah has a shortcoming, albeit a shortcoming flowing from the work's strength. He continues to

[12] Isadore Twersky, Introduction to the Code of Maimonides, page 105
[13] Shailat Volume 1 Page 300

explain that he is satisfied with the work by and large, but he admits that it is sometimes difficult to rediscover the sources of certain rulings. He even recalls one occasion when a judge asked him to see the source of a Pesak, and he could not find it. He writes of his intention to compose a companion work to the *Mishneh Torah*—a kind of sourcebook that would identify the Talmudic origins and deliberative foundations underlying his rulings.[14] At first glance, this appears to be a tacit admission that omitting the sources may have been a mistake. Indeed, many scholars have interpreted the letter in precisely this fashion.

Yet I tend to concur with Isadore Twersky, who argues that this should not be understood as an admission of error at all. Rather, HaRambam remained fundamentally committed to the literary and pedagogic structure of the *Mishneh Torah* exactly as he conceived it. The omission of sources was not accidental, nor was it a lapse in scholarly rigor; it was a deliberate methodological decision designed to produce a clear, systematic, and accessible code of law.[15]

From this perspective, the proposed companion volume would not have altered the essential nature of the *Mishneh Torah* but merely supplemented it for advanced students seeking the underlying discussions and proofs. In other words, had HaRambam written the *Mishneh Torah* again, he likely would have composed it in precisely the same fashion. The criticism may have prompted clarification and expansion but not retreat from the revolutionary vision that animated the work from the very beginning.

Here as well, HaRambam never explicitly mentions the names of his critics, nor does he engage in a detailed, point-by-point defense of his literary decisions. Instead, he responds with remarkable confidence and intellectual authority. He stands firmly behind the *Mishneh Torah* and the revolutionary vision that produced it.

What emerges from his responses is the sense that HaRambam believed his work would ultimately justify itself through its clarity, precision, and usefulness. Those capable of appreciating the method and intellectual rigor underlying the work would benefit immensely

[14] Shailat Volume 2 pages 442-445
[15] See Shailat Letter to the Rabbis of Lunel, where HaRambam asks how it is that the Nation of Israel does not have a code of law like all other nations. Also Volume 2 page 301

from it. Those who remained committed to criticizing it, however, were often viewed by him as either incapable of understanding his larger purpose or simply not worth engaging at length.

There is something strikingly restrained in this posture. HaRambam does not descend into endless polemics or personal attacks against his detractors. Rather, he appears convinced that serious students of Torah will recognize the value of the *Mishneh Torah* on their own. His confidence is therefore not merely personal arrogance, as some of his critics charged, but the confidence of a scholar who believed deeply in the necessity and enduring significance of his project.

Novelty often disturbs, especially in the realm of religion and tradition, where continuity and preservation are deeply cherished values. As has been well documented, Maimonides broke dramatic new ground in the way Jewish law was traditionally organized and presented.

As was noted earlier, HaRambam sought to produce a practical and accessible legal compendium that would enable any educated Jew to live according to Halakha without becoming lost in the vast and often difficult sea of Talmudic discourse. Organized with remarkable scientific precision and conceptual clarity, the *Mishneh Torah* transformed the study of Jewish law into something orderly, structured, and immediately usable.

The *Mishneh Torah* of HaRambam achieved immediate popularity throughout the Jewish communities of the Near East. Jacob Mann, one of the pioneering scholars to publish letters discovered in the Cairo Geniza, uncovered correspondence between a merchant traveling in Qal‘a and a friend in Egypt, praising the Mishneh Torah and requesting a copy of a letter in which HaRambam had responded to criticism of his halakhic rulings. Such evidence demonstrates not only the rapid circulation of the work but also the widespread public interest in both the code itself and the controversies it generated.

Indeed, HaRambam’s *Teshuvot* are replete with citations from the *Mishneh Torah*, strongly suggesting its extensive use in rabbinical courts, schools, and centers of learning. Teachers and judges alike appear to have relied upon the work as a practical legal reference.

The unintended result of such work could erode the rabbinic monopoly on halakhic decision-making. By placing a clear, organized, and accessible code of Jewish law into the hands of the broader public, HaRambam fundamentally altered the relationship between scholarship, authority, and religious practice. No longer would presumed Talmudic expertise necessarily be the exclusive gateway to practical Halakhic knowledge.

For the physician, scholar, and communal leader Isaac ben Sheshet HaNassi, this dynamic lay at the heart of much of the opposition to the *Mishneh Torah*. In his view, many of HaRambam's detractors were motivated less by pure devotion to Torah than by anxiety over the shifting nature of rabbinic authority itself. For him, the rejection of HaRambam and his monumental achievement often appeared narrow, self-serving, and at times even perverse. For HaRambam, the *Mishneh Torah* was a means of elevating Torah knowledge and nothing more.

Yonatan ben David HaKohen of Lunel (1135-1215)

A contemporary of Abraham ben David of Posquières, Jonathan ben David HaKohen maintained a respectful and intellectually rich correspondence with HaRambam. Unlike some of his countrymen in Provence, who viewed HaRambam's philosophical and literary innovations with suspicion, Yonatan HaKohen, it appears, had a meaningful appreciation for HaRambam's work and was notably generous in his praise.

In one of his letters, he opens by acknowledging the importance of secular wisdom and philosophical inquiry, revealing himself to be far more broadly oriented intellectually than many of his contemporaries. Yonatan HaKohen stood out not only as a distinguished Talmudic scholar but also as a cultured and educated figure within the rabbinic circles of Provence. At the same time, he appears to have possessed strong mystical and ascetic tendencies, combining rigorous scholarship with spiritual intensity.

It was precisely this rare synthesis that drew him so strongly to HaRambam. In HaRambam, he encountered a teacher after his own heart: a master of Halakha, a disciplined rational philosopher, and yet at the same time a profound spiritual soul. HaRambam represented the possibility that intellectual rigor and deep spirituality were not opposing forces, but complementary paths in the service of God.

This impression fueled an ongoing and sustained correspondence between the two scholars.[16] Their exchange demonstrates that alongside the fierce criticism directed at HaRambam during his lifetime, there also existed thoughtful and spiritually sophisticated admirers who recognized in him not merely a legal codifier or philosopher, but one of the great religious personalities of the Jewish tradition.

The issue that came to dominate the first exchange between HaRambam and Yonatan ben David HaKohen concerned the efficacy and legitimacy of astrology. In a letter written around 1193, Yonatan HaKohen requested that HaRambam issue an authoritative statement clarifying whether the stars and planets exercise any influence over human destiny and earthly affairs.

The question was hardly academic. Throughout much of the ancient and medieval world, astrology was regarded as a serious discipline and was accepted by many philosophers, scientists, and religious thinkers. Indeed, it is important to recognize that a significant number of post-biblical rabbinic authorities accepted astrology on some level. Despite the Torah's repeated warnings against the magical and divinatory practices of Egyptian and Canaanite astrologers, necromancers, and soothsayers, statements affirming astral influence appear within rabbinic literature itself.

One of the most famous examples appears in the Talmud, where Rava teaches:

> Life, children, and sustenance depend not upon merit, but upon the planets.[17]

Such statements led many medieval scholars to believe that celestial bodies exerted a genuine influence on human existence. Astrology was therefore often viewed not as idolatry, but as a sophisticated science through which divine influence operated within the natural world.

That HaRambam adopted such a dramatically different position on astrology is remarkable in itself and reflects a profound sense of courage and intellectual confidence. Rejecting astrology almost entirely, HaRambam regarded it not merely as intellectually unfounded and false, but it

[16] See the beautiful praise HaRambam showers on Yonatan of Lunil Shailat Volume 2 pages 500-501
[17] TB Mo'ed Katan 28a. See also Avraham ibn Ezra, Sefer Reshit Hokhma, Moshe ben Yaacov Coucy who insisted that foretelling based on Biblical verses was permitted; Nachamanides who insisted that planets control human destiny with a single exception being Israel.

was tantamount to idolatry.[18] Equally remarkable, however, was the fact that Yonatan HaKohen entertained serious doubts regarding astrology at all. At a time when belief in astral influence was nearly universal among philosophers, scientists, and rabbinic scholars alike, Yonatan HaKohen's willingness to question its validity reflects unusual intellectual honesty and rigor. His inquiry to HaRambam demonstrates an openness to philosophical reevaluation that sets him apart from many of his contemporaries in Provence.

His response to Yonatan HaKohen would become one of the clearest and most forceful articulations of HaRambam's broader struggle against superstition, magical thinking, and religious irrationalism within Judaism. In this remarkable letter, HaRambam does far more than reject astrology; he seeks to establish an entire intellectual and theological framework through which Judaism must understand nature, providence, and human freedom.[19]

What is especially striking is the way HaRambam formulates his response. He writes almost as though Yonatan HaKohen had never encountered the relevant rulings already codified in the *Mishneh Torah*. In effect, HaRambam transforms a private correspondence into a broader educational and philosophical statement addressed not only to a learned scholar but also to the wider Jewish public.

The letter, therefore, operates on multiple levels simultaneously. For the scholar, it presents rigorous arguments grounded in reason, Torah, and intellectual consistency. For the ordinary reader, it offers a powerful warning against the seductive pull of superstition and the human tendency to surrender moral responsibility to imagined cosmic forces. HaRambam's concern was not merely that astrology was scientifically false, but that it cultivated intellectual passivity and weakened belief in human free will, moral accountability, and rational religious faith.

In this sense, the response reflects HaRambam's larger pedagogic method. Even when addressing an individual scholar, he often wrote with an awareness that his words would circulate publicly and shape the intellectual culture of the Jewish community at large. He recognized that all writing is public.[20]

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[18] MT Avodah Zara 2:8-9 note Ra'avad's gloss on these rulings
[19] Shailat Volume 2 Pages 478-490
[20] See my *The Mysticism of Andalusia: Exploring HaRambam's Mystical Tradition, 2nd Edition,* Introduction

Following the query regarding astrology, Yonatan HaKohen and others, possibly Raavad, jointly sent HaRambam a letter containing twenty-four halakhic questions on the *Mishneh Torah*. It remains unclear whether these twenty-four questions represented the entirety of their concerns or merely a select sample of broader criticisms. It is also noteworthy that many of the questions focus specifically on matters of faith, prayer, and practices that border on superstition and popular religion. In addition, five of the questions point to possible textual errors introduced by copyists of the *Mishneh Torah*, an indication that the work was already circulating widely in manuscript form and that variations between copies had begun to emerge.

HaRambam's response is striking for both its tone and substance. Rather than reacting defensively, he answered with patience, precision, and intellectual generosity. He did not dismiss the questions as insolent challenges, nor did he treat his correspondents as adversaries. On the contrary, he praised them warmly and recognized the seriousness of their inquiry. He wrote to his student Ibn Aknin:

> Their letter testifies to the purity of their souls, and that they pursue the sciences and investigate the discipline of knowledge, and that they desire to ascend the rungs of true understanding, to find proper teachings and authentic traditions, to understand the issue and its interpretation, to open what is closed, and to straighten what is bent.[21]

This remarkable response reveals much about HaRambam's intellectual character. He viewed rigorous questioning not as a threat, but as evidence of sincerity and devotion to truth. Scholars who carefully examined his work were not enemies; they were partners in the pursuit of wisdom and halakhic clarity.

The correspondence also establishes an important historical point regarding HaRambam's relationship with his own writings. He understood that errors could emerge through transmission and copying, and he welcomed careful scrutiny of the text. The very existence of these exchanges demonstrates his ongoing commitment to refinement, accuracy, and precision. Far from presenting the *Mishneh Torah* as an untouchable work beyond review, HaRambam engaged criticism seriously and used correspondence as a means of clarification and correction.

[21] Shailat Volume 2 page 557

More broadly, this exchange reflects the larger Andalusian intellectual culture in which HaRambam operated — a world that valued disciplined inquiry, careful reasoning, textual precision, and the honest pursuit of truth. For HaRambam, Torah scholarship demanded not blind acceptance, but intellectual integrity.

Rabbi Pinchas ben Meshullam HaDayan

Soon after arriving in Egypt, HaRambam was appointed Dayan of the Jewish community. How this appointment came about so quickly after his arrival remains unclear. In a letter written by HaRambam in 1185 to Yefet ben Eliyahu HaDayan, HaRambam acknowledges Yefet's congratulatory remarks upon his receiving *harsha'ah* — a technical term associated with judicial authority and appointment to the rabbinate or dayanut.[22]

By that time, however, HaRambam had already been serving as a Dayan in Fostat for several years, suggesting that his authority may have extended well beyond the city's boundaries. It is possible that the Jewish leadership of Egypt quickly recognized in him not only extraordinary halakhic mastery, but also the intellectual breadth, political wisdom, and personal dignity necessary for communal leadership during a difficult and unstable period in Jewish history.

There were occasions when HaRambam clearly recognized that his towering authority and the widespread popularity of the *Mishneh Torah* were affecting established communal leaders. One such case involved the elderly and highly respected Dayan Pinchas ben Meshullam, originally from Byzantium and later settled in Alexandria. Pinchas was a learned and accomplished rabbinic scholar whose halakhic rulings increasingly came under scrutiny by educated laymen who now had access to HaRambam's *Mishneh Torah*. The accessibility and clarity of the code had begun to reshape communal dynamics in subtle yet significant ways.

Pinchas himself addressed a series of questions to HaRambam, challenging specific rulings found in the *Mishneh Torah*. These were not merely abstract intellectual inquiries or theoretical halakhic discussions. If HaRambam indeed held an official position overseeing the various *Batei Din* throughout Egypt, then these challenges must also be understood within a broader context of authority, jurisdiction, and rabbinic leadership.

[22] Shailat, Letter to Yefet page 230

In this light, Pinchas's questions take on a more territorial and institutional character. They were not simply directed at an author; they were directed at a sitting judicial authority whose rulings carried practical legal weight within the Jewish community. To challenge the *Mishneh Torah* was, in some sense, to challenge the growing centralization of halakhic authority around HaRambam himself.

This may help explain both the intensity and the sensitivity surrounding some of the early correspondences between Pinchas HaDayan and HaRambam. Local rabbinic authorities may well have feared that students, judges, and laymen would increasingly bypass traditional dialectical study and rely directly upon HaRambam's rulings.

In his correspondence with Pinchas HaDayan, there were moments when HaRambam responded with striking bluntness and impatience, and other moments when his tone was noticeably more conciliatory and accommodating. This fluctuation reveals much about both the nature of the disputes and HaRambam's broader approach to rabbinic leadership.

At times, HaRambam clearly viewed Pinchas's criticisms as misguided or unnecessarily combative, particularly when they challenged rulings that he regarded as well-established or logically self-evident. In such instances, he could be sharp, even impatient, especially when he believed that his words or methodology had been misunderstood. HaRambam possessed enormous confidence in his intellectual project and in the integrity of his halakhic reasoning. He was not hesitant to defend his conclusions forcefully when he felt that truth and clarity were at stake.

In a letter written around 1179, HaRambam makes the following harsh remark to Pinchas, who, as far as HaRambam could see, had ignored his guidance regarding a particular halakhic ruling:

> The way I always deal with those who cling to their stupidity and are unwilling to change their minds is to keep silent and let them do as they please.[23]

The sharpness of this statement is striking. HaRambam was generally careful in his correspondence with rabbinic colleagues, especially figures of standing and authority. Here,

[23] Shailat Letter to Pinchas HaDayan Page 447, also see Volume 2 page 454

however, one senses genuine frustration. Pinchas had apparently persisted in maintaining a position which HaRambam regarded not merely as incorrect, but as stubbornly resistant to reason and halakhic clarity.

In many ways, this statement functioned as a kind of private *herem* — not a formal excommunication in the legal sense, but a deliberate withdrawal of intellectual and rabbinic engagement. HaRambam was, in effect, declaring that continued debate had become futile. Rather than endlessly arguing with someone unwilling to reconsider his position, he chose silence and disengagement.

This response reflects an important aspect of HaRambam's intellectual temperament. He believed deeply in the power of reasoned argument, evidence, and clear analysis. But he also believed that an argument has limits. Once a discussion ceased to be a genuine search for truth and became rooted in obstinacy or ego, further engagement was, in his eyes, spiritually and intellectually counterproductive.

Yet there are also moments in the correspondence when HaRambam adopts a softer, more diplomatic tone. He praises Pinchas's scholarship, responds respectfully to difficult questions, and demonstrates a willingness to clarify, explain, and even acknowledge where his formulations may have created confusion. These more conciliatory passages suggest that HaRambam understood the delicate political and communal realities surrounding rabbinic authority. He was not merely debating abstract ideas; he was navigating relationships with prominent rabbinic figures whose cooperation and respect were essential to the stability of Jewish communal life in Egypt.

This duality[24] — firmness alongside conciliation — is characteristic of HaRambam's leadership generally. He believed deeply in intellectual rigor and in the necessity of preserving halakhic truth, but he also understood that leadership required patience, diplomacy, and sensitivity to communal tensions. His correspondence with Pinchas therefore offers a rare glimpse into HaRambam not only as jurist and philosopher, but as a living communal leader struggling to balance conviction with responsibility.

[24] See his Teshuvot to Rabbi Pinchas in Shailat Volume 2

In another correspondence, Pinchas raised two questions. One regarding the requirement of immersion in a mikveh for prayer leaders who had experienced a nocturnal emission and the validity of marriage effected through *kinyan*. HaRambam appears to have been fully aware that Pinchas's authority was being challenged and that younger scholars in Alexandria were invoking the *Mishneh Torah* as an authoritative legal standard against the rulings of the aging Dayan. There is even evidence suggesting that a younger judge in Alexandria sought to undermine Pinchas's standing by appealing directly to HaRambam's code.

Regarding the question of immersion in the mikveh for prayer leaders. Although HaRambam himself adopted a more lenient position and recognized that there was no binding Talmudic requirement mandating such stringency, he nevertheless deferred to Rabbi Pinchas's authority on the matter within his community. HaRambam understood that, in addition to Halakha, communal policy was very important.[25] This response reveals an unusual degree of humility, pastoral sensitivity, and commitment to preserving communal peace and, most importantly, the dignity of an elder rabbinic figure.

What is especially striking is the tone of HaRambam's response. Rather than asserting his authority triumphantly or dismissing the concerns of the elderly scholar, as he had previously done, he answers with restraint, humility, and remarkable sensitivity. He addresses each question respectfully and carefully reassures his correspondent that the *Mishneh Torah* was never intended to weaken or diminish the authority of established rabbinic scholars. On the contrary, the work was meant to serve as a practical tool for learned rabbis and as a guide to assist—not replace—the ongoing study and application of Talmudic law.

In that response, he explains how the *Mishneh Torah* was designed as a supplement to the study of the Talmud itself.

> I [HaRambam] never dreamt of suggesting that one should no longer busy himself with the study of Talmud or Alfasi or other compendiums. You fail to understand the separate perspective and purpose of the Talmudic-style case book and of a Mishnah-style code. The former interprets the latter regulates.[26]

[25] See Shailat Volume 2 pages 463-464
[26] Shailat Volume 2 page 439

In this exchange, one encounters a very different side of HaRambam: not the embattled intellectual defending himself against hostile detractors, but a thoughtful and self-aware rabbinic leader attempting to preserve both scholarship and communal dignity in a changing religious landscape.

Zekhariah ben Berakhel

Aleppo in the late twelfth century was an important center of Jewish scholarship and rabbinic activity. It was there that an Av Bet Din and communal fundraiser, Zekhariah ben Barakhel, composed a polemical document criticizing various halakhic rulings and interpretations advanced by HaRambam in his *Commentary on the Mishnah*. Although the original document has been lost, we possess the emotionally charged response of HaRambam's student, Yoseph ben Yudah ibn Aknin, who, at the time, was residing in Aleppo and reacted bitterly to both the tone and the substance of the critique.

The controversy appears to have been driven by more than purely scholarly concerns. HaRambam's commentary on Mishna had already been published and widely circulated by this time. Zekhariah had reportedly been appointed by the Resh Galuta of Baghdad and ordained specifically for this mission to Aleppo. Beneath the surface of the halakhic debate lay a growing political anxiety among the rabbinic leadership of Baghdad, particularly within the circles associated with the Resh Galuta and Shemuel ben Ali. There was increasing concern that their traditional authority was being weakened by the extraordinary popularity of HaRambam and the widespread acceptance of the *Mishneh Torah* throughout the Near Eastern Jewish world.

This tension is especially noteworthy because HaRambam himself explicitly affirmed the legitimacy and authority of the Resh Galuta of Baghdad.[27] Yet despite these affirmations, the practical impact of his writings inevitably shifted the landscape of rabbinic authority. His works offered direct access to organized Halakha in a manner previously unavailable, thereby reducing dependence upon older institutional structures.

It remains unclear what direct role, if any, HaRambam himself played in the dispute between ibn Aknin and Zekhariah. What is clear, however, is that HaRambam encouraged ibn Aknin to

[27] MT Sanhedrin 4:13-15

establish a *Bet Midrash* in Baghdad devoted primarily to the study of the *Mishneh Torah* together with the halakhot of Rabbi Isaac Alfasi. Such a move could hardly have been interpreted as religiously neutral. Inevitably, it represented a challenge—an authentic response - whether intentional or not—to the intellectual dominance and institutional authority of the Resh Galuta and, in particular, to the circle of Shemuel ben Ali.

HaRambam's response to the opposition was not political maneuvering, personal attacks, or institutional warfare. His response was to study more Torah, deepen one's knowledge, refine one's thinking, and maintain a life of moral discipline and integrity. That, ultimately, was his answer to his critics.[28]

Yoseph HaMa'aravi

In a responsum addressed to Joseph HaMa'aravi, it becomes evident that Samuel ben Ali publicly challenged several of HaRambam's rulings in *Hilkhot Shabbat*. One ruling in particular concerned travel on broad riverways during Shabbat. HaRambam equated such travel with ocean travel and therefore permitted it under certain conditions.[29]

Shemuel ben Ali responded sharply and dismissively. In his critique, he implied that the extraordinary praise and authority accorded to HaRambam were undeserved and exaggerated. The disagreement was therefore not merely technical or halakhic; it reflected the growing tension between the Baghdadi rabbinic establishment and the expanding influence of HaRambam throughout the Jewish world.

What is particularly striking, however, is the manner in which HaRambam responded. His tone remained scholarly, restrained, and entirely dispassionate. He never addressed the insulting rhetoric or personal tone employed by Shemuel ben Ali. Instead, HaRambam confined himself strictly to the legal issue at hand.[30] He calmly directed HaMaravi and Ben Ali to the relevant Talmudic passages supporting his position and gently reminded them that these very sources were readily available in the yeshivot of Baghdad.

[28] Shailat Volume 1 pages 300-312
[29] Shailat Volume 1 page 277
[30] Shailat Volume 1 Pages 285-288,

In the end, such matters were often resolved through local communal policy and practice rather than abstract legal theory alone. Yet this responsum remains a powerful example of how great leaders respond to criticism. HaRambam demonstrates that intellectual confidence does not require anger, personal attacks, or polemics. He answers criticism not through insult, but through clarity, scholarship, restraint, and unwavering composure.

Final Thought

As one can see, HaRambam gauged each challenge and each criticism independently. As the leader of the Jewish community, he allowed himself to respond differently depending on the circumstances and the individuals involved. When his opponents remained anonymous, he often did not mince words. Certain ideas were dismissed as "insane," "a proposition too unsubstantial to undertake a refutation of it," "a *shibbush*," "an enormous *shibbush*," or a "bizarre imagining," while other arguments were described as "containing much error and lack of reasoning." At times, he referred dismissively to the customs and practices of ignoramuses. Concerning one unnamed dayan, HaRambam wrote that the man was "completely mistaken," while another he characterized as a complete ignoramus.[31]

Yet these sharp formulations should not be misunderstood as mere arrogance or personal hostility. HaRambam believed that ideas mattered profoundly because mistaken ideas produced mistaken religious lives.

HaRambam was not afraid to admit errors. On more than one occasion, he explicitly acknowledged that he had made a mistake. In his responses to questioners, he sometimes conceded the point directly, stating that the text in the *Mishneh Torah* should be corrected and asking the recipient to emend his own copy accordingly.[32] There is, in fact, abundant evidence that HaRambam continually revised, corrected, and refined his writings throughout his lifetime.

This willingness to revise his own work is deeply significant. It demonstrates that, despite his enormous intellectual confidence, HaRambam did not regard himself as infallible. His

[31] See J. Blau 2nd Edition *Maimonides Responsa* (Jerusalem, 1986) pages 15, 61, 85, 160, 256, 419, 423, 483, 634, 662, 697, 707

[32] Blau, Responsa 289, also Shailat Letters to the Rabbis of Lunel, and Volume 2 page 301

commitment was not to personal pride, but to truth, precision, and clarity in Torah. The *Mishneh Torah* was not, in his mind, a static monument to his own scholarship, but a living legal work that demanded continual refinement whenever an error, ambiguity, or imprecision was discovered.

At the same time, his readiness to admit error makes his sharp confidence in other matters even more striking. When HaRambam defended a position forcefully, it was not because he lacked the humility to reconsider, but because he genuinely believed the matter had been carefully examined and established correctly. Thus, his intellectual personality combined two qualities rarely found together in equal measure: extraordinary confidence in reason and remarkable honesty when confronted with convincing evidence to the contrary.

In his mind, theological confusion, superstition, and intellectual laziness endangered the integrity of Torah itself. Consequently, when confronting what he regarded as irrationalism or religious error, he often responded with unusual sharpness and absolute confidence. At the same time, when dealing with sincere scholars, students, or communities genuinely seeking understanding, he frequently answered with patience, warmth, and remarkable humility. His responses, therefore, reveal not inconsistency but a leader carefully calibrating his voice according to what he believed the moment required: encouragement for the sincere, clarity for the confused, and forceful criticism for ideas he believed threatened authentic Judaism.

In a letter written toward the end of his life to his beloved student Yoseph ben Yehudah, HaRambam responds to Yoseph's complaint that he had become the subject of false accusations and malicious rumors spread by his enemies. HaRambam encourages his student to ignore such "foolishness" and to concern himself instead with personal moral and intellectual growth.

He then shares something deeply personal. Reflecting on the passage of time and experience, HaRambam explains that he had become "very forgiving." He writes that he eventually learned that the anguish and anger he once felt because of slander had little to do with his enemies' words and much to do with his own youth and inexperience. In a remarkably candid confession, he tells Yoseph:

> When I was your age, and even older, I suffered still more intensely from the emotions that affect you now. I would employ my tongue and pen without restraint to take revenge against men of standing and knowledge who had the temerity to disagree with me… I would make my adversaries weep with my tongue against those in my immediate vicinity, and my pen against those in distant places.[33]

This passage offers one of the most human and revealing glimpses into HaRambam's personality. The great sage who defended truth with extraordinary force also came to recognize the spiritual cost of anger, resentment, and intellectual combativeness. Age and wisdom taught him that not every insult deserved a response and that inner refinement mattered more than victory over one's critics. In the end, perhaps one of HaRambam's greatest achievements was not merely his mastery of law, philosophy, or medicine, but his gradual mastery of himself.

[33] Halkin Epistalae 49-50, 89-90, See also Shailat pages 300 & 306