



## You May, But Must You?

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Maimonides' last two rulings seem paradoxical. Discussing the concepts of ritual impurity and purity, he states — regarding ordinary meat — that ritually pure and impure individuals may both partake of it.

During the festivals “one is required to purify oneself,” whereas the remainder of the year, the majority of the year, one is permitted to defile ordinary food and eat it in a state of impurity, as he discusses at length.

He continues with: “That which Torah prohibits is sufficient for you”: it is enough to fulfill Torah’s laws without adding extra restrictions. Ordinary foods may be consumed in impurity — Torah allows it — and this may be done without reservation.

Immediately in the next law, however, he explains the trait of abstinence: even routine food should be eaten in purity; one should eat only in a state of purity. “Abstinence leads to purity,” he explains, “and to holiness.”

He then makes an astonishing statement: abstinence causes one “to distance himself from negative actions concerning the body,” and then, he adds, it “separates us from harmful beliefs in matters of the soul.” And as Maimonides states in Laws of Repentance: unholy thoughts are more destructive than unholy actions.

Afterward Maimonides makes another astonishing statement that, through this, one “becomes like the Divine!”

These statements seem contradictory. First he establishes a clear legal ruling: “That which Torah prohibits is sufficient.” This is immediately followed by the trait of abstinence. And “what does abstinence achieve?” he asks. It brings holiness. And what does holiness achieve? It guards one from negative actions; it protects one from an even greater stumbling-block: unholy beliefs. And this brings even greater perfection: “Becoming like the Divine!”

And with this he concludes the Laws of Purity.

The explanation is that Divine service begins with: “That which Torah prohibits is sufficient.” But that must be followed by further spiritual growth.



The order in Maimonides' laws is structured and precise. Completing one law, one moves "from strength to strength."

What is the next ruling? One must begin to think and act upon the attribute of abstinence: separating from one's previous self — the one who learned the preceding law — and progressing to a new and higher level. And a loftier expression of "Great is Torah study which leads to action."

Advancing then "from strength to strength," he moves forward to the second "strength": from abstinence to holiness. And here it becomes impossible to act negatively. Next he reaches a point where even his intellect cannot contemplate unholy beliefs, until he reaches the level of "like the Divine."

This is the well-known axiom repeated by Chassidim, and cited by the Rebbe: "It is not as the world says: 'That which is permitted — is permitted; and that which is prohibited — perhaps there is some loophole...'"

Chassidim say otherwise: "That which is prohibited is certainly prohibited; and that which is permitted, one must consider: *Is it necessary?*"

And this is the sequence and the ruling of Maimonides: that which is prohibited — is prohibited. That is the prior ruling. Next comes what we are permitted: "That which Torah prohibits is sufficient." The following law tells us to contemplate, *Is it necessary?* — is it permitted **for him?**

And this is not just an added stringency, it is a legal ruling by Maimonides!

