

That's Some Nerve!

PARSHA INSIGHTS - VAYISHLACH (5759)

NO ONE HAS THE NERVE TO EAT THE GID HANOSHEH

“The *Bnai Yisroel* [Children of Israel] must not eat the **displaced nerve** on the hip joint” (32:33). Others translate: “The *Bnai Yisroel* must not eat the **sinew of the thigh-vein** upon the hollow of the thigh.” The *sefarim* [books] explain that this *GID HANOSHEH* is the sciatic nerve - *nervus ischiadicus* - the nerve that runs down the back of the thigh. Our *pasuk* [verse] states that since the angel of Aisav touched this area of Yaacov’s thigh during their struggle, Yaacov’s descendants abstain from eating it when they consume the meat of animals. The reference is to the famous “spiritual wrestling match” between Yaacov *Avinu* [Jacob our forefather] and the guardian angel of Aisav’s nation. The philosophical messages are profound and fundamental, but we will not explore them today. Just one point: Rav Aryeh Kaplan cites the *Zohar*, that “the nerve touched by the angel is seen as the place where evil has strong influence.” This can help us understand the prohibition of eating the *gid hanosheh*. The commentators provide numerous explanations; perhaps we will look into them at a later time. At the present, let us delve into the basic *halachos* [laws] of *gid hanosheh*.

You might know that an entire *perek* [chapter] of *Mishna* and *Gemara* is named “*Gid Hanosheh*”. It is the seventh *perek* of the tractate *Chulin*. We will study a bit of the first *Mishna* now, found on *Chulin* 89B. The sciatic nerve may not be consumed, whether in *Eretz Yisroel* [the Land of Israel] or outside of it. The prohibition applies during the time of the *Bais Hamikdosh* [Temple] and afterward, and it includes both unholy meat and sacrificial meat. This nerve which is found in domesticated animals, such as cattle, sheep, and goats, is certainly off limits. Wild animals, such as buffalo and antelope, are also part of the prohibition. The sciatic nerve in both the right and left leg is forbidden. Birds are generally not included in the *issur* [prohibition] of *gid hanosheh* at all, because their anatomy is different from domesticated and wild land beasts. The structure of their “hollow of the thigh” is unlike that of cattle, for example. As a result, the Oral Torah explains to us that the sciatic nerve found in birds is not usually forbidden to us. For practical *halacha* [law], the *Shulchan Aruch Yoreh Daiah* 65:5-14 speaks in detail about the sciatic nerve.

Technically, we could carefully take out the *gid hanosheh* and eat the rest of the hindquarters. This process is called “*nikur*”. It is clear, however, that this needs to be accomplished by a skilled professional. Here is the *Rambam’s* remark in *Ma’achalos Asuros* 8:7: “The one who removes the sciatic nerve needs to dig down after it until he leaves no remnant. A butcher is (generally) trustworthy regarding the *gid hanosheh*, just as he is believed about (the fact that he has removed) *chailev* [forbidden fats].” The *Rambam* concludes with a warning not to purchase meat from just any butcher. Considering the seriousness of everything involved, one should only buy from a G-d-fearing, well-established person with impeccable standards. We know that this is true regarding all areas of *kashrus* [Jewish laws pertaining to proper food], but it applies especially to meat. In most locations, the hind part of an animal is not consumed at all. This helps avoid problems associated with removal of the *gid hanosheh*.

May this remind us to keep our *kashrus* observance at its best. The esoteric and simpler messages of the *gid hanosheh* are many. Hopefully, we have learned or at least reviewed some fascinating Torah information today.

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