



ונשמרתם מאוד לנפשותיכם! “Take therefore good heed unto yourselves” (Devarim 4:15)

On account of COVID-19 concerns and challenges, the ASF's *Sephardi World Weekly* presents the following special “Letter from the Land of Israel,” part of a new series on Jewish resilience rooted in the teachings of Sephardic Sages:

The novel coronavirus is developing into what looks like a global plague. Usually, when we hear the word “plague,” we think of the Dark Ages. And this is one of the reasons our present condition is so startling: weren't enlightenment and modernity supposed to make plagues a thing of the past?

But not everyone bought into the idea that modernity will be an eternal paradise of sunlit uplands. For instance, the fundamental insight of the great American art form of the Blues is that hard times are an inescapable fact of life, always a step ahead of the latest science and technology. As the celebrated European novelist, Milan Kundera, put it in his 1985 “Jerusalem Address”: “Stupidity does not give way to science, technology, modernity, progress; on the contrary, it progresses right along with progress!”

The claim that stupidity “progresses right along with progress” would have received a hearty “Amen” from the great 12th century Jewish communal leader, jurist, philosopher, and physician in the court of Saladin (and possibly to Saladin himself), Hakham Rabbi Moshe ben Maimon (popularly known as Rambam or Maimonides). It's the flip-side of Maimonides' teaching that the image of God in human beings is their mind (*Moreh Nevukhim/Guide for the Perplexed*: 1:2). Since people by and large fail to actualize that image, Maimonides taught that the perpetual problem of stupidity takes on two forms: on one hand, the “privation of knowledge;” on the other hand, using the mind, the capacity, “for thought and perception... [for] engendering all kinds of harm” (*Guide for the Perplexed*: 3:11; 1:7). Evil for Maimonides is accordingly a privation, not a presence. He didn't believe in an actual world of evil, parallel to our world. There is no Devil residing over Hell, no Darth Vader leading the “Dark Side.” Instead, it's like turning on and off the light. Light, i.e. good, is a presence. Darkness, i.e. evil, is an absence, the absence of light. Or to be more precise, evil is the absence of knowledge and mindfulness (*Guide for the Perplexed*: 3:10–12).

Maimonides' view of the centrality of knowledge and mindfulness was based on his understanding of the character of Divinity, and it gave birth, in turn, to the importance that he attributed to maintaining health and practicing medicine. According to Maimonides, the world is infused and informed by God's wisdom, i.e., the intelligible structures of reality, and it is God's will that the world run according to His wisdom. We are thus commanded to study the world, the lawful structures of reality, or what we call science (*Guide for the Perplexed*, 3:28). Likewise, we are obligated to consciously pursue health, and studying medicine, “is among the greatest acts of worship” (*Laws of Character Traits*, 4:1; *Eight Chapters*, Chapter 5). Walking the walk, Maimonides composed ten medical works in his lifetime, and aside from composing some legal responsa, he devoted the last decade of his life to the theory and practice of medicine.

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[Mercy, Mercy, Mercy](#)



Julian Edwin “Cannonball” Adderley (Photo courtesy of [Youtube](#))

“Mercy, Mercy, Mercy” is a bluesy and iconic soul jazz hit that was written in 1966 by Joe Zawinul for Cannonball Adderley's Quintet. In this live recording in front of a very responsive audience, Cannonball Adderley opens with a forty-second summary

The main challenge that we face in combating this coronavirus is thus the perpetual problem of ignorance. There is a global privation of knowledge. We don't fully understand the workings of the virus, and therefore we don't know how to defeat it. But we see the task ahead of us. As Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, in one of his most Maimonidean passages, wrote: "God wants us to fight evil... The conquest of disease is the sacred duty of the man of majesty" (*The Lonely Man of Faith*).

We can imagine Maimonides alive today, being interviewed on one of the major networks. What would he say? It's safe to say that he would encourage all of us to follow the advice of the scientific and medical professionals, from A to Z. He might balance that injunction with a call for caution, not alarmism. Either way, Maimonides would seek out the path of reason, away from irrational fears and fantasies. However, since people inevitably use their minds to follow wild imaginings and, in so doing, engender, "all kinds of harm," he also would warn against various forms of quackery. He would emphasize that following the scientifically-grounded directives of the professionals constitutes a religious obligation. And he would probably remind us that such is life, full of hard knocks and sometimes hard times. In the meantime, however, he would urge us to be resilient, and to strengthen our souls by striving to actualize the Divine gift of our minds.

"Bivas, kreskas, engrandeskas; komo un peshiko en aguas freskas! Amen!"
("Live, thrive, and grow; like a fish in fresh water! Amen!")

The American Sephardi Federation



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Image credit: Maimonides superimposed over the molecular view of COVID-19

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