

Parshat Vayishlach 5779

In *Parshas Vayishlach*, there appears to be a disjoint occurrence which appears in between the events in preparation for Yaakov meeting Esav and the actual meeting. Apart from sending several entourages of messengers ahead with gifts for Esav, Yaakov also splits his family into two groups and davens to Hashem prior to meeting Esav, in the hope that Esav will act peaceably towards him.

However, after guiding his family across the Yabok River, we are told that Yaakov has an altercation while alone at night, with a “man” of sorts. In fact, according to Rashi quoting Chazal, this man was none-other than the *Sar Shel Esav* – Esav’s administering angel, who upon meeting Yaakov sought to struggle with him in order to find some defect by which he could overcome him.

After a struggle all night until daybreak, the *Sar Shel Esav* was unable to overpower Yaakov, and the only damage he managed to inflict was to dislocate Yaakov’s thigh. Following this, Yaakov refused to allow the *Sar Shel Esav* to leave until he conferred a blessing on Yaakov. The *Sar Shel Esav* re-names Yaakov as Yisrael, and refuses to tell Yaakov his own name. Yaakov realises he has faced a *Malach* and yet survived, and names the place Peniel. Ya’akov then goes on his way, limping on his leg. The episode concludes with *perek 32, passuk 33* which states:

“Therefore Bnei Yisrael do not eat the Gid Hanasheh (sciatic nerve) which is on the hollow of the thigh until this day, because he touched the hollow of Yaakov’s thigh at the Gid Hanasheh.”

How are we meant to understand this *passuk*? In fact, the *meforshim* bring several answers which approach the matter from different perspectives.

A first perspective, brought by the *Da’as Zekeinim*, the *Rashbam* and the *Rivah* among others, is that the reason for not eating the *Gid Hanasheh* is in commemoration of the *Neis* whereby Yaakov strove with an angel and was saved, i.e. was not killed. Some *meforshim*, including the *Chizkuni*, go even further and suggest that the fact that this *Neis* occurred for our forefather Yaakov is an adornment for us, almost like something in which to take pride.

A second and almost contrary perspective is brought by many of the *meforshim*, including the *Chizkuni*, *Daas Zekeinim*, *Rivah* and *Tur Ha’aruch*, which describes not eating the *Gid Hanasheh* as a form of punishment. We are told at the beginning of the episode with the *Sar Shel Esav* that having accompanied his family (wife and

children) across the Yabok River, “*Yaakov was left alone*” (*perek 32, passuk 25*). The explanation brought by these *meforshim* indicates that in fact Yaakov’s sons were quite grown up at this point, strong and capable. They should not have allowed their father to be left alone, but rather should have waited for him to help him if necessary. However, instead they were negligent in the mitzvah of *levayah* – accompaniment – and through this Yaakov was injured. In order to remember this and to make sure that we would be extra careful and enthusiastic with this important mitzvah, Bnei Yisrael do not eat the *Gid Hanasheh*.

Another idea is as follows. It is an accepted principal that physical actions can have a spiritual effect on us and affect us, which is the basis for the encouragement of “*Mitoch sheloh lishmah, bah lishmah*” – it is worth doing mitzvos even if at first in an insincere way, since the very act of doing the mitzvos will have an effect on us so that, we will come to perform them in a sincere manner. This is because the actions have an effect on our souls. (Of course, we should still try to be sincere.)

There is a similar concept that what we eat can somehow affect our inner personality and traits, and we develop in a way according to what we eat. Indeed, one reason given as a way of explanation of certain of the kashrus prohibitions is that Hashem understands that these types of foods would have a negative effect on us were we to eat them. Here, the *Malbim* explains that any meat which is consumed somehow becomes a part of the flesh of the consumer. This is why we are careful not to eat impure or abominable creatures, which could imbue us with their predatory and cruel nature. The *Malbim* explains that Yaakov had managed to separate himself from all materialism, except at that one part of him where he was struck, a part which embodies materialism. How much more so should we not ingest the most material part of an animal – which has animalistic desires and the inability to separate from materialism – and thereby *chas veshalom* absorb such traits. For this reason therefore, the *Gid Hanasheh* was forbidden to us, to remind us that we need to separate from lust and desires and to be *Kodesh* – set aside – for Hashem.

We see from here how one seemingly short *passuk* coming to explain a mitzvah can contain so many important messages – e.g. *Hakaras Hatov*, the mitzvah of *Levayah*, and the importance of being *Kodesh* for Hashem. In other words, this *passuk* is just one example of how the Torah and Mitzvos are not merely a system of rules, but also a moral guide in our lives, and we can appreciate just how much we can learn from them.