

# Ever since Moses, there has not been another one like Moses

By David Assaf

If the criterion of an important book is its "rating" – that is, its popularity as expressed by the number of copies sold or printed editions – then there is no doubt that the most important publication of the past 1,000 years has not been a book, but rather a booklet: the Passover Haggadah.

From the earliest days of printing until today, about 5,000 different editions of this beloved booklet have been published. "There is no city or town in the world where there was Jewish printing that did not see the publication of Haggadahs," noted Yisrael Ta-Shma in his introduction to "The Treasury of Haggadahs," a recently published bibliography of Passover Haggadahs edited by Yitzhak Yudlov. "And this," he adds, "cannot be said of any other Hebrew book, not even the Bible, the siddur (prayer book) or the Mishnah."

But the criterion of distribution is not only not "serious," it is also unfair, as at least half of the past millennium went by before the Hebrew printing press was invented. The laws of survival in a world of manuscript books were far more cruel than those in the world of print: Only the most important books were copied and studied, and only they ultimately earned eternal life on the altar of print. Hundreds of years of research at the Cairo *genizah* (document repository) have taught us how fragile, arbitrary, partial and random is our knowledge of the past and of the books and the creative world of our ancestors.

Were we to ask Rabbi Moshe Ben Maimon (Maimonides, 1135-1204) what was, in his opinion, the most important book, we can assume that he would proudly indicate his own book, the *Sefer Mishnah Torah*. This book, commonly known as "The Strong Arm," was completed around 1180, when the author was about 45. For ten straight years – he himself said – he worked on the book, and those who read and study it find it hard to believe that it took only a decade to write.

Maimonides himself wrote in the introduction that with the publication of his book there was no need for any additional books. He drew a straight line from the scriptures, the written law, based in divine revelation, to his monumental work, in which "the entire oral law will be common property, with no questions and breakdown, without this one said this and that one said that, but with everything clearly stated so that all laws will be clear to great and small."

Is this baseless arrogance? This book indeed unquestionably reflects Maimonides's genius: a huge project of the assembling, classification and restatement of the entire normative and philosophical world of the oral law, the main written expressions of which had been the Talmudic literature and the literature of the *gaonim* (geniuses). But "the sea of the Talmud" and the thousands of traditions and disputes that are scattered through it in no particular order threatened to drown those who tried to find their way through them. The world of halacha (Jewish law), which seeks to organize the life of the individual and the collective in all its aspects was, until then, like a spacious and dark warehouse, in which thousands of items – rare jewels and junk – were all mixed together. In order to find what was needed in this warehouse, you had to wander through mazes and turns, with no light and no guide, and the result was to be misled and misleading, obstructed and obstructing.

Maimonides, the great philosopher and rationalist, who saw himself as "less than the least of the wise men of Spain," observed a laborious and exhausting schedule: an over-

worked physician in the court of the sultan in Cairo and an esteemed public leader who devoted his life to the members of his community and to many outside it who turned to him for advice and help. Together with all this, he managed to rebuild, by his own efforts and without the help of colleagues or students, a huge construct of the world of the halacha as it had been formulated until his day. Using a combination of phenomenal knowledge of all the early Talmudic and rabbinic sources, a sense of his own worth, the courage to choose among vague or contradictory traditions and profound religious belief, the Rambam created a halachic and theological world that is astounding in its formal beauty, complete in its internal logic and unity, and formulated in rich Hebrew, polished and unique, the likes of which had not been produced since the Mishnah was written.

However, the millennial laurels for the book that has most influenced the world of Judaism were taken from him. In his own day, near and after his death, Maimonides's ambition to write the one and only necessary book was criticized. The world of rabbinic literature, which interprets and develops the early sources, could not allow itself to rest on its laurels and make do with Maimonides's book, however great and sublime it might be. The ever-changing reality

and the bursting creativity inherent in the halacha have since then given rise to thousands of volumes of interpretations and innovations, rulings and questions and answers written by scholars in every generation and in every place.

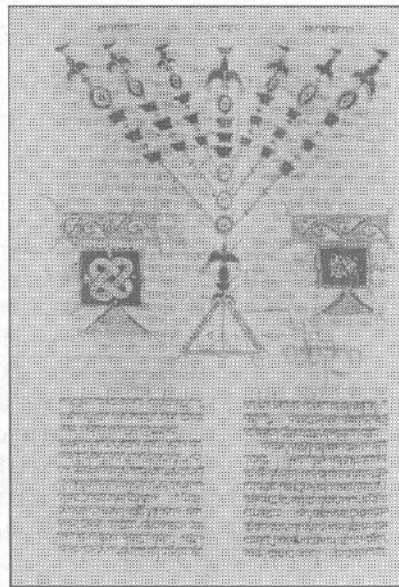
The creativity that is so much a part of the halacha and its internal mechanism vanquished Maimonides's "arrogance," but none of the writers who came after him even approached his stature, and since the days of Moses there has indeed been no one like Moses. Even monumental works, like the *Arba Turim* ("Four Columns") of Rabbi Yaakov Ben Asher (14th century) and Yosef Caro's *Shulhan Arukh* ("Set Table" - 16th century), which reformulated the same halachic world and organized it in a different way, could not have achieved what they did were it not for the infrastructure laid out by Maimonides.

The *Shulhan Arukh* was also not easily accepted by the Jewish world, and the polemic accompanying its printing and distribution lasted for about a hundred years. Nevertheless, the Orthodox Jew of today is not the Jew of the

Mishnah Torah, but the Jew of the *Shulhan Arukh*.

However, it seems that, confronted with the spiritual power radiated by the Mishnah Torah and its author on the history of Israel during the past thousand years, we who now stand on the shoulders of titans, at the transition of generations, are entitled to put up another book. It is a brief work, which was not even originally written in Hebrew but rather in German, and its artistic level is middling or even lower. Nonetheless, its influence on the Jewish world of the last millennium was no less than that of Maimonides's work, and in a sense its influence may have been even greater. Not many people read it when it was first published in 1869, but its title alone sufficed to change the face of modern history: "The Jewish State," by Theodor Herzl.

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Maimonides's Mishnah Torah: Halacha and philosophy.