

Dear Rabbi,  
Who was Maimonides and what are his “principles” that I’ve often heard references to?  
Joel P.

Dear Joel,

Maimonides, known as Rambam, or Rabbi Moshe ben Maimon, was one of the greatest Jewish and secular scholars of all time. He was born in Spain in 1135, and later fled to North Africa due to the Crusades, and after a short time in Israel he finally settled in Egypt. Already a world-renowned Talmudic scholar and philosopher, he became the chief court doctor to Saladin, who eventually defeated the Crusaders and expelled them from Israel which they had destroyed. Maimonides, who was held in high esteem by Saladin, influenced him to allow Israel to be rebuilt. Besides authoring vast volumes on Jewish law, philosophy and medicine, Maimonides dedicated his life to uplifting the spirits of the great numbers of Jews under persecution and forced conversion. He so inspired the people, that his name was added to the daily kaddish prayer by the Jews of Yemen, and his gravestone was inscribed “From Moses to Moses (Maimonides) there hasn’t been another Moses”. A group of gentile professors recently voted Maimonides as the greatest individual in the last millennia.

As part of his commentary to the Mishna, Maimonides compiled the “13 principles of belief”, which was widely accepted as the core basic beliefs that one must ascribe to in order to be considered one who accepts Judaism. They are published at the end of the morning prayers in most siddurs, in concise form (Artscroll Siddur p. 179) as the “Ani Maamin” prayer. They were also made into a famous poem, known as “Yigdal”, (ibid. p. 12).

These 13 principles are divided into three categories:

- 1) The definition of Jewish belief in G-d, as creator, all powerful and all knowing, in charge of what happens in our lives, and His eternal existence, with no physical body.
- 2) The concept of prophecy, that G-d speaks to human beings, revealed His will through prophecy at Sinai, the truth of the prophecy of Moses and other prophets.
- 3) The concepts of reward and punishment, the messianic era and eventual revival of the deceased.

I would highly recommend you study these principles in depth, as they will profoundly affect your understanding of Judaism and give you a true appreciation of what we believe and why.

For further study, see “Maimonides’ Principles” by Aryeh Kaplan (NCSY, OU Press), at any Jewish bookstore.