

The Homunculus of Maimonides



oses ben Maimon, known as Maimonides, was a student of the prophet Elijah, who not only revealed to him all the mysteries of the Torah and the sciences, but also gave him two secret books—*The Book of Creation* and *The Book of Healing*. With the aid of these two wondrous texts Maimonides was able to understand the greatest secrets of nature and to heal all diseases. His fame spread over all of Europe, and in the most distant lands people spoke of the great wisdom of the famous Jewish doctor in Cordova.

Now it happened that the only son of a rich businessman in London, whose lust for learning could not be satisfied by the teachers in his own country, secretly left his parents' home and traveled to Cordova. It would not be enough, this young man thought, to be the student of this doctor; he wanted to observe the greatly esteemed man in his own home and enter into the secrets and mysteries that the teacher reserved for himself alone. Therefore the young man employed a cunning device to achieve his goal. He appeared before the rabbi, dressed in a poor and humble manner, and presented himself as completely dumb. By means of piteous expressions and beseeching gestures, he made the rabbi understand that he wanted to serve him.

Maimonides was moved by the fate of the young man and accepted him as his servant. And by virtue of his attentiveness and punctuality, the speechless servant so earned the favor of his master that his help was soon requested at each experiment. During this time the student increased his theoretical knowledge as well. For in his master's absence he studied his master's books and writings with great industry, so that after only a few years he was almost his equal.

Now it so happened that a distinguished man of the court fell ill of a strange disease. Although there was no sign of injury on any portion of his body, from time to time he would fall into a kind of frenzy and twirl about, as if driven by unseen forces, until he fell to the ground exhausted.

All the Spanish doctors tested their skill in vain; the disease grew worse and worse, and the courtier's life was in great danger. As a last resort they sent for the Jewish doctor Maimonides. He immediately recognized the problem. "The sick man has a worm in his brain. There is only one way to save him: bore through the skull and remove the worm." For a long time the courtier could not persuade himself to undergo the operation. But as the disease got increasingly worse, he finally agreed.

Maimonides and his speechless servant came into the sick man's house with all the necessary instruments and found that a large number of doctors had assembled there to observe the procedure. With a sure and skilled hand Maimonides performed the dangerous operation. A portion of the skull was removed, and they could see the worm lying motionless on the delicate brain. Everyone present was astonished at the wisdom and skill of the Jewish doctor. Now Maimonides reached for some small pincers to remove the worm. Just then a strange voice from behind him cried out, "Stop, master! You'll kill the man!" Startled, Maimonides dropped the pincers and turned in amazement to the speaker. It was his servant. "What is this? Have you deceived me?" asked Maimonides in anger. "Forgive me, master. I will explain the reason for my deception later. But now let us save the sick man. Look, the worm has been sucking powerfully on the brain, and if you pull it away with force, you will injure the organ and the man's life will be lost." "What can we do to remove the worm?" asked Maimonides. "Sir," replied the student, "you explained it yourself in your writings. Lay a plant on the place and the worm will willingly leave its position to bore into it." So Maimonides sent for a plant, the courtier was cured, and Maimonides became the king's official physician.

After this operation Maimonides forgave his pupil for his deception and treated him as an equal. In time the two became inseparable. Their researches were pursued largely in common, and when one of them was at a loss, the other came to his assistance. Thus together they studied almost all branches of knowledge.

One day as they were sitting together in the study, the master said, "I see that you have almost surpassed me in learning. For you have at once absorbed what took me years of struggle to understand. And your powerful free spirit can go much further than mine, for it is more in tune with earthly matters than my own. Let us therefore follow a path together that past generations have never pursued. We want to observe the secrets of creation and destruction in nature, and then solve the great riddle of

creation." "My lord and master," answered the young man, "I am still young, and I am not certain how to distinguish what is true from what is false. I do not yet understand how far it is permitted for the human spirit to enter into the secrets of nature, but such daring seems to me sinful for a son of man and can only incite the wrath of the Creator." "All of this," the master replied with a sweep of his arm, "belongs to the human spirit, which can observe and employ it as it wishes. The human spirit can search until it finds the truth, until it can even create a world." "Sir, your words frighten me. I am, however, ready to follow you wherever this may lead. By your side I cannot stumble."

"Now I recognize once more my worthy pupil," said Maimonides, as he turned to the bookshelf and removed a large folio of *The Book of Creation* from a hidden drawer.

"Have you read any of this book?" he asked. "Often have I read with amazement, and not without terror, the wonders it contains," the pupil replied. "What do you think of the secrets found here?" Maimonides asked. "I doubt that they are true," said the pupil. "But it seems that your powerful spirit wishes to be convinced."

"We shall make experiments," Maimonides said. He opened the folio and pointed to a particular passage. "Here it says, 'Kill a healthy man, cut his body into pieces, and place the pieces in an airless glass container. Sprinkle upon them an essence gathered from the sap of the Tree of Life and the balsam of Immortality, and after nine months the pieces of this body will be living again. It will be unharmable and immortal.'"

"Master, whom shall we get for this dangerous experiment?" the young man asked anxiously. "You or me," responded Maimonides, "the lot shall decide. But first let us swear, in the Name of the Eternal One, that the living one will permit the dead pieces to ripen, and will not, for whatever reason, hypocritically destroy the apparatus prematurely, in order to destroy the embryo life." Both men laid their hands on the Holy Scroll and swore to the Almighty. The lot was cast and fell to the pupil. Maimonides conjured up the Angel of Death, and the young man fell lifeless to the ground. Maimonides cut the body into pieces, placed it in a glass container, sprinkled it with the wondrous essence, and left the room, which he carefully locked and did not enter for four months.

Finally, tortured by doubt and curiosity, he looked at the mass of dead flesh. And behold, there were no longer severed pieces but structured limbs, as if crystallized in the glass container. Happy about the restoration of his student, he left the room and waited a month. In the fifth month

the form of the human body could already be recognized. In the sixth the arteries and nerves were visible, and in the seventh movement and life in the organs could be perceived. The researcher, however, became worried. Maimonides was now convinced of the veracity of *The Book of Creation*. And he was terrified about the future. "What horror threatens the human race if I let this come to fruition? If this immortal man, with all his power, wanders among his brothers, will not people deify him and pray to him, and will not that holy revelation, the Laws of Moses, be denied and finally entirely forgotten?" Thus thought Maimonides as he left the room. At the end of the eighth month, uncertain and deeply troubled, he approached the growing being and was staggered as the almost completely developed face smiled at him. Unable to bear the demonic grin, he ran out of the room. "Oh, Lord, what have I done! It is true that man should not investigate too deeply; what is beyond this sphere leads to Hell."

A few days later Maimonides appeared before the Great Council and explained the case. After lengthy reflection the learned rabbis agreed: to protect against a horror for mankind, and to preserve God's honor, that vow might be broken and such a man killed. This decision they based on a verse in Psalms: *Disregard the law; the time has come to act for God.**

At the beginning of the ninth month, Maimonides stepped into the room, intending to destroy his creation. He brought a dog and a cat with him, and he released them and let them fly at each other. In the midst of this fighting, the glass container crashed to the floor and broke into a thousand pieces. The dead man lay at Maimonides's feet. After he recovered himself, Maimonides buried the body and took the pernicious volume and threw it into the flames of the fireplace. But nothing was the same again. Maimonides was attacked by the learned men of the court, accused of magical practices, and escaped judgment only by a timely flight to Egypt. But even there he was pursued and treated as an enemy both by his fellow Jews and by unbelievers, and from then on his life was filled with sorrow.

Eastern Europe: Nineteenth Century

*Psalms 119:126