

WHO REALLY WROTE MAIMONIDES'S PRAYER?

In 1783 a *Physician's Prayer* was published anonymously in a German magazine. Eventually it became so famous that in modern times it sometimes has been read at medical school graduation ceremonies instead of the Hippocratic Oath. The full title was *Daily Prayer of a Physician From a Hebrew Manuscript of a Famous Jewish Physician in 12th century Egypt*. Of course this perfectly described Maimonides (1135-1204 CE) who was well known in 18th century Germany. Because this Prayer doesn't appear in any of Maimonides' extensive writings, there was skepticism whether he was the true author and early in the 20th century Sir William Osler wrote to Joseph Hertz, the chief Rabbi of Great Britain, for an opinion. After due investigation, Dr. Hertz replied:

The Prayer is the product of Dr. Markus Herz [no relation], a friend and pupil of Immanuel Kant and Moses Mendelssohn. He was a physician in the Jewish Hospital in Berlin. The Prayer was composed by him in the English language in 1783...The current English version seems to be from the Hebrew translation and first appeared in the London paper Voice of Jacob on the 24th of December, 1841.

Modern scholars agreed that the work was written by Markus Herz, but the reason for the deception remains unclear. Nevertheless, the sentiments expressed, such as "the mind of man is ever expanding" are typical of the 18th century Enlightenment's spirit of optimism and improvement. There are several translations of the work and the following few lines give an idea of its sublime spirit:

May the love of my art inspire me at all times...Grant that my patients have confidence in me and my art and follow my directions and counsel...Should those who are wiser than I wish to improve and instruct me, let my soul gratefully follow their guidance; for vast is the extent of our art...Oh God, Thou has chosen me to watch over the life and death of Thy creatures; I am now about to apply myself to my profession. Support me in this great task so that it may benefit mankind, for without Thy help not even the least thing will succeed.

Who was Markus Herz? To be mentioned in the same context as Maimonides, he must have been a man of great intellect and sensitivity. He was born in 1747 in Berlin at a time when the Jewish population was living in the city illegally. His father was an impoverished Torah scribe who provided the young man with a yeshiva education. At age fifteen he moved to Koenigsberg with the intention of becoming a merchant. While there he had the good fortune to befriend the prosperous and highly cultivated Friedlander family who took him under their wing. As a youth he attended Kant's

lectures and began to study medicine, which was the only field of higher study then open to Jews. His studies in philosophy led him to the idea that natural and humanistic sciences should be integrated and he urged that subjects like zoology and botany should be limited in favor of what today would be called psychology or psychosomatic medicine. He found it to be unsatisfactory that the universities were able to find professors who knew every bone and ligament, but not one who could teach medical psychology.

Dr. Herz strove to introduce understanding of the patient's psyche into his own practice in Berlin where he worked from 1774 until his death at age 56 in 1803. He became successful and often visited up to thirty patients a day, mostly on foot, and treated patients regardless of their social class. In addition to private practice, along with his father-in-law he headed the Jewish Hospital and under their humane leadership, the hospital developed an excellent reputation for, among other things, its cleanliness, a rare quality in those times. Although himself not religiously observant, he arranged for strict Jewish dietary and ceremonial laws.

Markus Herz was a leader of Berlin's Enlightenment, and beginning in 1776 he and his beautiful and brilliant young wife Henrietta, held lectures in their own home concerning medical science, physics, philosophy and logic. In the audience were leading intellectuals and members of the royal house, including the crown prince. The same prince became King Friedrich Wilhelm II, who in 1787 appointed Herz as the first Jewish professor of medicine in Prussia.

Whether Markus Herz was the original author of the Prayer attributed to Maimonides or merely the first person to translate an earlier Hebrew prayer into German, he was an impressive figure who endeavored to introduce spirituality and psychology into medical theory and was among the first to express Jewish concerns in the course of his medical practice.