

**Date:** 27 Nisan 5786 (April 14, 2026)

**Torah Portion:** Metzora

**Topic:** Speaking Lashon Hara

The Torah introduces the law of the metzora: “This shall be the law of the metzora on the day of his purification: he shall be brought to the Kohen.” The Sages connect this to the traits that YHWH hates, including “a false tongue,” teaching that tzaraas is a consequence of corrupted speech. This is learned most clearly from Miriam, who spoke about Moshe and was afflicted. Her mistake was not only in what she said, but in how she understood his actions—she assumed he acted on his own, when in truth he followed the command of Hashem.

From here, the Sages discuss a fundamental question: Is negative speech said in a person’s presence considered lashon hara? Maharal rules that it is not, because such speech is open and direct—it does not resemble secretive behavior. However, the Chafetz Chaim disagrees and rules that even this is prohibited as lashon hara.

Rav Yitzchak Hutner resolves this disagreement by explaining that lashon hara contains two distinct elements. The first is **seeking out negative information** about another person. The second is **relaying that information** to others. These two parts are reflected in the Torah’s prohibition: “Do not go about as a gossip among your people” (Lev. 19:16). The word for gossip (רכיל) is related to the idea of spying (רגל). Lashon hara, therefore, is not merely speech—it is an act of “spying,” where a person uncovers and exposes the faults of others.

However, Rav Hutner explains an important distinction. One cannot violate lashon hara without **relaying negative information**, but one does not need to actively seek it out. A person may come across such information legitimately. If he then shares it, he has still committed lashon hara.

Yet there is a difference between these two situations. If the information was obtained legitimately, then the “spying” element must be found in the act of telling it. In such a case, if the speech is said openly in the presence of the person, it may not resemble spying. This is the case to which Maharal refers. But if the information was obtained improperly—if a person searched out faults or chose to interpret matters negatively—then the act of spying has already occurred. In that case, even if the information is later spoken openly, the prohibition of lashon hara still applies.

This explains the case of Miriam. Even if her words were spoken in Moshe’s presence, her sin began earlier. She encountered a situation that could have been judged favorably, yet chose to interpret it negatively. The Torah commands: “With righteousness you shall judge your fellow” (Lev. 19:15). By failing to do so, she is considered to have “sought out” negative meaning, and thus entered into the realm of lashon hara.

This teaching shifts the focus of the prohibition. Lashon hara is not only about speech—it begins in the heart, in how a person judges and interprets others. For this reason, the sages emphasize inner purification alongside guarded speech. We pray: “Purify our hearts to serve You in truth,” and also, “Guard my tongue from evil and my lips from speaking deceit.” These prayers reflect the same structure described by Rav Hutner: the heart must be purified, and the tongue must be restrained.

Even Maharal, who limits the definition of lashon hara, does not permit speaking negatively about others. Such speech may still violate other prohibitions, such as causing shame. Furthermore, the Chafetz Chaim, along with Rambam and other Rishonim, rules that lashon hara applies even when the subject is present. Therefore, in practice, one must avoid all forms of derogatory speech.

The law of the metzora thus teaches a broader spiritual lesson. The Man must guard not only what he says, but how he sees. When a person trains himself to judge others favorably and to restrain harmful speech, he moves toward purification. In this way, he becomes not one who exposes faults, but one who preserves dignity and brings peace.

Shalom.