

## Colt Serves as a Reminder of a Philosopher's Reach



Nathaniel Brooks for The New York Times

Students from Maimonides Hebrew Day School in Albany visiting Maimonides, a colt named for a Jewish philosopher.

By JOE DRAPE

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SARATOGA SPRINGS, N.Y., Sept. 2 — Rabbi Israel Rubin conceded that it was an unusual field trip for his students. They were here at Barn 70 on the backside of Saratoga Race Course on Friday morning to see a trainer about a horse. The trainer was [Bob Baffert](#), and the horse, Maimonides, was a fast one who just may capture the [Kentucky Derby](#) next May.

Maimonides cost \$4.6 million at last year's Keeneland September Sale, and last month he appeared as if he was worth every penny when he won his debut by 1 1/2 lengths. He is one of the favorites Monday to win the Grade I \$250,000 Hopeful Stakes, a seven-furlong sprint for 2-year-olds.

None of that, however, interested Rubin or his charges. He does not attend horse races or gamble. In fact, upon hearing about the colt, Rubin thought long and hard before arranging to take his students here.

"Some may think this is sacrilegious," he said.

Ultimately, however, the rabbi and his students were drawn here from the Maimonides Hebrew Day School in Albany for what is in a name.

The school and the colt are named for Moses Maimonides, who lived more than 800 years ago and is considered among the greatest Jewish philosophers. He was the chief rabbi of Cairo and the physician to the sultan of Egypt.

"He blended religious study and intellect with worldly manners to heal the sick and guide the healthy," Rubin said.

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“He was respected and honored by both Jews and Arabs. This is especially relevant now in our life and times.”

Maimonides is owned and was named by Ahmed Zayat, an Egyptian now living in New Jersey.

He did not know about Rubin’s visit, and, indeed, was flying back from San Diego and Del Mar on Friday morning. When told of the smiles of the youngsters petting the nose of his expensive colt, however, Zayat was beyond gratified.

He is a Muslim who grew up in a suburb of Cairo and had put much time and effort into bestowing the name Maimonides on his prize purchase.

“He was a very special man who was highly regarded by all people, regardless of faith,” Zayat said of Maimonides. “What has happened with Sept. 11, Iraq, and what’s going on in the region is contrary to the way I grew up. If this horse was going to be a superstar, I wanted an appropriate name. I wanted to say something with the tool I had, which was a horse. I wanted it to be pro-peace, and about loving your neighbor.”

When Zayat tried to register the name Maimonides with the Jockey Club, however, he discovered that it had been reserved for more than nine years by Earle I. Mack, a New York real estate investor and a former ambassador to Finland.

In 1997, Mack, then the chairman of the board for the Benjamin N. Cardozo School of Law at [Yeshiva University](#), was instrumental in bringing King Juan Carlos I of Spain to New York to accept the school’s Democracy Award.

Mack had been moved by the king’s remarks about how much Spain’s culture had lost when the country expelled its Jews in 1492 as part of the Inquisition.

The king mentioned Maimonides, who was born in Córdoba, Spain, in 1135, and who, with his family, was forced out of the country while Spain was ruled by Muslims.

“I was just waiting for a horse good enough to deserve the name,” Mack said.

He has owned and bred horses for more than 40 years, and knew that Zayat’s colt, a son of Vindication, was bred to be special. Each also understood the other’s good intentions. Zayat donated \$100,000 to Cardozo to commemorate the king’s visit there, and to promote tolerance. Mack released his claim to the name Maimonides.

“He had the right horse, and the right motives,” Mack said. “We are all after the same thing: to touch people across cultures.”

Zayat and Mack know that horse racing is an unpredictable business, and a thoughtfully named horse hardly guarantees future fame and fortune.

When Eli O’Brien, 14, patted Maimonides between the ears and promised to say some prayers for him, Baffert nodded enthusiastically.

“We’ll take anything you can give us,” Baffert said.

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