

Conversion to Islam in the Premodern Age

A Sourcebook

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A Letter of Maimonides about Conversion and Martyrdom

*Attributed to Moshe ben Maimon (Maimonides,
d. 600/1204)*

Ryan Szpiech

Title: *Iggeret ha-Shemad* (Letter on forced conversion), also called *Ma'amar Qiddush ha-Shem* (Treatise on martyrdom/sanctifying the name [of God])

Genres: Legal writing (epistolary responsa)

Language: Hebrew

INTRODUCTION

Maimonides wrote the *Letter on Forced Conversion* (*Iggeret ha-Shemad*), also called in some editions *Ma'amar Qiddush ha-Shem* (Treatise on martyrdom/sanctifying the name [of God]), in Fez in the early 550s/1160s, when he was not yet thirty years old. He and his family had left their native town of Córdoba around 554/1159 to escape persecution by the Almohads, who had recently conquered al-Andalus and replaced the ruling Almoravid dynasty. After fleeing Córdoba, Maimonides settled in Fez but fled persecution again in 560/1165, moving first to Palestine and finally to Fuṣṭāṭ, near Cairo, where he would remain.

The *Letter on Forced Conversion* is Maimonides's earliest public epistle, and although its authorship has been called into question by some, it is now usually accepted as authentic. The original Arabic version does not survive. The text was translated into Hebrew twice, with one translation (A) made of the whole letter, and the other translation (B) including only the first part. Eight manuscripts are known of translation A, and only one of translation B. All known manuscripts are listed in Yitshak Shailat's edition, on which the present English translation is based.

The text addresses the question of *shemad*, which literally means “destruction” or “extirpation” and which is generally translated as “religious persecution,”

“forced conversion,” or “apostasy.” Conversion to Islam requires explicit recognition of Muḥammad as a prophet of God, and part of the question discussed in this letter concerns the question of whether one can feign such recognition. In the context of persecutions of Jews by the Almohads, the question of the permissibility of feigning belief in Islamic tenets in order to escape danger or death was not an abstract or academic one. Many Jews who remained in Almohad lands—and Maimonides was probably not an exception—did pretend to embrace Islamic customs and beliefs while continuing to uphold Jewish beliefs and commandments in secret. Others embraced Islam and did not return. Maimonides, who certainly never willingly converted, was probably prompted to flee Fez, which was also under Almohad control, after Judah b. Shoshan, a leading rabbi in Fez, was put to death for apostasy from Islam.

In the letter, offered as an (apparently) unsolicited comment on the response given by another rabbi to an inquiry by a contemporary, Maimonides attempts to counter the stance of the rabbi that recognition of any Islamic beliefs, even under coercion or in order to escape persecution or death, is tantamount to apostasy from Judaism and worthy of punishment. For this unnamed rabbi, any response besides martyrdom is unacceptable. Maimonides attacks this argument first by impugning the knowledge and logic of its author and then by providing textual proof that supports a distinction between feigned and willing apostasy. He mentions that the great sages and rabbis Eliezer and Meir [BT ‘Avodah Zarah 16b-17a and 18b, respectively] themselves feigned apostasy under coercion.

The key to Maimonides’s argument is the distinction between what is done willingly or for pleasure (*bi-retson nafsho*) and what is done under coercion (*be-’ones*) or out of necessity (*be-hekhreah*). Also important is the distinction he makes between transgressing in public with deeds and transgressing in private with mere words. While accepting martyrdom to glorify God’s name fulfils the commandment, feigning conversion or transgressing in another way to escape death—unless it be by committing idol worship, incest, or bloodshed, which are always forbidden, even under coercion—is not a sin worthy of death or severe condemnation. As Maimonides pointedly asks, “How can one pass the [same] judgment against one who acts under coercion as against one who acts willingly?”

The following translation includes key selections from the beginning and ending sections of the letter. For reasons of conciseness, many of the detailed exegetical arguments are omitted.

TEXT

Moses the Spaniard, son of R. Maimon, of blessed memory, said: A man from among the men of our generation asked a question of a man who was, according to him, among the wise. It concerned something that happened not only to them

[of our generation] but also to many communities of Israel, namely, forced conversion (*shemad*)—may God abolish it. He [who made the inquiry] was asked to confess that “that man” [i.e., Muḥammad] is, in his apostleship, a true prophet. Should he acknowledge him in order not to die, even though his sons and daughters be assimilated among the gentiles, or should he die and not testify, since he is [thus] obliged by the Torah of Moses, our teacher, peace be upon him, and [since] such testimony would lead to the giving up of all the commandments?

The man who was asked answered with a weak answer, lacking in discernment, deficient in expression and substance. . . . In this answer, he said that whoever acknowledges that “that man” is a messenger has already denied the Lord, God of Israel. He brought forth as evidence for this what they of blessed memory said: “All who profess idolatry are like those who deny the whole Torah” [BT Nedarim 25a, Qiddushin 40a, etc.]. In this analogy, there is no difference (*lo haya etsel zeh ha-heqesh hefresh*) between someone who professes idolatry without coercion but rather with pleasure in [his own] soul, like Jeroboam, son of Nebat, and his companions, and someone who, out of necessity (*be-hekheah*), calls someone a prophet out of fear of the sword. . . .

When we looked again at his words, we found that he said this: “Whoever says that [about Muḥammad], even if he fulfils all of the Torah alone in private, is indeed a gentile.” . . . If this is so, this sharp-witted man does not differentiate in any way between a person who does not keep the Sabbath out of fear of the sword and a person who willingly fails to keep it. . . .

When I saw this thing that sickens the body and the eyes, I set out to gather remedies and the finest spices (*besamim rosh*; Exod. 30:23) from the books of the ancients, from which I will make useful medicines to cure this sickness and to heal it. I saw fit to divide this matter into five categories: (1) the division of the commandments in a time of coercion (*ha-’ones*); (2) the definition of the profanation of the Name and its punishment; (3) the ranks of those who are killed in order to sanctify God’s name and of those converted by force during persecution; (4) the question of this persecution among all persecutions, and what a person should do in it; and (5) an explanation of the means by which a person survives this persecution, may God separate us [from it].

First category: the division of the commandments in a time of coercion (*ha-’ones*). There are three parts. The rule concerning the commandments about idol worship, incest, and bloodshed is that when a person is forced to do any of these, he is commanded, in all places and at all times and no matter his circumstances, to be killed rather than transgress (*yehareg ve-al ya’avor*).

For all other commandments except these three, if he is coerced, let him consider (*yabit*). If [the coercion] is meant for [an oppressor’s] own pleasure, [a Jew] may transgress and not be killed, whether it be in a time of persecution or not in a time of persecution, whether it be in private or in public. . . .

If [an oppressor] intends to make him transgress, let him consider it in this way: if the time is a time of persecution, he is to be killed and not transgress, whether [he is] in private or in public. But if it is not a time of persecution and it is in private, let him transgress and not be killed, and if it is in public, let him be killed and not transgress. . . .

Second category: the definition of the profanation of the Name and its punishment. . . .

Third category: the ranks of those who are killed in order to sanctify God's name and of those converted by force during persecution. Know that wherever they of blessed memory (*hazal*) say, "Be killed and do not transgress," [they mean that] if one is killed, he has already sanctified [God's] name. . . . If he transgresses under coercion and is not killed, he has not acted rightly, and under coercion has desecrated God's name. Yet surely he is not to be punished by any of the seven punishments [i.e., *malkot*, whipping; *henek*, strangulation; *hereg*, slaughter/beheading; *serefah*, burning; *sekilah*, stoning; *karet*, extirpation; *mitah bi-yedei shamaim*, death by God's hands; cf. *Mishneh torah*, *Hilkhot sanhedrin*, 14]. We do not find anywhere in the Torah God imposing as sentence a punishment on someone who is forced, whether for light things or grave ones. Rather, [He punishes] someone who acts willingly . . . but not someone who is forced. Thus it is written throughout the Talmud: "The forced one is within the law [of the Torah]" (*'anus de-oraytah hu*). . . . In many places they said: "The Merciful One [i.e., God] exempts the forced one" (*'anus rahmana petareh*). He is called neither a criminal nor a wicked person, nor is he disqualified to testify, unless he committed offenses for which he is disqualified from testifying. Although he has not fulfilled the commandment of sanctifying the Name and is called "one who profaned the name of heaven under coercion," by no account [can he be called] "a willing profaner of heaven's name." . . . He is commanded to [let himself] be killed [rather than transgress], but if he is not killed, he is not [for this reason] condemned to death, and even if he commits idol worship under coercion, he is not to be cut off (*eyno hayav karet*) and, even less, executed by a court of law. . . . These matters are clear in themselves and there is in no way any need to adduce proof for them. How can one pass the [same] judgment against one who acts under coercion as against one who acts willingly?

Fourth category: the question of this persecution among all persecutions, and what a person should do in it. . . .

Truly, nothing can be said about anyone who is killed for not recognizing the apostleship of "that man" except that he fulfilled the commandment with a great reward before God and will be lifted up in order to give his soul to the sanctification of the Name. But whoever comes to ask us whether he should be killed [rather than] acknowledge [the prophecy of Muḥammad], we tell him to acknowledge it and not be killed, but [at the same time] not to remain in the kingdom of that king. He should stay at home until he can leave that kingdom, and if he must do some-

thing with his hands, let him do it in secret. . . . When our rabbis of blessed memory said, “Be killed and do not transgress,” they did not seem to speak of something that does not include action. One is to be killed [only] when he is compelled to do something or transgress something that he was warned of. . . .

Fifth category: an explanation of how a person should regard himself in these days of persecution. . . .

From the day we were exiled from our land, our persecution has not ceased, because “from our youth it grew up with us as [with] a father and from our mother’s womb it has guided us” [cf. Job 31:18]. It says throughout the Talmud, “Religious persecution is likely to be abolished” (*shemada* ‘avid ve-betil). May God abolish it for us and bring about in our days what he said: “In those days and at that time, says the Lord, the iniquity of Israel shall be sought, and there shall be none; and the sins of Judah, and none shall be found; for I will pardon those whom I leave as a remnant” [Jer. 50:20]. May it thus be [God’s] will. Amen.

FURTHER READING

- Hartman, David. “Rabbenu Moshe ben Maimon’s *Iggeret ha-Shemad*,” *Jerusalem Studies in Jewish Thought* 2 (1988): 362–403.
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- Soloveitchik, Haym. “Maimonides’ *Iggeret Ha-Shemad*: Law and Rhetoric,” in *Rabbi Joseph H. Lookstein Memorial Volume*, ed. Leo Landman (New York: Ktav, 1980), 281–319. Also in Haym Soloveitchik, *Collected Essays* (Oxford: Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2013–14), 2:288–330.