

Treatment of Depression by Maimonides (1138–1204): Rabbi, Physician, and Philosopher

Moses Maimonides, an illustrious figure in Jewish history, medicine, and philosophy (1), dedicated much of the last 10 years of his life to medical writings (2), in the course of which he also studied mental illnesses and provided what may be the first description of psychosomatic medicine (3). In his medical letter to the ill-fated nephew of Saladin the Great in Cairo, who suffered from manic-depressive disorder, Maimonides discusses the possible intake of alcohol by his Muslim patient—the only available treatment for depression at the time. Maimonides analyzes the conflict between his patient's religious prohibition of drinking alcohol and his own professional responsibility. This letter illustrates Maimonides' attitude regarding the patient-physician relationship, forges a synthesis of religion and medicine, and demonstrates intercultural respect and psychological sensitivity to his Muslim patient. Maimonides artfully incorporates sources from Jewish and Islamic culture and leaves the final decision to his patient.

We offer here this new English translation of his medical letter (4) to let Maimonides speak for himself. In our brief comments afterward, we elaborate on Maimonides' ethical messages for modern readers.

Maimonides' Medical Letter

His servant is well aware that our Master, with his broad intelligence and profound understanding, will be able to conduct himself in the proper manner, in accordance with the previous treatise and these chapters. All the more so, when there stands before him [a physician] from whom he may request professional guidance or seek out practical instruction.

God, may He be exalted, is a witness, and His testimony suffices (Koran 4:79–81), that his humble servant's great desire is to serve our Master with his own person and conversation, and not with paper and pen.

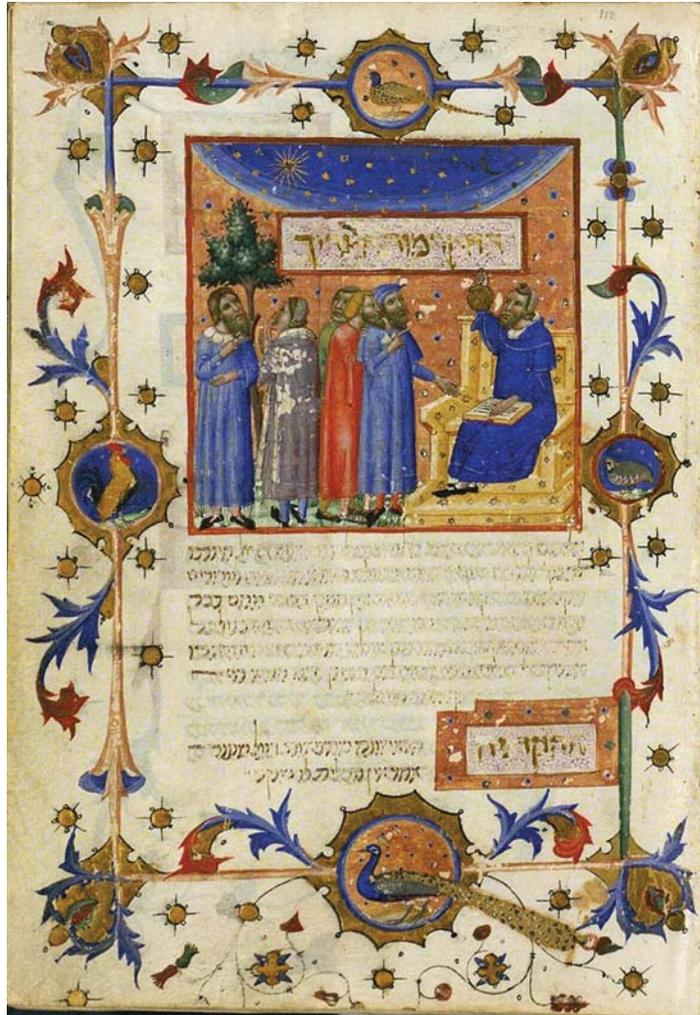
However, his poor constitution and the weakness of his natural faculties—already in his youth, and how much more so in his old age—constitute a barrier between him and many pleasures. I do not mean pleasures, rather good deeds, the most important and elevated of which is to serve our Master in actual practice. God be thanked for all the circumstances that befall us, the general and the particular, in the totality of existence and its particulars, in each and every individual, in accordance with His will, which accords with what is dictated by His wisdom, the depths of which no man can fathom. And God be thanked for every circumstance, whatever direction events may take.

Our Master should not criticize his humble servant for having mentioned in this treatise the use of wine and songs, both of which are abhorred by the religion. For this servant did not command acting in this manner; he merely stated that which is dictated by his profession. Indeed, the religious legislators know, as do the physicians, that wine has benefits for man.

A physician is bound, inasmuch as he is a physician, to present with a beneficial regimen, whether it is forbidden or permitted; the patient is endowed with the freedom to choose whether to follow or not. If [the physician] fails to mention everything that may be helpful, be it forbidden or permitted, he is guilty of acting dishonestly, for he did not offer trustworthy advice.

It is well known that religious law commands what is beneficial and prohibits what is harmful with respect to the world-to-come. The physician, on the other hand, instructs what will benefit the body and warns about what will harm it in this world.

The difference between religious commandments and medical counsel is that religion commands and coerces a person to do what will benefit him in the future, and prohibits what will harm him in the future, and punishes for it. The physician, on the



Illumination from a Hebrew translation of Maimonides' *Guide for the Perplexed*, a philosophical work. This manuscript, known as the Copenhagen Maimonides, was illuminated in Catalonia in 1347–1348. Reproduced with permission from the Royal Library in Copenhagen.

other hand, counsels [a person] about what will benefit him, and warns him about what will cause him harm. He does not use coercion, nor does he punish; he merely presents the information to the patient in the manner of advice. And it is [the patient's] choice [whether to follow that advice].

The reason for this is obvious. The harm and benefit from a medical perspective are immediate and clearly evident. Thus, there is no need for coercion or punishment. As for religious commandments, however, the harm and benefit that they bring are not evident in this world. The fool might, therefore, imagine to himself that everything that is said to be harmful is not harmful, and everything that is said to be beneficial is not beneficial, because these things are not clearly evident to him. For this reason religious law compels one to practice good and punishes for doing evil, for the good and evil will only become apparent in the world-to-come. All this is benevolence toward us, a favor to us in light of our foolishness, mercy upon us owing to the weakness of our understanding. This is the measure of what the servant saw fit to set before his Master and Ruler, may God grant him long years. I remain readily available to serve our Master. Thanksgiving and praise to God.

Discussion

Introduction

Maimonides emphasizes at the beginning his patient's insight as the key for the patient-physician relationship and the success of the treatment; Maimonides is the "servant" for the patient, his "master" (the Sultan's nephew). By quoting the Koran, Maimonides presents the religious foundation of his medical mission according to his patient's belief system. For the patient's confidence, the physician must also be familiar with his spiritual and religious world.

Maimonides' Medical Condition

For Maimonides, preventing suffering and providing medical and spiritual support to those who need it is also a religious duty. By partially sharing with his patient his own medical condition, which does not hinder him from his manifold activities, he encourages his patient to cope in the same way with his medical issues. Maimonides and his Muslim patient share a deep belief in the Creator, rooted in their respective religions.

The Physician's Medical Obligation Versus Religious Commandments

Drinking wine might be justified medically to treat depression, but Maimonides is fully aware of his patient's religious prohibition of drinking alcohol (Koran 2:219; 5:90–91). Following his overriding obligation as a physician, Maimonides frankly discusses the benefits of alcohol with his patient, who is the religious leader of an Islamic kingdom.

The Physician's Medical Obligation and the Patient's Autonomy

Based on the physician's professional obligation, anchored also in Maimonides' religious writings, the physician is bound to advise his patient according to his medical knowledge, even if it contradicts the patient's religious tradition. Withholding medical information from his patient would violate the physician's obligation to inform his patients. Maimonides elaborates on the ethical complexity of a religiously questionable treatment for his Muslim patient but leaves the final decision to his patient. This key role of the patient's autonomy is in accordance with Maimonides' religious philosophy.

Religious Commandments Versus Medical Instructions

Maimonides distinguishes between medicine and religion: The goal of medicine is well-being in this material world. Religion focuses on the spiritual future in the world-to-come, where the benefits are "not evident in this world." Saving lives and promoting human well-being in this world are not to be neglected in favor of religious commandments. According to Jewish tradition, saving life must be given preference over religious commandments. Therefore, Maimonides permits the enjoyment of wine within certain limits and encourages his sick Muslim patient to consider the benefit of alcohol in treating his illness.

Conclusions

Important ethical values are presented in Maimonides' medical letter: The *physician's personal qualities* include modesty, honesty, and obligation to his profession. The *patient's autonomy* to decide about his treatment must be fully respected, including with psychiatric patients, reflecting a remarkably modern attitude in a medieval physician, at a time when paternalism was the prevailing attitude. In his *patient-physician relationship* (5), Maimonides demonstrates familiarity with his patient's religious world by quoting the Koran. By frankly addressing both the religious issues of his Islamic ruler and the physician's professional duties, Maimonides deals with his medical and philosophical values together with his patient. He analyzes the *conflict between medicine and religion* by defining their different features and goals. For Maimonides, saving life is it-

self a religious duty that supersedes virtually all other religious obligations. Since Maimonides respects many common values of various religions, these concepts of Jewish law are consequently also relevant for his Muslim fellow man. The *intercultural bridges* between this outstanding Jewish scholar and his Muslim patient are remarkable for the 12th century, a period when religious persecution defined the political and social atmosphere in Christian and Muslim countries. In his clinical work, Maimonides successfully combined medical, religious, philosophical, and psychological talents, creating a respectful intercultural discussion for the benefit and well-being of his patients. For these special achievements, Maimonides, an outstanding medieval rabbinical authority, philosopher, and physician, remains a bioethical role model for contemporary clinicians.

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