PART TWO

MAIMONIDES
Maimonides was born in Cordova, Spain in 1135 to a distinguished family of rabbis and judges. His father was a judge. In childhood he was educated in Jewish law and general sciences. In 1148 Cordova was conquered by the Almohads. Because of the fanaticism of these rulers, who forcibly converted the Jews to Islam, the family was forced to wander for about ten years among the southern cities of the Iberian peninsula. In 1159 the family settled in Fez, which was also under Almohad rule; there too they had to keep their Judaism in secret. In 1165 they left by sea and arrived in the land of Israel. They stayed there about half a year. After the father’s death they settled in Egypt. Maimonides was supported financially by his brother who traded in jewels. After his brother’s death Maimonides supported himself through his medical practice. He regarded it as forbidden for scholars to earn a livelihood from Torah; it was incumbent on them to learn a marketable skill. Thus he became one of the most renowned physicians of his generation, and was appointed as physician in Saladin’s court, a position that won him great influence in the community.

A Universal Personality: Legal Authority, Communal Leader, Philosopher

Already in 1171 Maimonides was appointed leader of the Egyptian Jewish community, serving in that capacity until 1177 and again from 1195 until his death in 1204. His formal authority was limited to Egyptian Jewry, but he engaged in general and legal correspondence with the Jewish communities from Yemen to the southeast as far as Spain and Germany to the northwest. He was recognized as the leading halakhic authority of his generation, thus being invested, in effect, with the authority of the Geonim, the presiding officers of the Babylonian yeshivas of a prior era. It is worth emphasizing that Maimonides sought through his many-sided literary activity to fill the vacuum that was