Maimonides: Pioneer of Positive Psychology

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For more than 800 years, Moses Maimonides has been a towering figure in Judaism. Not only did he become the leader of world Jewry in a tumultuous era, but his religious works, including the monumental *Mishneh Torah* and the *Introduction to the Mishnah*, remain avidly studied today. His *Guide of the Perplexed*, seeking to integrate classic Greek thought with Hebraic monotheism, has exerted an enduring influence on Western philosophy. And yet, Maimonides' extensive writings are both important and relevant for another, rapidly growing field of knowledge: namely, positive psychology. Why? Many people are seeking to gain a greater sense of spirituality in their lives by applying its seemingly contemporary insights. In this article, I'd like to highlight Maimonides' teachings related to this important new specialty, what its originators have called "the study of character strengths and virtues."

The Science of Positive Psychology

The mental health field today is rightfully accepting "character strengths and virtues" as vital to understanding human nature. This development is long overdue; more than a century ago, the founding

American psychologist William James urged that the new science of psychology explore the heights of human attainment, including altruism and transcendental experience, rather than focus on laboratory studies involving the sensory sensations of average people. Unfortunately, James' declaration was largely ignored for nearly a half-century, until Abraham Maslow in the 1950s and 1960s co-founded the field of humanistic psychology. Maslow's 25-year emphasis on studying emotionally healthy and high-achieving persons—those whom he termed *self-actualizing*—had great impact on academia and popular culture, but lessened significantly after his death in 1970.

About a decade ago, Martin Seligman and his American colleagues launched the field of positive psychology, drawing partly upon growth-oriented conceptions of personality—but stressing empirical research to validate their viewpoint. Since then, positive psychology has grown tremendously around the world, with courses offered at more than 200 American universities, several new academic journals established, including *The Journal of Happiness Studies* and *The Journal of Positive Psychology,* and popular books such as Seligman's *Authentic Happiness* and *Happier* by Israeli psychologist Tal Ben-Shahar gaining wide media attention.

Central to such works has been a focus on such topics as hope and optimism, flourishing, gratitude and wisdom, love of learning, friendship and harmonious marriage, the mind-body relationship, courage, resilience, and happiness. Though the leaders of positive psychology are generally secularists from both Jewish and non-Jewish backgrounds, they have recently—and astutely—turned their attention to the writings of history's great religious thinkers for insights into character-building and the attainment of life-meaning and direction.

In this regard, a major figure in Judaism is highly relevant: Moses Maimonides. Though he lived long ago, Maimonides can be viewed as a pioneer in this domain—as both a brilliant rabbinic thinker and esteemed physician. Throughout his voluminous writings, Maimonides highlighted the importance of emotional and physical wellness for leading an upright, spiritual life. Let me highlight five aspects of Maimonides' teachings that are especially relevant to positive psychology today.

1. ***Human beings are creatures of habit.***

The notion that habit plays a key role in molding personality was first advanced by William James in the 1890s. He famously described habit as "the enormous fly-wheel of society"—propelling our lives in ways that lie outside our conscious awareness. Consistent with this longstanding view, positive psychology today has affirmed the utility of making habitual various forms of character-building activity, such as daily writing in a *gratitude journal* to "count one's blessings" or maintaining a diary to strengthen "learned optimism."

Maimonides repeatedly stressed the importance of habit in fostering ethical and altruistic behavior. It's fascinating to note that he specifically highlighted the importance of repetition in building positive habits. For example, in his influential formulation on charity, he observed that performing many small acts over time is more conductive to building character than if we perform one tremendous act with the same philanthropic value. Why? Because we are inwardly changed by our own behavior and thereby become more compassionate.

Maimonides' emphasis on the psychological significance of "small-act repetition" is precisely consistent with recent research in marriage and couples counseling—revealing that marriages collapse mainly due to many small acts of hurtfulness or neglect between spouses, not one huge calamitous event.

2. ***We are powerfully affected by our social milieu.***

Since Alfred Bandura advanced social learning theory in the 1970s, developmental psychologists have known that in childhood our attitudes and behaviors are shaped by our social milieu: specifically, by those with power to dispense rewards and punishments, namely our parents. We imitate what they *do,* not what they *say,* in order to gain their approval and affection.

Based on this viewpoint, positive psychology has begun to unravel how desirable behaviors of kindness, altruism, and empathy arise in certain social settings but rarely so in others.

Consistent with talmudic thought, Maimonides stressed the role of social surroundings in affecting individual behavior. Though readily acknowledging the influence of heredity, he contended that its impact on human conduct was much less than our daily social milieu. Maimonides recommended that we seek teachers, mentors, and friends in order to uplift our daily conduct—even paying for the opportunity, if necessary, to be positively influenced by moral exemplars.

Conversely, he repeatedly warned against associating with unethical companions due to their harmful impact on our character. If there are no ethical people with whom to

associate, Maimonides advised, then dwell alone in a cave rather than succumb to bad social influence.

3. ***Develop good social skills.***

Among the main interests of positive psychology today is the development of what are known as social competencies, or collectively, as social intelligence. Recent research in organizational psychology has shown that socially oriented traits such as conscientiousness and extroversion are predictive of workplace achievement as well as job satisfaction. Clinical studies, too, have revealed a strong relationship between mental health and the presence of friends and confidants in one's life. Conversely, social isolation is an important indicator of depression at virtually all ages. In Maimonides' relevant view, the cultivation of such social attributes as cheerfulness, friendliness, helpfulness, generosity, and kindness is not only ethically important, but also represents a true path for success in life. Thus, Maimonides endorsed the teachings of *Pirkei Avot* (Ethics of the Fathers) that positive social relations are the hallmark of the sage.

4. ***Avoid negative emotions, especially anger.***

To maximize mental health, positive psychology is concerned with strengthening such life-enhancing emotions as optimism, gratitude, and admiration—and lessening the force of our negative emotions. This view is consistent with increasing evidence from behavioral medicine that chronic anger exerts severe strain on the body and causes premature aging and reduced longevity. Here, too, Maimonides

was a pioneering thinker, for throughout his Judaic and medical writings, he repeated warned against negative emotions for their destructive effects.

For example, in the *Mishneh Torah* (Book II, chapter 3), Maimonides asserted that "Anger is a most evil quality. One should keep aloof from it to the opposite extreme, and train oneself not to be upset even by a thing over which it would be legitimate to be annoyed." In the same volume, he stated that "The life of an angry person is not truly life. The sages have therefore advised that one keep far from anger until being accustomed not to take notice even of things that provoke annoyance. This is a good way."

5. ***Cultivate mindfulness.***

The fields of positive psychology and behavioral medicine today are increasingly recommending mindfulness training (that is, learning to stay focused in the present moment) for its therapeutic value. The scientific evidence is clear that such training is effective not only in reducing harmful emotions like anger and fear, but also in strengthening the body—by lowering blood pressure and heart-rate, for example. In this regard, it's fascinating to learn that Maimonides addressed this topic in his influential *Guide of the Perplexed* (volume 1, chapter 60): "If we pray with the motion of our lips and our face toward the wall, but simultaneously think of business; if we read the Torah with our tongue while our heart is occupied with the building of our house, and we do not think of what we are reading; if we perform the commandments only with our limbs; then we are like those who are engaged in digging the ground or hewing wood in the forest without reflecting on the nature of those acts, or by whom they are commanded, or what is their purpose."

Indeed, Maimonides attributed so much importance to mindfulness for establishing a healthful lifestyle that he even provided specific advice on how his fellow Jews could cultivate this trait: "The first thing you must do is turn your thoughts away from everything while you say the *Shema* or other daily prayers. Do not content yourself with being pious when you read merely the first verse of *Shema* or the first paragraph of the *Amidah* prayer. When you have successfully practiced this for many years, try when reading or listening to the Torah to have all your heart and thoughts occupied with understanding what you read or hear… After some time, when you have mastered this, accustom yourself to have your mind free from all other thoughts when you read any portion of the other books of the prophets, or when you say any blessing…direct your mind exclusively to what you are doing."

Maimonides' career as a rabbinic scholar, communal leader, and physician spanned decades. His legacy has been profound and enduring. His psychological insights can enrich the new scientific specialty known as positive psychology with its important emphasis on fostering individual character strengths and virtues. In this regard, Maimonides' teachings also provide specific ways to advance Jewish spirituality in everyday life.