

Propelling Forward and Spiritual Struggle: Gid haNasheh

Greek legend tells us of the story of the water nymph Thetis, who is horrified when she finds out her son Achilles – unlike her – is mortal. In a panic and fear of the possibility of harm for her child, she dips him into the supernatural river Styx in the hope of making him impervious to death itself. However there is a catch: in order to not drop him into the water during the dipping, she has to hold Achilles by his heel - thereby leaving a vulnerable spot. This ultimately is his downfall - the Trojan prince Paris fatally shoots him right there.

This legend gets memorialized in our pop culture with the term “Achilles’ heel” - representing our weak spots. What could lead to our demise. What gets us to lose our balance and not be able to move forward.

How interesting then - that we, in the Jewish tradition, also have a tendon that is representative of one of our history’s greatest battles: the *gid hanasheh*. In our parsha, Yakov wrestles with the unknown man in the middle of the night near the Yabok river, and succeeds in overpowering his opponent. He is blessed and his name changes from Yakov to Yisrael. But Yakov does not come out totally unscathed. The episode ends with the following description:

וַיִּזְרַח-לּוֹ הַשֶּׁמֶשׁ כַּאֲשֶׁר עָבַר אֶת-פְּנֵי אֵל וְהוּא צֹלַע עַל-רִגְלוֹ:
.The sun rose upon him as he passed Penuel, limping on his hip

The sun rises and the wrestling is over, but Yakov comes out of it not only changed, but hurt. In his struggle with the unknown figure in the night, he is injured. The next verse codifies this experience:

עַל-כֵּן לֹא יֵאָכְלוּ בְנֵי-יִשְׂרָאֵל אֶת-גֵּיד הַנֶּזֶף - That is why the children of Israel to this day do not eat the thigh muscle (or gid hanasheh) that is on the socket of the hip, since Jacob's hip socket was wrenched at the thigh muscle

Yakov’s injury transforms from physical blemish into the legal reality of *kashrut* part of the daily consumption of food for the halakhic Jew. We tend to think of *kashrut* as being about hashgachah symbols, waiting between meat and dairy or about specific animal species we can't

eat. But the *gid hanasheh* is forbidden to eat even from kosher animals. Why is this one detail of *kashrut* in Genesis taught so many generations before the Torah was actually given?

It seems clear that the prohibition of consuming the *gid hanasheh* is not merely about avoiding eating a certain tendon in the body, but representative of something larger.

The 19th century Eastern European commentator the Netziv in his work the *Ha'amek Davar* comments on the anatomy of the *gid hanasheh* and what it might come to symbolize. The *gid hanasheh* - or sciatic nerve in medical talk - functions as “המתנענע בהילוך האדם” or “the mover in the walking of man.” This nerve between our hip and our knee is meant to propel our legs forward in motion. And when it doesn't move, neither do we. It is the locus of our ability to move forward or backward. By having this nerve prohibited to us, the Netziv suggests that it draws attention to the potential we have in our ability to choose how to proceed in conflict. Yakov could have played it safe and not struggled with the angel, however it would not have led to his new name and new hope for the future. He chose to risk it and push forward, even if it meant his sciatic nerve was harmed in the process. The prohibition surrounding the *gid hanasheh* is a call for resilience.

Another interesting understanding of the significance of the *gid hanasheh* is articulated by Rav Eliezer Melamed, the contemporary rosh yeshiva of Har Bracha and author of the *Peninei Halacha* books whose yellow and red covers you might recognize from the ASBI library. He notes that not only does the sciatic nerve help with movement, but it also protects the branches of the nervous system that connect from the spine to the legs - thereby being the connection of the mind to the body. In a mystical sense, Rav Melamed articulates the *gid hanasheh* as connecting the upper parts of man – head and heart, thoughts and feelings – to the legs of man – the location of the expression of action.

This symbolism coming from the *gid hanasheh* of Yakov in particular is meaningful, as Yakov struggles throughout his life with bridging the above with the below. Rav Shmuel Klitsner in his book *Wrestling Jacob* notes that Yakov's dream – all the way back in *Parshat VaYitzei* – of the ladder going up to heaven, shows us that Yakov has often struggled with connecting the two; a sense of spiritual bifurcation. He wakes up from his slumber on rocks and is surprised to sense that God too was in this place, as if God only has specific places in which God resides. This

struggle with the angel is the climax of his bifurcation, as he is mere man struggling with divine God, and then blessed with a name that represents the height of this struggle. No wonder then, that his *gid hanasheh* – the connector of the spiritual to the physical – is the anatomy of focus. And no wonder, only after this struggle with the unknown figure and the confrontation with Esav, is Yakov finally described as שלם, or at peace.

These understandings of the power of the symbolism of *gid hanasheh* make it clear to us why it must be preserved somehow in the practice of the Jewish people. However, it is still a bit odd to articulate a halakhic practice before revelation at Mount Sinai. And even then, regarding other pre-Sinaitic commandments such as procreation or circumcision, there is no meta-narrator statement regarding the codification of such acts. So what is special about this one?

The functions of the *gid hanasheh* – as described by the Netziv and Rav Melamed – represent who we should strive to be as descendants of Yakov. We, as descendants of Yakov, are inheritors of divine struggle – Yisrael after all means “כִּי־יִשְׁרָיִת עִם־אַלֹהִים וְעִם־אֲנָשִׁים וְתוֹקֵל/for you have striven with God and man and have prevailed.” Ultimately, the practice that symbolizes the struggle with angels, will become part of what Jews do that is the most mundane and mortal and separates them from angels - eating. It is emblematic of our ability to be hopeful in times of strife, and to attempt to find holiness in the mundane.

I wonder though, if we are truly living up to what this ideal of *gid hanasheh* asks of us. The Modern Orthodox community in America today seems to be suffering from a sense of spiritual bifurcation. The practice of *halakhah* often turns into an experience of only body and no soul: the Modern Orthodox community at large seems to be so focused solely on the intricacies of halakhic observance that it becomes only about rote practice, and does not prioritize asking the more impactful questions of ‘what does God want of me in this moment, and how do I make spirituality a serious endeavour in my everyday life?’ We live in a world that is often so focused on what we produce, without thinking about the process that went behind the end product - creating a hindrance for spiritual growth, which is all about *kavannah* or intention going into the action. When is the last time we have sat down for a moment to think about our relationship with God and the holiness around us, without smirking at the earnesty in that? Or taken a step back from our everyday actions and wondered if they match the ethos of the verses we read here

every Shabbat morning? Or even taken a break in our *Amidah* davening to think about what exactly we are praying for?

I know for myself – even being a semikhah student – finding such moments are rare and in between. *Halakhah* is a system that is so full of details and minutiae, that it is easy to get bogged down in the technicalities and for it to be void of spiritual language and any conversation about God. I too often look up and exclaim: I did not know God was in this place! But the *gid hanasheh* is a reminder for me and hopefully others that the struggle is not over, and there is always the possibility to continue trying to bridge heaven and earth in our journeys. That Godliness is found even in the food I eat.

By propelling forward amidst the struggle, and wrestling with these difficult realities, we have a chance to distance ourselves from this potential Achilles' heel of our community: to save it from the sense of spiritual bifurcation that plagued our forefather Yakov many generations ago.