On Camel Rides and Moses Maimonides

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While in Morocco, mainly to celebrate a 75th birthday by riding camels in the Sahara desert with my wife and several good friends, I also had another objective. I wanted to visit the old city (medina) of Fes and to find the home of the legendary Middle Ages physician, Jewish theologian, and philosopher, Moses Maimonides, said to be a direct descendent of King David.

The sand dunes in the Sahara were formidable, as I'd heard (*Figure 1*). The 1-hour camel ride was enjoyable (sort of), although the downhill was a bit hard on my postoperative low back. I could only imagine what it must have been like to make the 52-day journey to Timbuktu in years past.

The medina of Fes is a maze of narrow, twisting alleyways, lined with souks (shops) selling a wide variety of goods, mainly food, clothing, and various crafts. Unlike the medina of Marrakech, this one is free of motorized vehicles, although traversed by heavily laden donkeys and horses (*Figure 2*), their owners shouting a harsh *balak*, which roughly translates into "get out of my way."

Our guide, Jalil, had grown up in the medina and took us to the house where Maimonides lived during his 5 years in the city. Now a restaurant (*Figure 3*), the interior revealed the mosaics and various beautiful mismatched Berber carpets, so typical of the country. Nearby was a sign (*Figure 4*) noting the former site of a hospital dating back to the time of Maimonides, where he most likely trained in medicine.

MOSES MAIMONIDES

Maimonides (*Figure 5*) was born in Cordoba, southern Spain, in 1135. The Almohad Berber dynasty conquered Cordoba when he was a teenager, forcing his family to try different areas in Spain more tolerant of Jews before coming to Fes. He trained in medicine both in Cordoba and in Fes. The fanatic Islamic sect of Almohad eventually took over Fes in 1145, after a 9-month siege. Maimonides had departed for Egypt years before and eventually settled in Old Cairo, where he died at age 69.

A prolific writer and thinker, Maimonides produced a 14-volume work on codification of Jewish law among his many works. He became the chief rabbi of all the lands controlled by Saladin, the sultan of Egypt and Syria, and was also the personal physician to Saladin (who had defeated the crusaders in Jerusalem) and to Saladin's son, Al-Afdal. The latter was said

Figure 1. The author and his wife, Marilyn, riding in the Sahara desert.

to have had "unhealthful habits" and was "burdened by black thoughts and physical symptoms," which no doubt kept his physician busy.

THE APHORISMS

I was mainly interested in perusing some of the 10 medical books of aphorisms Maimonides wrote. As Nuland noted, he was "a commentator on the art of medicine as it had been

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Figure 2. The medina of Fes.

handed down to him by Hippocrates and especially Galen, basing the commentary on his world view and the experiences he had had when caring for his many thousands of patients” (1).

He described a number of common conditions, from pneumonia and asthma to diabetes and hepatitis. He had the chutzpah to criticize Galen for contradictions “in that which he previously stated,” saying that “this requires explanation.” He also challenged Galen’s belief that the testicles were more

Figure 4. A sign indicating the hospital location where Maimonides probably worked.

important than the heart, pointing out that one could live without testicles (i.e., eunuchs) but not without the heart. It would take another 500 years before William Harvey disproved Galen’s theory of the circulation.

Some of Maimonides’ aphorisms (1, 2) are still pertinent today, such as the following:

- “The more perfect a person becomes in one of the sciences, the more cautious he grows, developing doubts, questions, and problems that are only partially solved” (whereas one deficient in science will find it “easier to understand every difficulty”).
- “Immobility is as great a deterrent to the maintenance of health as activity is of benefit.”
- “One should not neglect physical exercise for the body as do people of learning who diligently study the entire day and night without any gymnastics.”
- “Moderate physical exercise . . . is good both for the body and soul.”
- “It is not good for a person to drink more than a reasonable amount of wine.”
- “Thus, rejoicing and happiness alone will make many people’s illness milder. For

Figure 3. The former home of Maimonides, now a restaurant.

Figure 5. 18th-century portrait of Maimonides.

others, both the illness on the one hand as well as the emotional upset that led to it disappear.”

- “Colchicine . . . dissolves inflammation of gout.”

Of less value are off-the-wall statements:

- “Radishes and beets and the like are quite often altered and converted to blood, but only a small amount.”

- “Excessive ingestion of walnuts causes hindrance of speech.”
- “Excrement of goats, mixed with barley flour and kneaded with vinegar, dissolves hand inflammation.”
- “The consumption of rabbit heads, as much as one is able to eat, helps against tremors.” (Sorry, I can’t eat many rabbit heads.)
- “The wearing of rabbit skins strengthens the bodies of the elderly and the young.”
- “Mustard oil trickled into the ear of a deaf person restores hearing.” (Maybe I’ll try that on a friend who is going deaf.)
- “Ivory, if pulverized and the teeth brushed therewith, whitens them.”
- “If his right testicle is larger he will give rise to male offsprings; if it is the left, he will give rise to females.” (I’ll test this in a patient whose wife is pregnant.)
- “A cattle hoof, if burned and drunk with oxamel, shrinks an enlarged spleen and stimulates the desire for coitus.” (Worth a try, even if one’s spleen isn’t enlarged.)

SUMMARY

A birthday celebration trip to Morocco featured a camel riding adventure in the Sahara desert and a visit to the home of the noted physician, Jewish theologian, and philosopher Maimonides. After a prolific life, Maimonides died in Egypt and was buried in Tiberias in the Holy Land, a site that some still debate. His medical aphorisms were referred to for centuries after his death. Many hospitals and schools throughout the world today bear his name, such was his influence. His gravestone says simply, “From Moses to Moses, none arose as Moses.”

1. Nuland SB. *Maimonides*. New York: Schokem Books, 2005.
2. Rosner F, Muntner S, eds. *The Medical Aphorisms of Moses Maimonides*. New York: Yeshiva University Press, 1971.