

Parsha Ponders

Vayishlach | November 19, 2021 | 16 Kislev 5782

Tests of one's nerves¹

על-כן לא-יאכלו בני-ישראל את-גיד הנשה אשר על-כף הירך עד היום הזה כי נגע בכף-ירך יעקב בגיד הנשה
Therefore, the Children of Israel do not eat the sciatic nerve, which is on the hip of the thigh, until this very day. This is because Yaakov was injured on his hip, in his sciatic nerve²

One of the most mysterious encounters in the *Chumash* is Yaakov's wrestling match with an unknown man. Their fight lasted the entire night. Our Sages tell us³ that it was an Angel. Not just any Angel, but the guardian angel of Yaakov's brother Eisav. Although Yaakov emerged victorious from the struggle, he didn't escape unscathed. The Angel managed to injure Yaakov's hip socket. The Torah concludes this episode with the words: "This is why the Jews to this day do not eat the sciatic nerve". Indeed, this is one of the 613 *mitzvos*⁴, not to eat the sciatic nerve of a kosher animal. What's the reasoning behind this *mitzvah*? What are we to learn from it?

The Sefer HaChinuch gives⁵ an interesting suggestion. It's no coincidence that the Angel of Eisav came to fight Yaakov. His intent was to wipe out Yaakov and all of his descendants, forever. Despite failing in his mission, he managed to cause Yaakov pain, through injuring his hip. The same is true for the descendants of Eisav, the nation of Edom. They became what we know as the Roman Empire, and include all of their future evolutions as well. Throughout the generations, they tried to destroy the Jewish people. Although they pained and injured us, they were never successful in their plots. We refrain from eating the sciatic nerve as a reminder, that although we'll suffer much pain throughout our many exiles, we should be confident to know that we will not perish. Just like Yaakov eventually recovered from his injury, so too we will see salvation from our oppressors.

Rav Moshe Feinstein asks a basic on this *mitzvah*. It seems to be commemorating Yaakov's fight with the Angel. It's for us to remember what happened, and apply it to our own tribulations. However, this *mitzvah* doesn't seem to have any other that's similar to it. All of our *mitzvos* which are meant to evoke recollections of our past, like eating *matzah*, or wearing *tefillin*, all involve a positive action. The sciatic nerve is a unique *mitzvah*, meant to recall something, which we perform through inaction. We are to *refrain* from eating the sciatic nerve. Why is the *mitzvah* formulated this way?

Perhaps we can suggest that even though it's an amazing feat, withstanding all of the trials and tribulations of exile, and we will surely be duly rewarded for our steadfast devotion to Judaism, we would much rather not have to go through such tests. We pray every day that Hashem not give us tests⁶. Included in this is our desire not to have to experience exiles, and all of the challenges it provides. We pray every day for our redemption. Therefore, we recall the encounter of Yaakov and the Angel through inaction, not through action, to demonstrate that although withstanding oppression is an amazing thing, it is something we'd rather not experience.

Good Shabbos

¹ Based on [Darash Moshe](#) to [Genesis](#) 32:33

² [Genesis](#) *loc. cit.*

³ [Bereishis Rabbah](#) 77:3. See [Torah Sheleimah](#) to [Genesis](#) Chapter 32 § 116

⁴ [Sefer HaMitzvos Lo Saaseh](#) § 183; [Sefer HaChinuch](#) § 3; [Semag Lavin](#) § 139; [Bahag Lavin Sh'B'Malkus](#) § 1

⁵ *Loc. cit.*

⁶ [Berachos](#) 60b