

# SPEECH: A USER'S GUIDE

by Rabbi Eliyahu Hoffmann

Parshas Metzora begins with a description of how the metzora/leper described in last week's parsha regains his purity. It is a complex process, which includes two birds, one which is slaughtered as a sacrifice. The second bird is dipped in the first bird's blood, and sent off "on the face of the field."

The use of sacrificial birds is not unheard of, but somewhat unusual. Rashi explains that since the disease of tzaraas is a physical manifestation of the sin of lashon hara (ill-meant gossip), as we discussed last week, the Torah dictates that its purification should come through the chirpy bird: "Just like he let his mouth run off, let him bring a bird, which chirps and tweets all the time."

Rashi doesn't address why one bird alone isn't enough to stress the point; nor why only one of the birds is slaughtered; nor why the second bird is sent "on the face of the field."

R' Shlomo Gantzfried zt"l, author of the famous Kitzur Shulchan Aruch, explains based on the following Gemara (Chullin 89a):

R' Yitzchok said, "What is the meaning of the following verse (Tehillim/Psalms 58:2): *'Indeed silence? Speak righteousness. Judge people with fairness.'* [It means this:] What is man's profession in this world? To be silent like the mute. Perhaps even for the words of Torah [i.e. silence is preferred even to discussing Torah]? This is why the verse continues, 'Speak righteousness [i.e. talk in Torah study]. Perhaps the Torah scholar is permitted to become arrogant? This is why it continues, 'Judge people with fairness.'"

In a nutshell, R' Yitzchok derives from the above verse that, with the notable exception of Torah study, one's 'occupation' should be to keep as quiet as possible. This is likely connected to the admonishment of Shlomo Ha-Melech (King Salomon - Mishlei/Proverbs 10:19), *"With many words, sin will not be avoided."*

The Gemara (Eiruvim 21b) compares the Torah scholar to the farmer. Just like the farmer ekes out his living by the sweat of his brow, so too the Torah scholar lives a life of simplicity and often lacking in material comforts, in order to achieve success in his Torah studies.

Mefarshim explain that one of the ideas behind animal sacrifice is that the sacrificial animal takes the place of man. The sinner, they say, should imagine everything that's happening to the animal should really be happening to him.

Were the metzora to bring only one bird, which is slaughtered, he would likely understand that the

bird, which chirps all day, had to be slaughtered to atone for his sin. He was unable to stop his busy lips from making disparaging comments about others, and because of that, the bird - in his place - will chirp no more. As a means of repentance, he would reason, he should clam up and refuse to speak.

Assuming the thoughtful metzora got this far, he would have indeed been correct - to a point. One's occupation in this world is to make himself silent, but not completely so. Not with regards to Torah study.

Not only is it obviously wrong for him to become so upset and introverted that he refuses to discuss the words of Torah - he should in fact be increasing his speech in that regard. The Gemara (Erchin 15b) says that the gossiper, who defiled his mouth with idle and nasty speech, should correct his sin and cleanse his tongue by increasing Torah study.

The second bird, which is allowed to live, teaches the metzora that speech in-and-of itself is not bad - it can be life giving. It all depends what it's used for. Speech of Torah brings life; slander and gossip bring death. *"The tree of life [a metaphor for the Torah] heals the tongue (Mishlei 15:4)."* The bird is sent out to the field, alluding to the Torah scholar, who, like the farmer, leads a life of simplicity and sparse material comfort. [Apirion]

Pharaoh enslaved the Jews in Egypt. The word Pharaoh can be broken down into two words, peh ra - a bad mouth.

Sefarim write that part of the Egyptian exile was that the Jews lacked the ability to study Torah. Firstly, it had not yet been given. Secondly, although the Torah was in some form passed down through Yaakov and Yehuda, the back-breaking slavery to which the Jews were subjected made Torah study, which requires one's full concentration, an impossibility.

Without the Torah, the Jews had no way of purifying their speech, and fell under the domination of Pharaoh - peh ra; their mouths were defiled. This is why, before the redemption, they groaned and screamed to Hashem from the inhuman slavery (Shemos/Exodus 2:23), but could not express their prayer in words.

Pesach, the Yom Tov which celebrates the release of the Jews from Egypt and their redemption from the exile of speech, is an especially meaningful time for Torah study. It's interesting that the Yom Tov is preceded by two parshios that deal with the sin and ultimate purification of the ba'al lashon hara. Apparently one who wants to be part of Pesach's redemption first has to cleanse his mouth from speaking badly about others. Have a good Shabbos. Text Copyright © 2008 by [Rabbi Eliyahu Hoffmann](#) and [Torah.org](#)