



The final section of Parashat Shemini presents the Torah's dietary code, towards the end of which we find the admonition, "*Al teshaketzu et nafshoteikhem*" ("Do not make yourselves loathsome" – 11:44). The immediate context is the prohibition against the consumption of *shekatzim*, insects, and the Torah here concludes its discussion of this law by warning that ingesting these creatures amounts to a form of self-contamination.

Maimonides, however, cites this verse as introducing the broader prohibition against engaging in repulsive behavior of any kind. In the final passages of Hilkhot Ma'akhalot Asurot (17:29-31), Maimonides codifies the prohibitions against eating or drinking substances that people generally find repulsive, eating from soiled utensils, eating with soiled hands, or restraining oneself from performing his bodily functions. All these types of behavior, he writes, fall under the category of "*Al teshaketzu et nafshoteikhem*," making oneself "loathsome" by acting in an undignified manner. (Maimonides' rulings are based on a number of sources in the Talmud; see Shabbat 90b and Makkot 16b.)

Maimonides concludes his codification of these laws by commenting (17:32), "Whoever exercises care in this regard brings sanctity and purity to his soul and cleanses his soul for the sake of the Almighty, as it says, 'You shall become sanctified, and you shall be holy'." The verse cited here is the verse that immediately follows the admonition of *al teshaketzu*. Maimonides infers from this juxtaposition that heeding this warning leads one to sanctity. By refraining from socially-deemed repulsive conduct, one puts himself on the path leading to the ideal of *ve-hitkadishtem v'ehyitem kedoshim* – to becoming a "holy" person.

Essentially, Maimonides here establishes that the first step to a "sacred" existence is self-respect and dignity. A person who engages in conduct that his society deems repulsive displays, first and foremost, a lack of regard for himself; he demonstrates that he does not hold himself in high enough esteem requiring compliance with general norms of dignified behavior. Such a person can and will never aspire to a life of sanctity, a life of religious meaning and fulfillment. He has, in effect, despaired from himself, from his potential, and from a life of achievement. The road of sanctity begins with *al teshaketzu*, with regard for oneself. This sense of self-esteem is indispensable for one's recognition of his immense potential for greatness – a recognition that will, hopefully, drive him towards living his life in the pursuit of spiritual fulfillment: "*Ve-hitkadishtem v'ehyitem kedoshim*."