

Zera Shimshon

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Chapter XXVIII: Metzora (Lev. 14:1–15:33)

Essay 7. The severity of defamatory speech

מדרש רבה על פסוק "זאת תהיה תורת המצורע", מעשה ברוכל אחד שהיה מסחר בעצירות ומכריז ואומר מאן בעי למזבן סם חיים, סליק לגבייה ר' ינאי וכו' הרצה לו בספר תהלים הפסוק "מי־האיש התפץ חיים" וכו' וכתוב בתריה "נצר לשונך מרע" וכו', אומר ר' ינאי אף שלמה מכריז ואומר "שמר פיו ולשונו שמר מצרות נפשו", אומר ר' ינאי כל גמי הייתי קורא הפסוק הזה ולא הייתי יודע היכן הוא פשוט עד שבא רוכל הזה והודיעותי "מי־האיש התפץ חיים", לפיכך משה מזהיר את ישראל ואומר להם "זאת תהיה תורת המצורע" המוציא שם רע עכ"ל. וצריך עיון מאי הנה קשיא ליה לר' ינאי מעקרא על הפסוק קודם שבא הרוכל ומאי פשיטא ליה לאחר שבא הרוכל.

There is a **Midrash Rabbah** on the verse “This shall be the law of the *metzora*”:¹

There was an incident with a certain peddler who would go around the towns . . . , proclaiming and saying, “Who wants to buy an elixir of life?” . . . Rabbi Yanai . . . said to him: “Come in here and sell it to me.” [The peddler] said to him: “You and those like you do not require it.” [Rabbi Yanai] pressed him and went up to him. [The peddler] showed him in the Book of Psalms the verse “Who is the man who desires life [and desires years of good fortune]”² and it is written after it, “Guard your tongue from evil . . . ; Shun evil and do good.”³

Rabbi Yanai said: “Solomon, too, proclaims and says: ‘One who guards his mouth and his tongue guards himself from troubles.’”⁴ Rabbi Yannai said: “All my days I would read this verse, and I did not know where its plain meaning lay until this peddler came and informed me, ‘Who is the man who desires life.’ Therefore, Moses warns Israel and says to them, ‘This shall be the law of the *metzora* [המצורע],’ the law of one who brings out an evil name, i.e., a defamer [המוציא שם רע] [*hamotzi shem ra*].”

- Lev. Rabbah 16:2

This requires analysis: what difficulty did Rabbi Yannai originally have with the verse before the peddler came, and what became clear to him after the peddler came.

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¹ Lev. 14:2. *Tzara'at* is a skin disease. Many English translations refer to it as leprosy and to the person afflicted with it, the *metzora*, as a leper. However, this skin disease was not related to leprosy. Rather, it was considered a physical manifestation of a spiritual ailment.

² Ps. 34:13.

³ Ps. 34:14–15.

⁴ Prov. 21:23.

וַיִּשׁ לֹמֵר דְּאִתָּא בְּתַנְחומָא אַל תִּקְרִי "שֹׁמֵר מִצְרוֹת נִפְשׁוֹ" אֶלָּא "שֹׁמֵר מִצְרַעַת נִפְשׁוֹ". וּמְשׁוּם הֵכִי הִנֵּה קִשְׁיָא לִיָּה לִר' יַנַּאי עַל הַפְּסוּק, דְּהוֹאִיל שְׁמִי שְׁאִינוּ שׁוֹמֵר פִּיּוּ וּלְשׁוֹנוֹ לֹקֵה בְּצַרְעַת, אִם כֵּן הִנֵּה לוֹ לֹמֵר שׁוֹמֵר מִצְרַעַת גּוֹפוֹ, וְעוֹד שְׁאֵף אִם יִשְׁמֹר פִּיּוּ וּלְשׁוֹנוֹ אֶפְשָׁר שְׁיָבוֹא עָלָיו הַצְרַעַת מִחֻמַּת דְּבָרִים אַחֲרֵיהֶם, דְּאִמְרִינוּ בְּפֶרֶק ג' דְּעַרְכִּין עַל שְׂבָעָה דְּבָרִים נְגַעִים בָּאִים.

It may be said that it is brought in Tanchuma (Parashat Metzora 2): “Do not read ‘guards his soul from troubles [tzarot] [צָרוֹת]’ but rather ‘guards his soul from tzara’at [צַרְעַת].”⁵

Because of this, Rabbi Yannai had difficulty with the verse talking about the soul, since one who does not guard his mouth and tongue is stricken in his body with *tzara’at*. If so, it should have said “guards his body from *tzara’at*.” Furthermore, even if he guards his mouth and tongue, it is possible that *tzara’at* will come upon him due to other matters, as we say in chapter 3 of tractate Arachin (16a) that afflictions come on account of seven things. We learn there: “Rabbi Shmuel bar Nachmani says that Rabbi Yochanan says: Leprous marks come for seven matters: For malicious speech, for bloodshed, for an oath [taken] in vain, for forbidden sexual relations, for arrogance, for theft, and for stinginess.”

אַמְנָם קִשְׁבָּא הָרוּכַל וְאָמַר מֵאֵן בְּעֵי חַיִּי, דְּהִינּוּ דְּעוֹנָשׁ הַצְרַעַת אִינוּ תְלוּי בְּהַנְגָעָה לְבָדוּ אֶלָּא הוּא בְּסַכְנַת מִיתָה נְמִי אִזְ הַבִּין הַפֶּל, דְּאִין הֵכִי נְמִי שְׁהַנְגָעִים בָּאִים עַל שְׂבָעָה דְּבָרִים אֶבְל יֵשׁ הַרְבֵּה מִינֵי נְגַעִים, וַיִּשׁ בְּבִגְדֵיהֶם וַיִּשׁ בְּבִתְמֵיהֶם, וְהַנְגָעָה הַיּוֹמֵר חֻמּוֹר וְקִשְׁיָה יָבוֹא עַל חֻטְא הַלְשׁוֹן הָרַע, וּבִשְׂאָר עֲבִירוֹת יָבוֹאוּ הַיּוֹמֵר קִלִּים כְּמוֹ שְׂפָתַב מְהַרְשָׁ"א הֵתָם בְּעַרְכִּין, וּמְשׁוּם הֵכִי אִמְרוּ זֹאת תְּהִיָּה תוֹרַת הַמְצוֹרָע הַמוֹצִיא שֵׁם רַע, לְפִי שְׂבָכַל הַפְּרָשָׁה הוּא קוֹרָא אוֹתוֹ בְּשֵׁם צְרוּעַ וְכֵאן שִׁינָה וְכַתְּבַב מְצוֹרָע, אֶלָּא וְדַאי דְּלְדַרְשָׁא אִתָּא לֹמֵר הַמוֹצִיא שֵׁם רַע, וְהַטַּעַם הוּא, לְפִי שְׁהַמְצוֹרָע חָשׁוּב כְּמַת, וְלָמָּה כָּךְ.

However, when the peddler came and said, “Who wants life,” meaning that the punishment of *tzara’at* is not dependent on the affliction alone but also involves danger of death, then he understood everything. That is, the verse is not merely warning of affliction, but of a life-threatening spiritual consequence. For indeed, although afflictions come for seven things, there are many types of afflictions—some on garments and some on houses—and the most severe and difficult affliction comes for the sin of *lashon harah*, defamatory speech, while for other transgressions the lighter ones come, as Maharsha wrote there in Arachin. Because of this, they said, “This shall be the law of the *metzora*”—the one who brings out an evil name; for throughout the entire section it calls him by the name “*tzarua*,” but here it changes and writes “*metzora*,” which must surely come for exposition, to say “one who brings out an evil name” [*hamotzi shem ra*].

The reason for the change in terminology is that the *metzora*—i.e., one who defames another—is considered like the dead—and why is this so?

⁵ Midrash Tanchuma, parashat Metzora 2.

אֵלָא לְפִי שְׁהַתְרַגּוּם שֶׁל צָרַעַת סְגִירוֹ, דְּהֵינּוּ שְׁנִסְגְרוּ מִמֶּנּוּ אֲוֵרוֹת הָעֲלִיּוֹנִים דְּהֵינּוּ אֲוֵרוֹת הַחֲכָמָה הָעֲלִיּוֹנָה דְּכַתִּיב בָּהּ "הַחֲכָמָה תִּסְתֶּה בְּעֲלִיָּהּ", וְכֵן הוּא בְּשַׁעַת מִיתַת הָאָדָם שְׁנִסְגְרוּ מִמֶּנּוּ אֲוֵרוֹת, וְהַצָּרַעַת שֶׁבָּא מִתַּמַּת שְׂאָר דְּבָרִים בְּנֻדָּאֵי שְׂאִינּוּ כָּל כֶּף חֲמוּר.

Rather, because the translation of *tzara'at* in Targum Onkelos is “closed off,” meaning that the supernal lights are closed off from him,⁶ namely the lights of higher wisdom have been removed from him.⁷ In other words, *tzara'at* represents a blockage of Divine vitality.

This is as it is written, “Wisdom gives life to those who possess it.”⁸ So it is at the time of a person’s death, when those lights are closed off from him. Therefore, the *metzora* is considered as dead,⁹ for death too is when that great light has been removed from the soul.

But *tzara'at* that comes due to other matters is certainly not as severe, and thus for those other matters, a different term is used, *tzarua*.

שְׁהַרֵּי הַלְשׁוֹן הִרְעוּ נִקְרָא שְׁכּוֹפֵר בְּעֵקֶר, וְעוֹד מִגְדִּיל עֲבִירוֹת כְּנֶגֶד עֲבוּדָה זָרָה גִילּוּי עֲרִיּוֹת וְשִׁפְיָכוֹת דְּמִים כְּדֵאִיתָא הֵתָם בְּעֵרְכִין, וְהַשְׁתָּא נִיקָא שְׁפִיר שְׁהַכְּתוּב אֹמֵר "מָנוֹת וְחַיִּים בְּיַד-לְשׁוֹן" דְּנִיקָא, וּמִכָּאֵן יִלְיָף הָרוּכֵל לֹמֵר מֵאַן בְּעֵי חַי, וְנִיקָא לִיהּ לְפָרֵשׁ הַפְּסוּק "מִי-הָאִישׁ הִתְפַּץ חַיִּים" וְכוּ' עַל עוֹן זֶה דְּנִיקָא, לְפִי שְׂאִתָּר שְׂאִמֵּר "הִתְפַּץ חַיִּים" דְּמִשְׁמַע וְלֹא מִיתָה דְּהֵינּוּ סְכֻנַּת הַנְּפֶשׁ, עוֹד יֵשׁ סְכֻנַּת הַגּוּף לְמִי שְׂאִינּוּ נִזְהָר, שְׂיִלְקָה גּוּפוֹ בְּצָרַעַת.

But how can the other cited matters, bloodshed, an oath taken in vain, forbidden sexual relations, arrogance, theft, or stinginess, be considered less severe than evil speech! **For *lashon hara*, defamatory speech, is considered as denying the fundamental principle of faith, and furthermore it magnifies transgressions corresponding to idolatry, forbidden relations, and bloodshed, as stated there in Arachin.**

Now we can well understand that the verse says, “Death and life are in the hand of the tongue”¹⁰ specifically; and from here the peddler derived to say, “Who wants life.” It is fitting for him to explain the verse “Who is the man who desires life,” etc., specifically regarding this sin of defamation. Given that it says “desires life,” implying not death, that is, danger to the soul, there is also danger to the body for one who is not careful, that his body will be stricken with *tzara'at*.

⁶ Zohar III:49b.

⁷ Rabbi Chayim Vital, *Sefer Etz Chayim* 38:7: “Since the state of a *metzora* also involves the departure of the intellectual Sefirah of *Chochmah* [חכמה] [“wisdom”], as we said above, therefore he is considered as dead.”

⁸ Eccl. 7:12.

⁹ Nedarim 64b.

¹⁰ Prov. 18:21.

ומשום הכי סגים הכתוב שמלבד הסגים יהיה "אהב גמים לראות טוב", ועל זה הוסיף ר' נבאי שעתה הוא מבין הפרוש של שומר פיו וכו', דבדוקא נקט נפשו משום שהיא סכנת מיתה, וזה הוא שאמר ולא הייתי יודע היכן הוא פשוט, כלומר בלי שום קושקיא.

Because of this, the verse concludes that aside from life, there will be “one who desires years of good fortune.” Regarding this, Rabbi Yannai added that now he understands the explanation of “he who guards his mouth,” etc., that it specifically mentions “his soul” because it involves danger of death. This is what he said, “and I did not know where its plain meaning lay,” meaning without any difficulty.

ובנה שפיר סגים המדרש לפיכך משה מזהיר את ישראל דוקא על הלשון הרע, משום שבשאר העבירות לפעמים אין הקב"ה מעניש מיד, כמו שמצינו בימי אחאב שהיו יוצאים למלחמה ונוצחים ולהפך בימי דוד לפי שהיה בהם לשון הרע היו בופלין.

With this, the Midrash properly concludes: “Therefore, Moses warns Israel” about *lashon hara*, because with regard to other transgressions, sometimes the Holy One, Blessed be He, does not punish immediately. This is as we find that in the days of Ahab, even though they were idol worshippers, they would go out to war and be victorious, because they had peace among themselves.¹¹ In contrast, in the days of David, because there was evil speech among them, they would fall.¹²

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¹¹ Yerushalmi Peach 4b.

¹² Midrash Tehillim (Shocheh Tov), Tehillim 7.