

## Maimonides' *Mishne Torah* –

### A Recommended Masterpiece for the General Public

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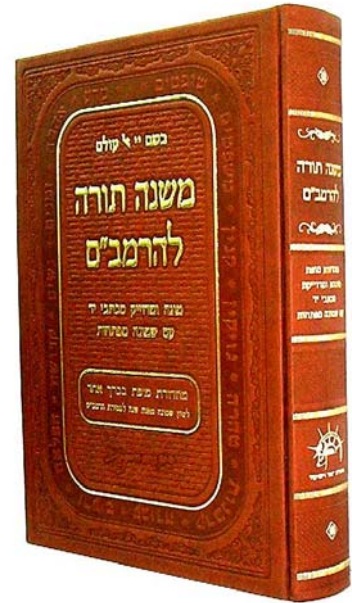
Maimonides' *Mishne Torah* – a masterpiece in a single volume / textual and chief editor: Yochai Makbili / Orvishua Yeshiva Publications, Haifa.



#### The new edition

The writings of Maimonides (1138-1204) have provided employment for generations of commentators and thinkers, poskim and lawmakers. Maimonides' magnum opus is, beyond question, his *Mishne Torah*, the massive work which "collects the entire Oral Law," and which has been widely accorded the appellation *Yad Hachazaka* ("The Strong Hand") due to author's boldness in calling it *Mishne Torah*.

The Makbili edition, which has recently been published in a meticulously-edited and attractive one-volume format, makes good on its claim to be a "precise edition." The editor, R. Yochai Makbili, together with students at the Orvishua hesder yeshiva in Haifa have, over the course of many years' painstaking effort, produced the definitive version of Maimonides' *Mishne Torah*. A version that was all the more difficult to edit in view of the numerous corruptions that befell it over the years, due to: A) Christian



ensorship, innumerable printing errors, "corrections" aimed at bringing the wording of the Gemara into conformity with Maimonides' wording B) the printers' propensity to divide up the halakhot as they saw fit, in contrast to Maimonides' subdivisions aimed at brevity and ease of comprehension. Incorrect grouping of the halakhot frequently leads to incorrect understanding of the halakhot; C) In this edition the magnificent illustrations have been restored in their original state. For this alone the book would be a worthy addition to the library of any student or researcher who appreciates the precise and eloquent language of the Great Eagle.

Beyond this the editors have added numerous indexes, the most important of these being a rich and comprehensive index of concepts and terms

that substantially eases the readers' orientation within the vast sea of the *Mishne Torah*, and an index to Biblical verses with precise quotes that shed new light on Maimonides' interpretation of the verses.



## The need for the edition

The most widely-used edition of the *Mishne Torah* is based on the Vilna Edition, a version that contains many significant differences from the original text. One particularly egregious, and far from uncommon, example of a corruption of Maimonides' original meaning, relates to the issue of punishment by death for eating Matzah on Passover Eve. The Vilna Edition states: "Mekhin oto ad she'tetzeh nafsho" ("Beat him until he dies") (Sefer Zmanim, Hilkhos Chametz Umatzah, Perek 6, Halakha 12). Various implausible supports have been composed for this version, which have led to rabbinical rulings that stray far from Maimonides' intentions: the words "ad she'tetzeh nafsho" do not appear in the extant reliable manuscripts. The Frenkel edition, which aspired to provide the reader with an exact version of the text, retained the early print editions' wording "ad she'tetzeh nafsho;" as in most other cases, the exact wording was included in a marginal "alternative versions" gloss, far from the reader's eye.

Familiar with the exact manuscripts, particularly with Yemenite manuscripts, Rabbi Yosef

Finally, one cannot but mention the attractive binding, convenient format, and superb quality of the paper (1008 pages in all!), which help to make the encounter with Maimonides' formidable enterprise a pleasant one.

Kapakh zt"l, the great translator and editor of Maimonides' works, dedicated his life to producing an exact version based on Yemenite manuscripts, in twenty-four volumes with a comprehensive commentary. The great advantage of the Yemenite manuscripts, beyond their precision, lies in the fact that Maimonides actually served as a *posek* (legal decisor) in Yemen. The exact text under these circumstances thus became a practical guide to life, rather than merely a work to be studied within the walls of the beit midrash. The new Makbili edition presents the authoritatively-exact Rabbi Kapakh edition as the main text, with alternative manuscript versions from other major editions (Rabbi Rabinovich' *Yad Pshuta*, *Rambam Meduyak*, *Mekhon Mamre*, etc.) in the margins, thereby ensuring the inclusion of all the best versions. The editor was right in limiting himself to the inclusion of only the more significant alternative wordings alongside the main text. What is lacking is a basis for comparison with the print version that would enable the reader to form an impression of the version's superior quality. In order to remedy this deficiency, the editor has begun to make available

on the book's website (<http://www.mishnetorah.com>) digital comparisons that demonstrate how different the versions are.

An important advantage of the new edition's presentational format is the ability to see an entire chapter at a glance. This feature benefits not only those studying Maimonides in depth, but also *daf yomi* students seeking practical, concise summaries of the halakhot.

The book includes no commentary, which is, perhaps, problematic in terms of Torah students' usual study habits. But therein lies its unique value. The *Mishne Torah*, as a work that encompasses all aspects of Jewish law, both in terms of day-to-day existence and in anticipation of Messianic times, at the philosophical and practical levels, has been the subject of endless commentary, addressing all facets of



## The vision

Guided by Maimonides' original vision, the editor's effort to provide the reader with a summary of the Oral Law in one precise, deluxe volume has proven successful (how often does one hold a thousand-page book in one's hands?). There is something reminiscent in this edition of the *Mishne Torah* of what we have already become accustomed to in another context: the entire Bible in one volume. That so extraordinary a work could have been produced under the yoke of the exile and foreign rule, in so short a period of time (ten to fourteen years) – a

Maimonides' language, and demanding that the student relate to Maimonides' thought in the light of Talmudic argumentation, thereby causing his actual language to be all but forgotten.

Presenting Maimonides as is, with no commentary, encourages straightforward, unmediated reading, just as Maimonides himself intended. The brief halakhot (the old numbering has wisely been retained), the clear Hebrew (this is the only work that Maimonides composed in the language), the “airiness” of the text – all of these things contribute to a unique learning experience. Only rarely does the reader encounter unique words, such as “Katparas” or “Herhin”, that the editors would have done well to provide brief explanations. But in general, after a few pages, the reading becomes fluent and smooth, as with the Torah itself.

feat unequalled to this day – is nothing short of astounding. For a single volume to contain the entire body of Hebrew law, the laws of the Divine service, the rules of ritual purity, holiday observances; to unite philosophical discursions with instructions for conduct in daily life, the principles of Jewish faith with reflections on human nature, astronomy with the laws of Sabbath observance – the juxtaposition of all of these disparate elements reflects the internal tension by which the work's wholeness is sustained.

The *Mishne Torah* in general, and this edition in particular, are potentially powerful forces for

reviving the Jewish people's vision, for restoring the lost glory of Jewish wisdom, the love of learning and knowledge of the Creator. The editor's aspiration to establish a *quiz of the Oral Law, the "Mishne Torah", as a realization of the vision of the Jewish People, is honed when*



## The indexes

The book's 70 or so pages of indexes supply what has been lacking for many years, as the *Mishne Torah* has come to be the exclusive province of the highly learned. In contrast to the academic indexing that characterizes the Ketuvim edition (based on the print versions and unjustifiably expensive), the indexing here is designed for maximum convenience. The editors were not afraid of their valuable index being stolen, and every entry refers the reader to

*compared with the veteran Bible quiz, thus positioning the Oral Law at the very focus of an experience that is both national and private, both practical and philosophical, and is wholly comprehensive in its scope.*

the exact place (book and halakha number, with no page numbers requiring that only this particular edition be used). This indexing system provides the reader with an exceptional mnemonic tool useful in finding the source of terms (for example: where does the term "Ashera" appear? – in the halakhot of Avodah Zarah (the prohibition against idolatry)).



## Conclusion

After 800 years, this classic masterpiece of Judaism is now being issued in an impressive, clear and accessible edition, one capable of opening up a direct channel to the thought of the Great Eagle for every Jew. This indexed, attractive and high-quality single-volume edition of Maimonides' *Mishne Torah* provides the reader with an incomparable existential experience.

(Rabbi Dr. Eliyahu Aviad, the Jerusalem District Supervisor for the Ministry of Education's Torah Culture Division, has recently published *Guide to the Perplexities of the Soul*, a book that deals with the psychological aspects of Maimonides' thought.)