

A Daily Bread

Date: 28 Nisan, 5784 (April 15, 2026)

Torah Portion: Metzora

Topic: Living is Giving

It is written (Lev. 14:2), “This shall be the Torah of the metzora.” Elsewhere it is written (Psa. 34:12–13), “Who is the man who desires life, who loves many days, that he may see good? Guard your tongue from evil and your lips from speaking deceit.”

The Midrash teaches that the word מְצֹרֵעַ (metzora) may be understood as a contraction of מוֹצִיא שֵׁם רָע (motzi shem ra), “one who brings forth an evil name,” a defamer. Yet tzaraas comes as a consequence of various sins. Why then does the Torah allude specifically to lashon hara?

Rashi, commenting on this passage, follows the Midrash and emphasizes that lashon hara is singled out because it is uniquely destructive—it harms three at once: the speaker, the listener, and the one spoken about. It is a sin that spreads impurity through relationship itself, corroding the bonds that make communal life possible. Thus, the metzora is measure-for-measure (midah k'neged midah) isolated from the camp, because he created division through his speech.

The Midrash answers further by pointing to Tehillim: life itself is bound up with the proper use of speech. Of all the sins that may bring tzaraas, lashon hara strikes at the root of life. The Torah therefore highlights this failure, teaching that misuse of speech is not merely one sin among many—it is a distortion of the very essence of being human.

King Shlomo reinforces this truth: “Whoever guards his mouth and his tongue guards his soul from troubles” (Prov. 21:23). The one who refrains from evil speech is described as one who “desires life.”

The Rambam deepens this idea in Hilchot De'ot (7:3), where he writes that lashon hara, though often dismissed as a light matter, is in fact exceedingly grave because people habituate themselves to it. It becomes constant and unnoticed, embedding itself into the fabric of daily speech. In this way, it is more dangerous than many overt sins, for it reshapes the character of the speaker without resistance.

Why is speech so central?

Because speech reveals—and shapes—the soul.

The Tanya (Iggeret HaKodesh; also ch. 1–2) teaches that human speech emerges from the nefesh chayah, the living soul breathed into Adam (Gen. 2:7, ruach memalela—a speaking spirit). Speech is thus the primary expression of the divine image within man. When speech is used for truth, encouragement, and holiness, it channels divine vitality (shefa). When corrupted, it blocks that flow and redirects energy into fragmentation and concealment.

Thus, one who speaks ill of others often does so to elevate himself. By diminishing another, he creates a false sense of worth: if the other is lesser, then I must be greater. Yet this mindset is the very opposite of life.

Life, in the Torah's vision, is not self-exaltation but self-giving.

The Torah calls a flowing spring “mayim chayim”—living water—because it gives from its own מקור. It does not take; it overflows. So too, a living human being is one who becomes a source of חיים (life) to others—through words, actions, and presence.

This principle is echoed in the words attributed to Yeshua in the New Testament: “Out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks” (Matt. 12:34).

Here, speech is not merely communication—it is revelation. The tongue uncovers what fills the heart. Thus, corrupt speech is not accidental; it reflects an inner disorder. Conversely, to refine speech is to refine the heart itself.

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In another place it is written:

“The tongue is a fire... it sets on fire the course of life” (James 3:6).

This parallels the rabbinic understanding: speech has generative power. It can build worlds or destroy them. Just as the Holy One created through speech—“And God said...”—so too human beings, made in His image, create or destroy through their words.

The Sages teach (Nedarim 64b) that four are considered as if dead: the poor, the metzora, the blind, and one without children. R' Chaim Shmulevitz explains that their shared denominator is a diminished ability to give.

The poor cannot readily give.

The metzora is isolated, cut off from relationship.

The blind cannot perceive the needs of others.

One without children lacks a primary channel of continual giving.

Life, therefore, is defined by giving.

A tree that no longer produces fruit, shade, or beauty is considered lifeless, even if it still stands. Likewise, a person who only takes but does not give may exist biologically, but spiritually he is diminished.

From this perspective, the one who engages in lashon hara is among the furthest removed from life. His identity is built not by giving, but by subtracting from others. Instead of becoming a source, he becomes a diminisher.

Such a person, in the language of the Sages, is like one who walks yet is not truly alive.

To desire life, then, is to give life—to offer dignity, encouragement, and truth. It is to become a מקור of blessing rather than a channel of harm.

This is why the avoidance of lashon hara is not merely restraint—it is transformation. It aligns a person with the divine flow of חיים. In the language of the Tanya, it restores the האדם as a conduit of shefa, rather than a blockage.

Thus, when Moshe declares, “This shall be the Torah of the metzora,” it may be understood more deeply: this is the Torah of the motzi shem ra, the one who has misused the divine gift of speech.

The laws of tzaraas are not merely ritual—they are diagnostic and redemptive. They expose the fracture caused by speech and guide the האדם back into alignment with life.

For life and death are indeed in the power of the tongue (Prov. 18:21).

To guard one's speech is to choose life.

Shalom.