Ever since I first studied Hilchot Deot (Laws of Character Development) with Rabbi Larry Kushner back in 2007, I’ve been fascinated by Moses Maimonides. As a doctor myself, I’m intrigued to find his medical texts to be hardheaded and practical, yet religious to the core. It is the spiritual thread weaving through these works that gives them their long-lasting impact. Though it is difficult to do justice to all of his contributions in a short article, I will do my best to describe why I believe that Maimonides deserves the title “Prince of Physicians,” conferred upon him by the great Sir William Osler two centuries ago.

In my view, the most important thing to know about Maimonides as a thinker is that he was first a believer in Torah and then a philosopher. As Leo Strauss says in his famous introduction to Shlomo Pines’ translation of the Guide of the Perplexed, “Philosophers are men who try to give an account of the whole by starting from what is always accessible to man as man; Maimonides starts from acceptance of Torah.”¹ In other words, Maimonides gives his "assent" to Torah, then binds it to philosophic (and medical) truth.

Take the Mishneh Torah as an example. Maimonides compiled this comprehensive legal code for the purpose of organizing and articulating the entire oral tradition. As he says in the introduction, “I have entitled this work ‘Mishneh Torah,’ (Repetition of the Law), for the reason that a person who first reads the Written Law and then this compilation, will know from it the whole of the Oral Law, without having occasion to consult any other book between them.” The Mishneh Torah turns out to be a description of how to

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observe all of the 613 mitzvot of Judaism, beginning with the commandment to “know that there is a God.”

The section called Hilchot Deot contains a chapter of medical advice, which raises an interesting question: if the Mishneh Torah is a compilation of the “Oral Law,” as Maimonides says, what justifies his inclusion of health-related material? Is the medical knowledge of the Greek and Arabic traditions part of the Oral Law?

According to Maimonides, it is. This is true because the maintenance of healthy practices is itself connected to a mitzvah, the commandment to “imitate His ways,” based, according to Maimonides, upon Deuteronomy 28:9, “keep the commandments of the Lord your God and walk in His ways.” As Maimonides says, “Since maintaining a healthy and sound body is among the ways of God...therefore, he must avoid that which harms the body and accustom himself to that which is healthful and helps the body become stronger.” (Hilchot Deot 4:1) If Maimonides finds effective methods of maintaining or restoring health amongst the Greek and Arabic medical texts, he is not to be blamed, since “one should accept the truth from whatever source it proceeds.”

In Hilchot Deot, Maimonides offers not only the scriptural source of our commandment to care for our bodies but also the motivating purpose for all such efforts. “A person who accustoms himself to live by [the rules of] medicine does not follow a proper path if his sole intention is that his entire body and limbs be healthy...rather, he should have the intent that his body be whole and strong, in order for his inner soul to be upright so that [it will be able] to know God.” In other words, attention to the health of soul and body is for the purpose of knowing (loving, and serving) God. Thus, it seems there is not only a how of medicine, but a why.

While the “why” of Maimonides’ medicine is, I would argue, worthy of contemplation, even (or especially?) in modern times, the “how” was, for him, a bit problematic. The medicine of his time relied upon Galen’s theories of the balance of humors, and the therapeutic options available, such as bloodletting and purging, were dismal.

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3 A point worthy of more discussion, however in brief, for Maimonides, love is proportionate to apprehension of God (i.e. knowing God), and after this love comes the worship of God, which involves “setting thought to work on the first intelligible and in devoting oneself exclusively to this as far as this is within one’s capacity.” See Moses Maimonides, Guide of the Perplexed, transl. by Shlomo Pines, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963), III:51, 621.
Maimonides himself was acutely aware of these limitations, as he tells a patient in his treatise *On Asthma* (Ch. 13:22), “[Aristotle has said], ‘most people die as a result of medical treatment.’ I think that Aristotle should be trusted in this assessment….For this reason, I have warned [you] and advised [you] and urged [you] to rely on nature, because it is quite adequate in most cases if left alone and undisturbed.”

This reliance on natural processes gave Maimonides a very specific take on the intent of the scriptural phrase, “God is our healer,” (Ex. 15:26). He did not believe that God intervenes with miracles at the time of disease but that humans are healed by means of the natural forces inherent in our bodies, placed there by God at the time of creation. Our job is to facilitate those healing forces by following a good regimen of diet, exercise, and sleep, intervening with medicine only when necessary.

Maimonides was a strong advocate of preventive practice, stating in his *Regimen of Health*, “The art of medicine comprises three regimens, of which the first and most noble is the regimen of the healthy, that is, the regimen of the state of health so that it is not lost.” He writes, “As long as one exercises, exerts himself greatly, does not eat to the point of satiation and has loose bowels, he will not suffer sickness and he will grow in strength,” and further that “overeating is like poison to anyone’s body; it is the main source of all illness” (*Hilchot Deot* 4:14-15), advice that seems prescient today in this age of expanding incidence of obesity and a predicted rise of diabetes prevalence to one in every three Americans by the year 2050.

Despite, or perhaps because of, his astounding intellectual capacities, people sometimes perceive Maimonides as cold or distant. I am not so sure. I wonder if his true character isn't best revealed in his personal writings, including his well-known letter to Samuel ibn Tibbon, written just a few years before his death. Describing his arduous daily regimen, Maimonides explains that after traveling by horse several miles to visit the sultan and attend to his household, he returns to his own medical practice in the afternoon, only to:

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5 J. Boyle, T. Thompson, E. Gregg, L. Barker, and D. Williamson. 2010. Projection of the year 2050 burden of diabetes in the US adult population: dynamic modeling of incidence, mortality, and prediabetes prevalence. *Population Health Metrics* 8(1):29+. While some cases of diabetes, particularly Type 1 diabetes and autoimmune forms of the disease, are unrelated to obesity, the vast preponderance of cases of Type 2 diabetes result from a combination of predisposition to the disease and excess adipose tissue.
“find the antechambers filled with people, both Jews and Gentiles, nobles and common people, judges and bailiffs, friends and foes – a mixed multitude who await the time of my return...I partake of some slight refreshment, the only meal I take in the twenty-four hours. Then I go forth to attend to my patients, and write prescriptions and directions for their various ailments. Patients go in and out until nightfall, and sometimes even, I solemnly assure you, until two hours or more in the night. I converse with and prescribe for them while lying down from sheer fatigue; and when night falls, I am so exhausted that I can scarcely speak.”

I imagine that Maimonides treated many of these people without payment, because as he says in his commentary to Hippocrates’ first aphorism, “...he [the physician] should remove the external impediments to the best of his ability, according to the circumstances of each case. If the patient is poor...he should provide him with food and medication if he [the patient] does not have any. Lo, these and their like are the ‘external things’ which are the responsibility of the physician with respect to his art...To only state that which should be done and then to depart, this he [the physician] should not do.”

As a physician involved in treating the underserved in a free medical clinic, I see this evidence of Maimonides’ compassion as the true measure of his character, the outcome of a practice based not only upon the “how” but the “why” of medicine. Maimonides shows that placing service of God and people at the heart of treatment leads to the real caring known as healing. If Maimonides were alive today, as I often wish he were, he is the one I would most like to call for a consult, whether for myself, my patients, or for our struggling medical system.

Tricia Hellman Gibbs, MD, is a graduate of Williams College (summa cum laude 1982) and Yale University School of Medicine (1986). She completed her residency in Family Medicine at the University of Washington in Seattle in 1990, and is on the clinical faculty at Yale University and University of California at San Francisco. In 1993, she and her husband, Richard Gibbs, MD, founded the San Francisco Free Clinic, a primary care clinic

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7 Moses Maimonides, Maimonides’ Commentary on the Aphorisms of Hippocrates, trans., Fred Rosner, Maimonides’ Medical Writings (Haifa, Israel: Maimonides Research Institute, 1987), 23.
for the medically uninsured. In 2013, Dr. Gibbs and her husband received both the University of San Francisco California Prize and the Yale-Jefferson Award for Public Service. She is currently a Masters candidate in Jewish Studies at the Graduate Theological Union, where she has made a special study of the works of Moses Maimonides. She and her husband have five grown children.

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References:


