Summary:

- His real name was Mosche ben Maimon. However, he is known as Maimonides or by the acronym Rambam.
- Maimonides was born in Cordoba, Spain, in 1138 and died in Cairo in 1204. He was a rabbi and physician, including at the court of Sultan Saladin.
- In his works, he dealt with Jewish law and an understanding of religion based on the philosophy of Aristotle.
- Maimonides thus created many enemies within Judaism, but also many admirers beyond Judaism.
- Maimonides is one of the greatest Jewish scholars; his works were published in Arabic, Hebrew and Latin.
- FokusIsrael.ch’s AI-supported interview with him shows that he still has a lot to say to us today. In it, Maimonides comments on his philosophy, our society today, Israel, the ultra-orthodox Jews who do not work, and AI itself.

Rabbi Moshe ben Maimon, why did you move from Spain to Jerusalem and then to Cairo?

Maimonides: The fanatical Almohads (a Berber dynasty from North Africa, ed.) conquered Córdoba in 1148 and forced the Jews to convert, to exile or to death. My family fled in order to preserve Jewish life and faith. We moved via Fez to Acre and Jerusalem to see the Holy Land, but the unsafe conditions under the Crusaders made it impossible to stay. In Cairo (Fustat) we found a stable Jewish community, protection and I had the opportunity to work as a doctor and teacher.

In one sentence, how does your religious teaching differ from that of earlier rabbis?

Maimonides: I combine halacha (the legal basis of Judaism, ed.) with reason and

Aristotelian philosophy: the Torah is not just to be followed, but to be understood intellectually. Man must come closer to God through knowledge in order to overcome prejudices such as the humanization of God.

Your convictions have also earned you a great deal of opposition in Judaism. Why?

Maimonides: Many feared that the systematization in my law book “Mishneh Torah” would make the study of the Talmud superfluous, and that the explanations in my philosophical work “Guide of the Indecisive” – e.g. on miracles, prophecy or angels – would undermine simple faith. They saw reason as a threat to tradition. But the truth endures trials.

What exactly is “Mishneh Torah” and the “Guide of the Indecisive” about?

Maimonides: In my “Mishneh Torah”, I have clearly, logically and completely organized the entire Halacha, i.e. the legal aspects of Judaism. Anyone who knows the written Torah and studies this work no longer needs any other books in order to understand and live all the commandments correctly. They form the practical foundation of an entire Jewish life.

In my “Guide to the Undecided” I show that true philosophy and Torah do not contradict each other. God is absolutely incorporeal and unique. The commandments have deep rational reasons. Through reason and allegorical interpretation, the Torah leads the seeker to the highest knowledge of God.

You wrote the “Mishneh Torah” almost 1000 years ago. Would you write it the same or differently today?

Maimonides: I would adapt it to the new findings in science and society, but the basic principles of halacha would remain the same. I would emphasize the rational justification of the commandments even more, so that the Torah appears to be alive for all times.

For you, religion is something very rational and intellectual. But today religion is often lived very emotionally. Is that a problem?

Maimonides: Yes, unfortunately. Many seek ecstasy in religion instead of knowledge. However, true love of God comes from an intellectual understanding of creation and the commandments. Emotion without understanding leads to superstition; understanding without a heart remains cold. The two must be

combined.

We encounter many fanatics in all religions today, including Judaism. What can we do about it?

Maimonides: Fanaticism in any religion, including Judaism, is a serious aberration. It arises from ignorance, blind literalism and a lack of true knowledge of God. There is only one remedy: thorough study – both of the Torah and of philosophy. Education that enlightens the heart and mind drives out fanaticism. Those who seek God through reason become neither extremists nor indifferent. True piety is moderate, reasonable and serves moral perfection.

As a religious scholar, is it permissible or necessary to be critical of faith and God?

Maimonides: One must be critical of false ideas about God – of the humanization of God, of superstition and naïve belief in miracles. Criticism serves to purify faith through reason, not to cast doubt on God’s existence.

Analytical thinking is central to you. How do you see its ultimate result: artificial intelligence?

Maimonides: Artificial intelligence is a potential tool and an extension of reason if it serves knowledge and the good. But artificial intelligence is and remains a human creation: it has no soul! It poses a threat if it alienates humans from moral responsibility. The mind must dominate artificial intelligence, not the other way around.

Has humanity become wiser in recent centuries? Or does it just know more?”

Maimonides: Thanks to science, she knows infinitely more than she used to. But true wisdom – the combination of knowledge with moral action and the fear of God – has not increased. The increase in knowledge often even serves to destroy.

As a doctor, what is the biggest mental illness today?

Maimonides: The greatest spiritual illness today is ignorance of reason. Fanaticism, materialism and the inability to marvel at creation – all this leads to spiritual emptiness. The cure lies in education and ethics.

Let’s talk politics: Do you see the state of Israel as the beginning of redemption?

Maimonides: The state of Israel is a significant political phenomenon and important because Jews who want to leave other places find a new home in Israel. But full redemption in the religious sense depends on moral action, not politics alone. A Jewish state can pave the way for this, but it is no guarantee.

The Muslim environment in Israel is very hostile to Jews. You were Sultan Saladin’s doctor. How were you treated at Hof?

Maimonides: Saladin and those around him treated me with respect and trust despite my Judaism. I was allowed to practise my faith openly and act as a ‘nagid’, or leader, of the Jewish community.

What is more important to you: being a doctor or a rabbi?

Maimonides: For me, the two are inextricably linked. The body is the vessel of the soul. He who heals the body serves the Torah. In a certain sense, medicine is also a service to God, because it creates an important prerequisite for people to be able to recognize God through a healthy mind.

They work as doctors. Strictly observant Jews in Israel, however, say that they cannot work because otherwise their Torah studies would suffer.

Maimonides: That contradicts tradition! It says: “Beautiful is Torah study with worldly occupation.” Those who live on alms alone and do not work profane the name of God. Even great sages worked as woodcutters or water carriers. Organize your time: Work for a living, study for the soul.

Note: This interview was conducted with the help of the AI assistant Grok. It is based on Maimonides’ historical writings, biography and philosophy, according to ss in modern German. In the coming weeks, we will be holding AI-supported conversations with other personalities from different areas of life – politics, religion, science, culture – who were significant for Judaism and Israel, in order to bring them and their ideas closer to today’s audience. The The first such interview took place with Theodor Herzl the founder of modern Zionism, the second with Chaim WeizmannIsrael’s first president, the third with David Ben-Gurion, the first Prime Minister of Israelthe fourth with Israel’s only female prime minister to date Prime Minister, Golda Meir, the fifth with Anwar Sadat, the Egyptian presidentwho traveled to Jerusalem in 1977 to make peace with Israel, and the sixth with Moses, who led the Jewish people from Egyptian slavery to freedom.