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Vatican to share holy medieval texts with Israel

By Lisa J. Huriash
Staff Writer
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The Vatican will loan the work of Moses Maimonides, one of Judaism's most celebrated rabbis and sages, to Israel this year in a gesture meant to improve relations between Catholics and Jews.

Jewish community leaders said they are ecstatic to have the opportunity to study the Maimonides document, and at least three other medieval manuscripts.



Rabbi Benjamin Blech, a professor at Yeshiva University in New York, said the gesture by the Vatican "strengthens the bonds between Jews and Christians."

"We are asking a favor, they are showing us a kindness, to borrow these items," he said.

A delegation of about 160 rabbis and cantors

worldwide, including Blech, and American laypeople will meet with Pope John Paul II this month to thank him for years of goodwill, including working out an agreement to display the priceless Jewish artifacts for the first time in Israel. Delegation members announced the plan to the South Florida Sun-Sentinel this week.

The work by Maimonides was written by a scribe in the 1400s, 200 years after his death, and is cherished as a one-of-a-kind record that covers the rules of life, such as marriage and other codes of behavior. Opponents who considered Maimonides a heretic burned many of the original works.

Two years ago, a similar delegation requested the Vatican loan out the four manuscripts, each containing hundreds of pages. Three of the books, including one written in 1435, are medieval Hebrew texts written by other authors not immediately identified.

The most excitement, however, surrounds the work of Maimonides, also known as Rambam, the 12th-century doctor and sage in Egypt whose works include the first codification of Jewish law. He is considered one of the most influential of all Jewish thinkers.

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PHOTO



Moses Maimonides
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Jan 7, 2005



Krupp with Pope
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The Maimonides manuscript to be loaned includes his "major work on Jewish law, the Mishneh Torah, the source for all subsequent works on the codification of the entire oral and written laws of the Torah and Talmud," Blech said.

There is no known recorded history showing exactly how or when the Vatican acquired the writings, Blech said.

Gary Krupp, a Jewish man from Long Island who was knighted by the Pope in 2000, made the loan happen, Blech said.

Krupp, honored for his charity work for a hospital in Italy, worked with both religious groups.

"[The Vatican] has the largest repository of ancient Hebrew and medieval Hebrew manuscripts in the world," said Krupp, one of three living Jews to be knighted by a pope.

In gratitude for the Pope's reaching out to Jews by such things as recognizing Israel in 1992, the delegation will meet with the pontiff at the Vatican on Jan. 18 to thank him, Krupp and Blech said. The elderly pontiff grew up in a heavily Jewish town in Poland and has visited a synagogue in Rome.

The Maimonides book has been on display previously, in Germany and elsewhere.

Blech said the works could be turned over to the Israel Museum in Jerusalem as early as May, although Krupp said it may not be until September, to celebrate the museum's 40th anniversary.

Krupp said the manuscripts are written in Hebrew and the Vatican has maintained them perfectly.

The agreement says that two of the manuscripts -- including the copy of Maimonides' -- must be returned to the Vatican Library after being on display for four months; the other two will be on display for six months, according to Krupp.

"The parties are committed to cultural cooperation," Father David Jaeger, a Vatican spokesman, legal advisor to the Church and professor, said in a telephone interview from Rome on Thursday.

An initial Jewish delegation, including Blech, first got to see the manuscripts in 2002 with the aid of Krupp. In January 2004, The Jerusalem Post reported that Pope John Paul II met with Israel's chief rabbis in Vatican City and that the rabbis considered asking to search Vatican storerooms for artifacts such as the huge golden menorah that stood in the Temple in Jerusalem 2,000 years ago. But the rabbis decided not to mention the menorah, which the Vatican has maintained is not there. Instead, they were shown the work of Moses Maimonides and they asked for the documents to be lent to Israel. Rabbis at this upcoming January delegation, as well as Krupp, said it would be counterproductive at this time to discuss other items of Jewish interest being held in the Vatican's vault.

"Things in the future are very promising," Krupp added, however.

The loaning of the manuscripts is also viewed as an offering to resolve other political and social disagreements in Israel, including Hebrew University's partial use of a convent since 1948 that the Vatican wants back, and property tax exemptions for religious

institutions.

If the university accedes to the Vatican's wishes and leaves, it could open the door to more treasures being released, Krupp said.

"The benefits will be astronomical," he said.

Jaeger of the Vatican also said he hopes the loan of the work by Maimonides will lead to improved relations.

"The idea is any kind of a positive event might help to create a positive atmosphere," he said.

Some members of the delegation say the items belong to the Jewish people and are hoping Israel obtains other Judaic treasures hidden in the Vatican.

Krupp observed, however, that the writings are the basis of both Judaism and Catholicism.

"It's just as much a part of their religion as it is of ours."

Staff Researcher Bill Lucey contributed to this report.

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