



THE PERSON

BY RABBI DR. TZVI HERSH WEINREB
OU Executive Vice President, Emeritus

IN THE PARSHA

The Victorious Victim

I always experience a sense of excitement when I begin a new book. I am convinced that most avid readers feel the same way. This Shabbat gives us an opportunity to experience that excitement as we begin a new book, the book of *Leviticus*, and *Parshat Vayikra*.

The book, or *chumash*, of *Leviticus* has historically had “mixed reviews.” On the one hand, our tradition reveres this book, calling it *Torat Kohanim* (the Torah, or Teachings, of the Priests). The dominant theme of *Leviticus* is the role of the priests within the various rituals connected to worship in the Holy Temple, and their role in various rituals associated with purity and holiness.

So special a place does *Leviticus* have in our tradition that there was once a time when schoolchildren began their study of

the Bible with this very holy book. “Let those who are pure and holy be involved in the study of purity and holiness.”

In more recent times, however, *Leviticus* has become a “victim” of negative criticism. I remember participating in a protest against a publisher who planned an anthology of inspiring biblical texts but deliberately omitted *Leviticus* from the table of contents. He felt that most of the book was irrelevant and outdated. Only instead of using the term “outdated,” he called it “primitive.” Those of us who protested his omission adduced many passages in *Leviticus* that were not only relevant, but of great import to contemporary society—but to no avail. I realized how futile our protest was when he asserted that the verse, “Love your neighbor as yourself,” couldn’t have been part of the original text of *Leviticus* but must have been inserted centuries after the book was first written.

Of course, the source of this publisher’s bias traced back to the early school

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of biblical criticism, which assigned the “author” of *Leviticus* the title “P,” standing for “Priestly Code”. These critics maintain that the entire book of *Leviticus* was written much later than the rest of the Bible. As a believing Jew, I disassociate myself entirely from this school and its theories.

It was at one of the public lectures of Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik that I heard him say that we have a standard by which to assess the sanctity and importance of those matters that we consider holy. “The more virulent the opposition to one of our beliefs, the more sacred and important we can consider that belief to be.” He offered two examples of this phenomenon. One was the book we begin to read this Shabbat, which some so-called “Bible scholars” consider inferior to other books of the Bible. This antagonism, argued Rabbi Soloveitchik, is in and of itself sufficient to convince us that *Leviticus*, *Chumash Vayikra*, is especially important. As a second example, he pointed to the State of Israel, which already in his time—forty or so years ago—faced extreme hostility in the international arena. This very hostility, he insisted, demonstrates the State of Israel’s essential importance.

Viewing the entire book of *Leviticus* as a “victim” of misunderstanding and defamiation provides an opportunity for us to consider the very relevant lessons the book may actually have for the nature of victimhood. As I hope to demonstrate, our tradition has many lessons to teach us about the relationship between the perpetrator and the victim, between the pursuer and the one he pursues.

Many of those lessons are rooted not only in the book of *Leviticus*, but in this week’s

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Torah portion, *Vayikra*. But first, let me share with you a verse from another biblical book that has had its share of detractors over the centuries, the book of *Kohelet* (*Ecclesiastes*):

“What is occurring now occurred long since,

And what is to occur occurred long since: and God seeks the pursued.” (*Kohelet* 3:15)

In this verse, King Solomon, the author of *Kohelet*, maintains that history is cyclical. Today’s events and future events have their precedents in the past. One aspect of this repetitive narrative is consistent and predictable: God seeks the pursued. God is on the side of history’s victims, and ultimately it is they who will prevail. Here is how the Midrash expands upon this concept:

“Rabbi Huna said in the name of Rabbi Yosef, ‘God always seeks the pursued. You will find that when one righteous person pursues another righteous person, God sides with the pursued. When a villain pursues a righteous person, God sides with the pursued. When one villain pursues another villain, God sides with the pursued. Even when a righteous person pursues a villain, God sides with the pursued! In every case, God sides with the pursued!’” (*Vayikra Rabbah* 27:5)

This Midrashic passage continues to offer

examples throughout history of this principle: Abel was pursued by Cain, and God chose Abel. Noah was pursued by his society, and God favored Noah. Abraham was pursued by Nimrod, Isaac by the Philistines, Jacob by Esau, Joseph by his brothers, Moses by Pharaoh, David by Saul, Saul by the Philistines. In each and every instance, God favored the pursued and eventually vanquished the pursuer. So too, the Midrash assures us, although the people of Israel have been pursued by enemy nations throughout their history, God will seek the pursued. He will favor the victim.

The Talmud takes this theme one step further, recommending that we consciously strive to be among the pursued and not join the pursuers. “Rabbi Abahu preached that one should always include himself among the pursued, and never among the pursuers, for, after all, no species of fowl is more pursued than pigeons and turtle doves, and yet these are the only species of fowl that are fit for the altar.” (*Bava Kama* 93a)

Maimonides includes Rabbi Abahu’s advice in his description of the proper demeanor of the Torah scholar, the *talmid chacham*: “His guiding principle should be to include himself among the pursued but not among the pursuers. He should be



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one of those who forgives insult but never insults others.” (Hilchot De’ot 5:13)

Do not be misled. Joining the pursued does not mean that one should be a pushover, a “nebbish.” The Torah encourages us to stand up for ourselves and defend ourselves vigorously when necessary. Rather, joining the pursued means that we do not always need to win, that we give others credit and allow them the limelight. We join the pursued when we are careful not to trample others competitively in order to get ahead, but we work collaboratively with them. Those are the qualities that are blessed by the God who seeks the pursued.

The 19th century commentator and rabbinic authority, Rabbi Jacob of Lyssa, offers a brief insight into the verse of our focus in this column, “God seeks the pursued.” He points out that in a certain sense we are all “pursued.” Every human being is pursued by his or her passions, moral failings, and selfish egos. Part of man’s existential condition is that he is pursued by evil urges. God seeks the pursued, offering succor to all those who valiantly struggle to overcome their internal temptations and strive to live an ethical and moral life.

As individuals, as a people, and as human beings, we often are fated to be victims. Still, our Sages see in this week’s Torah portion the lesson that we can be victorious victims. ■

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