Maimonides and the Mesorah of Tiberias

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I. The Torah of Tiberias

The city of Tiberias played an extraordinary role in Jewish history and in the annals of Torah study. For a thousand years, from the time of the Mishnah to the high middle ages, it was one of the world's greatest centers of Jewish life and scholarship, and during the middle ages it surpassed even Jerusalem as the most important Jewish city in the world. The glory of Tiberias as a city of Jewish life and Torah ended abruptly when Tiberias was destroyed by the Christian Crusaders in the early twelfth century.

Some of the best known rabbis of the Mishnah lived in Tiberias, amongst them Rabbi Yosi Hagelili, Rabbi Shimon ben Hananyah, Shimon Ben Azzai, and Rabbi Meir. The Talmud lists ten locations to which the Sanhedrin was exiled after the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem (Rosh Hashanah 31a-b). The final location was Tiberias, where the Sanhedrin and its rabbinic leaders (the nesi'im) resided from the year 235 until the institution ceased to function (sometime from the fifth century onwards). The Jerusalem Talmud was compiled in Tiberias during the fourth century.

The best-known connection between Maimonides and the city of Tiberias is that he was buried there. This is a well-documented fact, and the evidence for it is explained in a fine article by Rabbi Yamin Levy. But did the Torah of Tiberias also impact Maimonides during his life? Or was it no more than his resting place in death?

Maimonides, as is well-known, did not see graves as a place of inspiration or holiness for the living. As he wrote (Laws of Mourning 4:4):

Graves are to be marked, and a memorial is built over the grave. But a memorial is not to be built over the graves of the righteous, for their words are their memory. Nor should a person visit graves.

Given these sentiments, if there was indeed a connection between the living Maimonides and the Torah of Tiberias, then it behooves us learn about it when we visit Tiberias and when we remember Maimonides, "for their words are their memory."

It happens that there is such a connection. The Sanhedrin, the Mishnah, and the Jerusalem Talmud are not the only gems in the crown of Torah that are tied to Tiberias. The final gem, a polished diamond, is the very text of the Bible itself: its letters and vowels and cantillation points. This highly technical field is called the "mesorah," and its practitioners are called ba'alei ha-mesorah (or "Masoretes" in English). As a science and as an art form, the mesorah reached its culmination nowhere else than in Tiberias. And the greatest work ever produced by the masoretes, today called the Aleppo Codex, eventually found its way into the very hands of Maimonides himself. This fact
has had ramifications for synagogue life throughout the Jewish world to this very day.

But in order to make a meaningful connection between Maimonides and the Tiberian masoretes, we first need to understand what the Tiberian masoretes accomplished, why their work is so important to Jewish life, and how Maimonides amplified their achievements throughout the Jewish world.

II. The Tiberian Mesorah

Whenever the Torah is read in a synagogue, there are people trained in two different skills who make that reading possible: The first is the scribe who wrote the Torah scroll by hand, and the second is the person who has been specially trained to read it correctly. In Hebrew, the first is called a sofer and the second a kore (or ba'el kore). Most of the time these two functions are carried out by two different people: The Torah-reader is rarely a scribe as well, and a scribe is not usually the person who reads the Torah in his synagogue.

This division of labor is very ancient, and it seems to happen again in each generation for very practical reasons related to the nature of the Hebrew language, whose letters are all consonants. For instance, when a scribe who writes Torah scrolls or other biblical books needs to copy the four Hebrew letters וישב, he may not know for sure whether he is writing va-yeshev or ve-yashav or even the rare form va-yishb (Numbers 21:1). Nor does he need to know which word he is writing, because that isn't his job! Similarly, when a Torah-reader learns the sing all the words in the weekly Torah portion by heart with their correct vowels, that by no means indicates that he remembers how many times the word yoshev is spelled with four letters (יושב), and how many times with three (יֹשב).

In short, there were always two simultaneous traditions for the Hebrew text of the Bible: A written tradition and an oral tradition. There was the tradition of the scribes and the tradition of the readers. On the one hand, the written tradition tried to preserve the exact spellings of words, and its ideal was that each new scroll be identical with the older scroll it was copied from, letter-for-letter. On the other hand, the oral tradition tried to preserve all of the elements that go into a proper public reading: This meant memorizing not only the correct vowels and accents for each and every word in the entire Bible, but also the relationships between words within a single verse. For within each verse of the Bible, some adjacent words are closely related and form a single phrase together, while other words are disconnected by a pause. The oral tradition of the readers preserved these relationships in a nuanced system that is far more detailed and expressive that our modern system of periods, commas, and semicolons. And all of these details were memorized and passed down orally from generation to generation.

Children began to learn this special way of reading the Bible from a very young age (Avot 5:21) and committed the details to memory. Thus, far from being a project for bar-mitzvah boys, chanting the Bible correctly was a lifetime endeavor. In fact, this form of reading or chanting out loud reflects the formal title for “Bible” in rabbinic literature, which is migra, meaning “that which is read”. Contrast this to Scripture, the European term for the Bible, which means “that which is written”. The classic Jewish word for the Bible emphasizes the oral tradition over the written one.
But at some point these two ancient, detailed traditions for how the Bible was supposed to be written and how it was supposed to sound were in danger of being lost. So what the Tiberian Masoretes did is this: First they would commission a copy of a part of the Bible such as Torah or Nevi'ïm or Ketuvim, or sometimes even of the entire Bible, by an expert scribe who would prepare the letter-text. This copy was written on parchment by hand, but instead of joining its pages end-to-end and rolling them up to form a scroll, they were bound together on one side in a form known as a "codex," much like a modern book. Thus, the greatest products of the masoretic schools are known as the Masoretic Codices.

Next, the Masoretes would take this professionally-prepared copy and add special symbols which they themselves invented to represent the oral tradition: vowels and cantillation signs, called niqqud and te`amim (or ta’amei ha-Miqra) in Hebrew. These written symbols for the oral tradition were invented during the 8th to 10th centuries, the "masoretic era," and are still used in Hebrew to this very day when the Bible is printed, and whenever any Hebrew book is published with vowels. The vowel-signs of the Tiberian Masoretes eventually became the vowel-signs of the Hebrew language for Jews everywhere.

The Tiberian Masoretes would also sometimes note that the written tradition and the oral tradition for a certain word in the Bible didn't correspond to one another. When this happened they would leave the written letter-text prepared by the scribe intact, but also note the oral reading by inserting its vowels into the text and noting it in the margin. This is the origin of the phenomenon known to Torah-readers as keri ukhtiv.

Each individual Masorete also added notes in the margins of his Codex about how certain words should be spelled, so that he could verify the accuracy of the letter-text and correct it when necessary. Finally, the Masorete would continue to read his Codex over and over again, making corrections to both the letters and oral symbols, and slowly but surely weeding out errors. The masoretic ideal was to create a "perfect" copy of the biblical text representing both the written and oral traditions at once. To produce an accurate Masoretic Codex was the ultimate life's work of a masoretic scholar in Tiberias.

Outside of Tiberias there were different schools of the Mesorah, in other areas of the Land of Israel and in Babylonia. They too invented symbols for their oral traditions and took notes on the exact spelling of their written traditions, but none of them ever reached the level of nuance and accuracy achieved by the Tiberian Mesorah. In the end their vowel systems were not so widely adopted and their achievements were largely forgotten, eclipsed and replaced by the outstanding system of writing and vocalizing the Bible produced by the scholars of Tiberias.

To give some idea of the scope of this endeavor, let us consider a statistic: A masoretic copy of the entire Bible according to the Tiberian system contains over two million (!) orthographic symbols, including letters, vowels, cantillation marks that represent the degrees of relationships between individual words, and other minor marks. The amount of work involved in writing and proofreading a text like this by hand is mind-boggling. Remember that this took place before the age of computers, and even before the age of printing (which allowed for the easy creation of identical copies of texts). Could any human being ever succeed at something like this?

The ideal of an absolutely perfect masoretic manuscript was never reached, of course. But some masoretic codices came very close. A masoretic Bible that contains only a few hundred individual errors is considered highly accurate, and several like this have survived to this day in various libraries. But there was one specific codex, prepared by the greatest of all the Masoretes and
proofread by him over the course of a lifetime, whose mistakes are no more than a handful in the entire Bible.

This outstanding codex was prepared by Aaron ben Moshe ben Asher in tenth century Tiberias, and its creation was the culmination of all masoretic activity. It represents both the written and oral traditions of the biblical text in a form as close to perfection and any human being could possibly achieve. For Jews around the world it became the ultimate authority on the proper spelling of words in Torah scrolls, and in later centuries printed editions of the Hebrew Bible strove to represent "the Mesorah of Ben Asher" as perfectly as possible. This precious, thousand-year-old text survives to this day, seriously damaged but still extremely useful. It is now located at the Shrine of the Book in Jerusalem.

III. Maimonides and the Mesorah of Tiberias

The Codex of Ben Asher was produced in Tiberias and remained there for a century or more. Its letter-text was written by the scribe Rabbi Solomon ben Buya’a, and it was vocalized and annotated by Aharon Ben Asher in Tiberias, apparently sometime before the year 910 C.E. According to its earliest inscription, however, it left Tiberias when sold to the Karaite synagogue in Jerusalem, where explicit conditions for its use allowed it to be consulted by both Karaites and Rabbanites for the correction of scrolls (but not for common reading). That sale took place sometime during the eleventh century.

But the Codex did not remain in Jerusalem for long. It was looted by the Seljuks (in 1071) or by the Crusaders (in 1099), and subsequently ransomed from its captors by Jews who brought it to the Synagogue of the Jerusalemites in Fustat (Cairo), a Rabbinite synagogue. In Cairo it was consulted by none other than Maimonides himself. In his Laws of Tefillin, Torah Scrolls, and Mezuzah (8:4), Maimonides wrote:

The book upon which I have relied in these matters, a well-known book in Egypt, contains the twenty-four books [of the Hebrew Bible] and was in Jerusalem for several years. It was used to correct scrolls, and all relied on it because it was proofread by Ben Asher, who devoted years of meticulous attention to it and proofread it many times, according to the tradition. And I relied on it for the Torah scroll that I wrote according to Jewish law.

"These matters" were the detailed lists that Maimonides composed of the section-breaks in the five books of the Torah, which he carefully transcribed in order to put an end to the great confusion encountered by scribes in that area. He succeeded, and because of his efforts the Torah scrolls found in all Jewish communities around the world today have standardized section breaks that are based indirectly on the codex of Ben Asher. But beyond the specific topic of section breaks, Maimonides also went out of his way in the above passage to express great admiration for the accuracy of Ben Asher, and for the lifetime that the Masorete spent correcting his codex, an activity that had much more to do with the letter-text of the codex than with its section-breaks.

That Maimonides saw Ben Asher's codex as a model of perfection in all of its details is supported by his discussion of the exact spelling of the words found in tefillin. Maimonides wrote that "one must be exceedingly careful about the proper spelling, so that all four sections [in the tefillin] appear as they are written in a Torah scroll that has been carefully checked" (2:3). In fact, the correct spelling of the words in
Ben Asher's work was already highly regarded long before the time of Maimonides. It is clear from the passage cited above that Maimonides was impressed by the Masorete's long-established reputation, a reputation that the Egyptian scholar was able to confirm through direct examination of the Tiberian's work. Ever since Maimonides' time, the authority of the Tiberian mesorah in general and of Ben Asher's work in particular were doubly bolstered by Maimonides' approval of them.

Almost immediately, for instance, we find that the Jews of Yemen started to produce Torah scrolls and masoretic manuscripts that exhibit extraordinary fidelity to Ben Asher's codex (of which they apparently commissioned a copy). For the Yemenites, this involved not just making corrections, but even switching from the Babylonian system of vocalizing the biblical text to the Tiberian one. That action was a clear reaction to Maimonides' approval of the Tiberian mesorah as represented in Ben Asher's codex.

In the wider Jewish world, scholars wrote several important books over the centuries that attempted to correct the letter-text and vocalization of the Bible (and especially of the Torah). These include works such as Masoret Seyag la-Torah by Rabbi Meir Abulafia (13th century Spain), Masoret ha-Masoret by Rabbi Eliyahu Bahur (16th century Italy) and Minhat Shai by Rabbi Yedidyah Norzi (17th century Italy). These scholars strove to reconstruct the exact nuances of the mesorah according to Ben Asher using all the means at their disposal, but unlike Maimonides none of them had direct access to Ben Asher's own manuscript. It is due to their efforts that today's Torah scrolls and printed Bibles remain extremely close to Ben Asher's mesorah, though not absolutely identical to it. These scholars acknowledged their indebtedness to Maimonides, and his authority in the area of mesorah, including the primacy he gave to the Tiberian tradition as transcribed by Ben Asher.

Furthermore, over the course of many centuries from Maimonides' time until our own, numerous scholars inquired about specific readings in Ben Asher's actual manuscript, and some even traveled great distances to examine it with their own eyes and take notations. These scholars were aware that were consulting the actual writing of Ben Asher, the very Bible which Maimonides held in his own hands and according to which he wrote his personal Torah scroll.

IV. The Aleppo Codex

Ben Asher's manuscript is known today as the Aleppo Codex. It was most likely brought to Aleppo, in Syria (known as Haleb in Arabic and identified by the Jews with the biblical Aram Zova) in the 14th century, and even this move seems to have strong connections with Maimonides.

Over the centuries, Aleppo was the home to a number of extremely important Maimonidean manuscripts. Maimonides' original copy of his Commentary on the
Mishnah, written in his own hand, was kept in Aleppo for centuries and survives to this day (two of the six Orders of the Mishnah are now found at the Jewish National and University Library in Jerusalem and three others are in Oxford). Early copies of Maimonides' great halakhic code Mishneh Torah were also to be found in Aleppo, some of them commissioned during his lifetime and bearing his signature. The most important Maimonidean manuscripts, amongst them the original Commentary on the Mishnah, were brought to Aleppo by Rabbi David, a sixth-generation paternal descendant of Maimonides, who left Egypt in 1375 and settled in Aleppo. It is quite likely that Ben Asher's manuscript was also brought to Aleppo by Rabbi David himself. If not, then it was probably brought there by one of the other Egyptian scholars who moved to Aleppo at the time.

The rabbis of Aleppo claimed that Maimonides himself sent the codex to their city during his lifetime, citing a responsum of Rabbi David ibn Zimra to this effect. It turns out, however, that there is no responsum which actually states this. Ibn Zimra does, however, refer to copies of the Mishneh Torah which Maimonides himself executed and were found in Aleppo (Responsa 4:1286 [225], 1482 [9]).

The Jews of Aleppo used eloquent titles for some of the most important texts in their possession. A copy of the Mishnah with Maimonides' commentary was called Ha-Ma'or or Al-Siraj in Arabic, "The Luminary" (not the original title of the work but one which was widely used). Like Jews in many places, they referred to a vocalized manuscript of the Bible as a "Crown"—Keter in Hebrew or Taj in Arabic. (The Jews of Yemen still call a vocalized Torah a Taj, even a printed one.) In Aleppo they possessed several such masoretic manuscripts, the most important being Ben Asher's, the Crown of Aleppo, or Keter Aram Zova as it is known to this day in Hebrew.

In late 1947, shortly after the United Nations vote in favor of partitioning Palestine and establishing the State of Israel, anti-Jewish riots broke out in Aleppo. The ancient synagogue in which it was kept was burned, but most of the Keter was saved and eventually smuggled to Israel by Syrian Jews who risked their lives to do so. It finally arrived in Israel in 1957, where it was presented to President Yizhak Ben-Zvi, who had made great efforts to ensure its recovery.

Tragically, about a third of the Keter was lost in the riots, including nearly all of the Torah. But scholars have nevertheless been able to reconstruct nearly all of the lost text, enabling the manuscript to be published. Thus, the very Bible written and proofread by Aharon Ben Asher in Tiberias, consulted and authorized by Maimonides in Egypt, and preserved for centuries in Aleppo, has finally been published in Israel. The first edition of the Bible based directly on the Keter was published by the late Rabbi Mordecai Breuer of blessed memory, and the most recent such edition became the official Bible of the Hebrew University, entitled Keter Yerushalayim ("The Jerusalem Crown"). The Ben-Zvi Institute has also made high-quality images of the Keter available on-line.

Maimonides' connection to the heritage of Tiberias is not just in the location of his gravesite, but in the living Jewish tradition of writing and reading the Bible in Hebrew. Beyond the Bible, even the very vowels printed in Hebrew books today are part of the shared heritage of Tiberias and Maimonides. Maimonides' influence helped to make the greatest masorete (Aharon Ben Asher) and the greatest achievement of the masoretes (the Aleppo Codex) central and authoritative throughout the Jewish world. The Torah of Tiberias is sung today in synagogues around the Jewish world, and Maimonides is part of that song.
Sources and Further Reading: