

Maimonides: Life and Thought by Moshe Halbertal.
Princeton University Press 2014.

Internationally renowned Professor Moshe Halbertal brings to his study of possibly the greatest figure in Jewish history, Moshe ben Maimon, universally known as Maimonides or by the acronym RaMbaM, a lifetime of exemplary scholarship fitting him well for the task of revealing and explaining the life, work and thought of someone at their height in the late 1180s.

Halbertal divides his book into eight chapters, each with several sub-headings and book-ended by an introduction and conclusions: Moses the Man; The Commentary on the Mishnah, the Book of Commandments, and the Philosophy of halakhah; Ethics and Belief in the Commentary on the Mishnah; What is Mishneh Torah?; Philosophy and Halakhah in Mishneh Torah; Mishneh Torah and the Conceptual Understanding of halakhah; The Guide of the Perplexed and its Critique of Religious Language; The Guide of the Perplexed: Will or Wisdom? The book also contains a bibliography of the Rambam's staggeringly large literary output, as well as one of scholarly books on the man and his work.

The two key texts, perhaps above all others that the Rambam bequeathed to the world were the Mishneh Torah and the Guide of the Perplexed. The former is Maimonides' exemplary distillation of rabbinic legal decisions, the latter his attempt to find common ground between the classical philosophies and those of the rabbis.

In his conclusions, Halbertal brings together all the ideas he has considered before, portraying Maimonides as a revolutionary thinker whose theses and writings had a profound effect on the Jewish thought of subsequent centuries, both positively and negatively, but who stands out, almost a thousand years after his birth, as one of the finest Jewish minds of all time.

Rabbi Dr Charles H Middleburgh