



# Erev Pesach: Whose Birthday Do You Remember

*"There are countless greats in Jewish history—but only one about whom it's said, 'From Moshe to Moshe, none arose like Moshe.'"*

## Birthdays

Most people can remember the birthdays of their close friends, siblings, parents, and so on. But when it comes to their *own* children, it's a whole different level. Not only do they remember the date—they also remember what day of the week it was. Was it a Tuesday or a Wednesday? They'll tell you whether it was in the morning or at night. In fact, many mothers can tell you the exact time their child was born—"Three-oh-eight in the afternoon, on the dot!" (Please don't test me on this—I'm just proud I remember all their names. That in itself is a major accomplishment!)

But in the collective memory of the Jewish people, birthdays usually don't stick. We remember the day Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai passed away—Lag BaOmer—but who knows when he was born? And the same goes for most of our great leaders throughout history. We typically only mark their *yahrtzeits*, the day of their passing—because that's when we say Kaddish, light a *yahrzeit* candle, and reflect on their legacy. Birthdays? Not so much.

But there's one big exception: the Rambam. With him, we don't just know the day he passed away—20 Teves—we also know the day he was born. And not only that, we know the *day of the week* he was born, and even the *exact time*.

The Rambam was born on Erev Pesach, which that year fell on Shabbos, at twenty minutes past midday, in the year 1135.

## The Kaddish Addition

To appreciate the Rambam's impact on the Jewish world, we need to talk about Kaddish.

Every Jew knows about the *Kaddish* prayer. There's a story of a young boy who came home from Hebrew school one day, and his father asked him, "So what did you learn today?" The boy said, "We learned how to say Kaddish!"

Alarmed, the father immediately called the teacher and asked, "Why are you teaching my son Kaddish? I'm still alive and well!" The teacher replied, "Don't worry—by the time he learns it, you'll be very old!"

What do we actually say in the Kaddish? We ask for G-d's name to be exalted and sanctified in the world. And we pray for the coming of Moshiach—*"in your lifetime, in your days, and in the lifetime of the entire Jewish people, speedily and soon."* We're not asking for something far off in the distant future—we want it now, in *our* time.

During the Rambam's lifetime, they would actually insert his name right into the Kaddish. After the words *"in your lifetime and in your days"* they would add, *"and in the lifetime of our master, Moshe ben Maimon."* That's how deeply he was loved and revered by the Jewish people.

## **The Persecution**

What was so special about the Rambam? Why did the Jewish people love and cherish him so much that they didn't just remember the day he passed away—they also remembered the exact day and time he was born?

The Rambam is buried in Tiberias, and on his tombstone is written a remarkable phrase—one that you won't find on the grave of any other Jewish leader: *"From Moshe to Moshe, there arose none like Moshe."* The inscription is saying that from the time of Moshe Rabbeinu until the Rambam—Moshe ben Maimon—no one reached such a level.

Fifty generations passed from Yehoshua to the Rambam, and yet the Jewish people saw in him a continuation of Moshe Rabbeinu's greatness. (See the Rebbe's sicha from 11 Nissan 5745, *Hisvaaduyos* 5745, vol. 3, p. 1697.)

What made the Rambam greater than even Rabbi Akiva? Greater than Hillel the Elder, the prophet Shmuel, King Solomon? Why was *he* seen as a second Moshe?

Let's look at the time the Rambam lived in. During his lifetime, Jews in Spain and across much of the Arab world were under tremendous persecution. The Muslim regimes of the time forced conversions on

Jews and Christians alike. Many Christians escaped to countries ruled by Christianity, where they could live freely.

But the Jews had nowhere to run. In Christian countries, they would've been forced to convert to Christianity—so many had no choice but to outwardly accept Islam. They had to occasionally attend a mosque and publicly declare, "G-d is One and Muhammad is His prophet."

But in their personal lives, they quietly continued keeping Torah and mitzvos. The Muslim authorities, unlike the later Christian Inquisition, didn't send investigators into Jewish homes. They didn't police private religious observance. Jews were able to live a double life—one public, one private—while remaining committed to Judaism behind closed doors.

(This was completely different from what happened later under Christian rule in Spain, when the Inquisition would storm Jewish homes looking for even the smallest trace of religious observance. If someone was caught lighting Shabbos candles or saying a blessing, they were tortured and burned, G-d forbid.)

During that time, there was a certain rabbi who lived outside of these Muslim-ruled countries. Someone wrote to him asking for guidance about how to view these "crypto-Jews"—Jews who outwardly practiced Islam but secretly remained faithful.

Instead of showing understanding or compassion, this rabbi unleashed a harsh attack. He wrote that anyone who publicly accepted Islam—even just on the surface—was a heretic, had no share in the World to Come, and that any mitzvah he did in private was worthless. Even his prayers, he said, were not only ineffective—they were an *abomination*.

Can you imagine what kind of despair that rabbi's letter caused? The more religious Jews fell into deep sadness and depression. They had been clinging to Torah and mitzvos with self-sacrifice—and now they were being told it was all worthless. And the rest of the people? Many simply gave up. "If we've already lost our connection to G-d," they said, "then what's the point? Why bother keeping mitzvos or studying Torah in secret? If it doesn't count anyway, we might as well just fully embrace Islam and move on."

## **The Special Letter**

At the time, the Rambam was around 26 years old. When he heard what had happened, he wrote a heartfelt response to those Jews. It

became known as the *Iggeres HaShmad*—“The Letter of Persecution.” It’s a powerful letter, filled with love and deep empathy for the Jewish people.

First, the Rambam calmly and clearly refuted the rabbi’s harsh claims, proving that these Jews were not idolaters. Then he went even further, and challenged the rabbi for speaking negatively about fellow Jews. He reminded him: Even when great prophets like Eliyahu, Yeshayahu, and even Moshe Rabbeinu themselves criticized the Jewish people—even when their words were *true*—G-d responded harshly. Because G-d does not tolerate people speaking negatively about His children. So how could *you*, he wrote, dare to declare that these Jews have no portion in the G-d of Israel?

The Rambam continues: Even wicked people like Esav—who committed every sin in the book—were rewarded by G-d for doing just *one* mitzvah. Esav honored his father, and G-d paid him richly for it. So how much more so, the Rambam wrote, for these dear Jews—who under life-threatening pressure, continued to keep mitzvos in secret, risking everything just to remain connected. G-d surely cherishes them deeply, and it’s our job to embrace them, not push them away.

In short, through his deep love for every Jew, the Rambam revealed a core Jewish truth: that a Jew’s connection to G-d runs deeper than anything they say or do on the surface. It’s a bond that can never be broken.

And when someone loves the Jewish people with that kind of open heart, it’s no surprise that the Jewish people return that love—so much so that to this day, we remember not just the Rambam’s yahrtzeit, but his *birthday* too.

Just as the Torah describes Moshe Rabbeinu as someone who “*loved the Jewish people*”, so too, Moshe ben Maimon—alongside all his brilliance as a halachic authority, physician, and philosopher—stood out for one trait above all: he loved his fellow Jews.

And that’s why the inscription on his tomb rings true: “*From Moshe to Moshe, there arose none like Moshe.*”