

OUR SERIES ON LEADERS WHO HAVE SHAPED RELIGIOUS ZIONISM OVER THE LAST 150 YEARS

Rav Yehuda Leib HaKohen Maimon

Rav Yehuda Leib HaKohen Maimon (born Fishman, 1875-1962) was born in Bessarabia, then part of the Russian Empire. Rav Maimon studied in Lithuanian *yeshivot* and after receiving *semicha* from Rav Yechiel Mechel Epstein, author of the *Aruch HaShulchan*, he served as *maggid* in Marculesti and then as Rabbi of Ungeni (1905-13). He became active in the Chibbat Tzion movement, for whom he wrote passionate pro-*aliyah* material and, after meeting Rav Isaac Jacob Reines (1900), the founder of Mizrachi, he took an active part in Mizrachi's founding conference in Vilna (1902) and in its first world conference in Pressburg, Bratislava.

After making *aliyah* (1913), Rav Maimon was among the founders of Mizrachi's broad educational network in *Eretz Yisrael*. Imprisoned by the Turkish authorities at the outbreak of World War I and condemned to death, he was ultimately freed due to active intervention by Jewish American leaders. He traveled to the United States, where he helped organize and strengthen Mizrachi and, after returning to *Eretz Yisrael* on the first ship to reach its shores after World War I, he and Rav Kook established the institution of the Chief Rabbinate. In 1936, he founded Mossad HaRav Kook, which still publishes religious books. As Chairman of the Jewish Agency Executive, he was interned by the British on "Black Saturday" in June 1946.

He served as Israel's first Minister of Religion; helped draft Israel's Declaration of Independence and was one of its signatories, and played a pivotal role in promoting Judaism in the new Jewish State. A polymath and prolific author, he was awarded the Israel Prize for his contribution to rabbinic literature (1958).



Rav Maimon was one of many government ministers who, at Ben-Gurion's request, Hebraicized his original, exilic name. Not surprisingly, he did not much care for the name *איש דג* (the literal translation of Fishman); as he explained it, he chose the name *מימון* because his family was descended from the Rambam (Maimonides), whom he greatly admired

and whose name was Moshe ben Maimon.

Rav Maimon was appointed Minister of Religion and Minister in Charge of War Casualties in both the provisional government and the First Knesset. Elected to the first Knesset in 1949 as a member of the United Religious Front (an alliance of Agudat Yisrael, Poalei Agudat Yisrael, Mizrachi and HaPoel HaMizrachi), he retained his ministerial role in the first and second governments, resigned from the Israeli cabinet over a dispute with Ben-Gurion, ceased his political activities after the death of his wife in 1957 and then devoted himself entirely to literary work.

Rav Maimon played what was unquestionably the dominant role in promoting Judaism in the founding of the new Jewish State and in its nascent governmental institutions, particularly through his remarkable friendship with Ben-Gurion, who held him in the highest regard.

He was instrumental in ensuring that all government institutions, including the army, serve only kosher food, in promoting public Shabbat observance (including by government officials), and in convincing Ben-Gurion to vest the Chief Rabbinate with authority over marriage and divorce matters. He is also credited with the wide acceptance amongst Zionist halachic authorities of reciting *Hallel* on Yom HaAtzmaut. ■