

Sanctification of the New Moon – A Treatise of Maimonides' Mishneh Torah

Martin Senator

Abstract

Recently I read *Sanctification of the New Moon*, which is a small part (one of 83 Treatises) of Maimonides' Mishneh Torah. I didn't read this work as part of my adult Jewish responsibility to study Torah. Rather, I read it as a natural next step in a recreational study I was making of the Jewish calendar. After reading it, however, I was so impressed by Maimonides that I decided to write this report as part of my responsibility to study Torah. My purpose is to present Maimonides as a scholar, teacher, and moral person.

This report is divided into two parts. Part 1 is devoted to discussing Maimonides, the Oral Law, and his Mishneh Torah in a general way. Part 2 covers the beginning of Sanctification in detail, to give direct contact with a sample of Maimonides' work.

Part 1 – Generalities

Four Main Points.

1. Maimonides was a genius. He is generally recognized as one of the greatest Jewish scholars of all time, a world class expert in all fields of Jewish studies. Additionally, he was a world class expert in the secular fields of philosophy, astronomy, and medicine.
2. Unlike many geniuses, however, a large part of his prolific scholarly output (at least his Mishneh Torah, which took about 10 years to complete) is directed to the average educated Jew rather than to other scholars.
3. From my reading of Sanctification I would add another major category to the list of secular fields in which Maimonides was also a world class expert, namely teaching. I discovered Maimonides' teaching expertise because of an unusual combination of circumstances – to understand the calendar *halakhah* in Sanctification a reader must have a minimal understanding of remainder arithmetic; Maimonides judged that his intended readers would not have this understanding; and I knew something about remainder arithmetic before reading Sanctification. I was, therefore, able to read Maimonides' discussions of remainder arithmetic as an instructor rather

than as a student and I was able to appreciate his effective use of different teaching techniques. I then looked for, and found, other examples of Maimonides' skills as a teacher and judged him to be a world class teacher.

4. The final, and to me, the most impressive point about Maimonides is his morality. His morality seems to me to be based on reasoned and logical faith rather than on blind unquestioning faith, and he chose to respect the spirit of the law even though he certainly had the capability to find legally valid exceptions. As Twersky puts it
 "Another outstanding feature of Maimonides was his intellectual honesty and courage, unintimidated by pressure, dissatisfaction, or potential censure."

I'll mention two examples of Maimonides' morality – one external to Sanctification, which I'll only deal with briefly, and one internal to Sanctification, which I'll deal with at length.

The aspect of Maimonides' morality external to Sanctification is his refusal, according to his interpretation of the Law, to use Torah to earn a living. After his brother and most of the family's assets were lost at sea, he taught himself a trade (medicine) rather than accept community support. He didn't use his knowledge of the Law to find an exception for himself. When we consider that today, all highly respected, moral, observant scholars that I have heard about seem to have found legal ways to accept community support (as a prominent example, Heschel accepted a salary from the Jewish Theological Seminary), Maimonides' no-compromise morality stands out.

The aspect of Maimonides' morality internal to Sanctification has to do with his insisting, in the absence of any documentation in the Sources, that in addition to having used observation when deciding whether the new moon had been seen in its 'proper' time, the Court had also used calculation. He reasoned that since the God-specified, Sage-implemented procedure documented in the Sources is severely flawed, the Court must have used both calculation and observation (this would have almost completely fixed the flaw) and that the record of the Court's use of calculation had been lost. I strongly admire the aspect of his morality displayed by this faith-based logic. (Maimonides also presents, in the last part of Sanctification, the complex methods of calculation that the Court must have used to determine the potential visibility of the new moon in its proper time. I also strongly admire the competence necessary for him to have been able to extract these methods from the sources available to him and to have been able to explain them to motivated members of his intended audience.)