

## *What's the Truth About... "Rambam's Physician's Prayer"?*

*By Rabbi Ari Z. Zivotofsky, Ph.D.*

**M**isconception: The popular Jewish "physician's prayer" was authored by the Rambam (Maimonides), who was born in 1135 CE.

**Fact:** This commendable prayer is of uncertain authorship. Most likely, it was *not* written by Maimonides (who was actually born in 1138), but rather by an 18<sup>th</sup> century Jewish-German physician.

**Background:** The physician's prayer attributed to Moses Maimonides (Rambam) has become very popular in recent years. This oath praises God for creating the wondrous human body, and requests that God assist the physician in carrying out his task in a noble, honorable and successful manner. Many Jewish physicians frame an artistic version of it in their offices or homes, and some medical schools use it rather than the Hippocratic Oath at their graduations. It is so universally assumed to have been authored by Maimonides that a recent book review<sup>1</sup> opened with, "Over 800 years ago, Maimonides established timeless guidelines for the care and treatment of patients in his oath for physicians..."

The prayer first appeared in print in German in 1783.<sup>2</sup> The first Hebrew version appeared in 1790, and the first known English version was printed in 1841. That a Jewish physician of the

ethical and professional caliber of the Rambam would author such a prayer is certainly conceivable. Other well-known Jewish physicians, such as Asaph Harofeh (6<sup>th</sup> century, Middle East), Rabbi Judah Halevy (1075-1144, Spain), Abraham Zacutus (1575-1642, Portugal, Holland), and Jacob Zahalon (1630-1693, Italy) indeed authored "physician's prayers" that emphasize the moral and ethical responsibilities that the medical profession demands.

This particular prayer has been attributed to Maimonides almost since its first appearance; and that attribution has also been challenged for almost as long! While it would be wonderful to be in possession of a prayer authored by the Rambam, the preponderance of evidence unfortunately suggests an 18<sup>th</sup> century authorship. In actuality, the prayer was most likely written by Dr. Markus Herz (1747-1802), a pupil of Immanuel Kant, and Moses Mendelssohn's friend and physician.<sup>3</sup>

The initial German version is unsigned, and does not directly attribute the text to the Rambam. Rather, under the title it simply states: "From a manuscript of a 12<sup>th</sup> century Jewish Egyptian physician." This was at a time when medieval manuscripts were generally unavailable to scholars for study, and it was common to attribute texts to earlier, more famous personalities.<sup>4</sup> This attribution to a Jewish Egyptian physician led people

to attribute the oath to the Rambam, despite the fact that in the Hebrew version of 1790, a mere seven years after the initial version appeared, the translator notes that it was translated at the request of the author, Dr. Herz!

A second, wide-spread misconception about the Rambam is the year of his birth. There is strong evidence<sup>5</sup> that the Rambam was born in 4898 (1138 CE), not 4895 (1135 CE), as claimed in almost all writings about him.<sup>6</sup> This "new" date is based on at least two autographed manuscripts of his Commentary on the Mishnah, at the end of which he states that he was 30 years old when he completed his commentary in 1168. This error was first brought to the attention of the public about 20 years ago by several prominent scholars,<sup>7</sup> and though still subject to debate, is gaining wider acceptance.


### **Do You Own a "Birchat Habayit"? Do You Know its Origin?**

There is another very popular form of decorative Judaica that is of uncertain authorship. Over the last few decades, the so-called *Birchat Habayit* has found its way into many Jewish homes. Its words even have been used as a popular song on a recent Jewish album. This "prayer" seems to be a relatively recent phenomenon. The language and style are modern Hebrew, indicating a recent composition.

Rabbi Shlomo Aviner,<sup>8</sup> the *rav* of

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Beit El, has pointed out that the style is not a Jewish style. There is no “*Yehi ratzon*” or “*Ribon Olamim*.” God is not addressed and no request is made. It is simply a statement. Rabbi Aviner is sure it is a translation from a non-Jewish source, and recalls a claim that the contents may be from a work by Rudyard Kipling. I have been unable to locate any such formulation in the writings of Kipling. Other scholars speculate that it is modern Hebrew poetry. If any reader is familiar with the source of this now near-ubiquitous, and almost mandatory Israeli souvenir, I would appreciate hearing from you! Write to: *Jewish Action Legal-ease/Orthodox Union*, 11 Broadway, New York, NY 10001 or email: [friedland@ou.org](mailto:friedland@ou.org) 

#### Notes:

1. Judith Bolton-Fasman, “The Medicine of Friendship,” *Jerusalem Report*. April 24, 2000, page 54.
2. For details on the points in this article see the thorough article by J.O. Leibovitz, “The Physician’s Prayer Attributed to the Rambam (Hebrew),” *Dapim Refuim*, 13:77-81, II Adar 5714 (March 1954). This was followed by an equally scholarly English article by Fred Rosner, “The Physician’s Prayer Attributed to Moses Maimonides,” *Bulletin of the History of Medicine*, 41(5):440-454, September-October 1967, and a summary article also by Fred Rosner, “Moses Maimonides: Correcting Two Misconceptions,” *The Mount Sinai Journal of Medicine*, 62:2:165-166: (March): 1995.
3. Dr. Joseph H. Hertz, Chief Rabbi of the British Empire concluded in a letter in 1917 that the prayer was written by Markus Herz, not the Rambam.
4. Several other items attributed to the Rambam may also be late works, including a last will and testament attributed to him.
5. For details see, “Letters to the Editor” by Fred Rosner in the *Israel Journal of Medical Sciences*, 30:7:553: (July):1994 and Fred Rosner, “Moses Maimonides: Correcting Two Misconceptions,” *The Mount Sinai Journal of Medicine*, 62:2:165-166: (March):1995.
6. Including the previously cited article by Rosner from 1967. Interestingly, on the Rambam’s tombstone, his birthday is given as 14 Nissan 4895 (Shabbat April 6, 1135 [Gregorian]) and his *yahrtzeit* as 20 Tevet 4965 (December 20, 1204 [Gregorian]). However, the tombstone is from a much later period than the Rambam.
7. Including Sassoon, Havlin, Goiten, Kafich, and Kahana (see Rosner 1995 for citations).
8. In his radio call-in show and in a personal conversation on 4/13/00.