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Rosh Bais Medrash English Speaking Program JCT Machon Lev

Gid HaNasheh: When There Is No Pleasure, Why Is It Still Prohibited?

The Torah commands us:

עַל־כֵּן לֹא־יֹאכְלוּ בְנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל אֶת־גִּיד הַנָּשֶׁה אֲשֶׁר עַל־כַּף יַרֵךְ עַד הַיּוֹם הַזֶּה, כִּי נָגַע בְּכַף־יֶרֶךְ יַעֲקֹב בְּגִיד הַנָּשֶׁה.

Therefore Bnei Yisrael do not eat the *gid hanasheh*, which is on the hip joint, to this day, because he touched Yaakov's hip joint on the *gid hanasheh*.[1]

The obvious purpose of this mitzvah is to remember Yaakov Avinu's struggle with the angel of Eisav. Rav Nebenzahl[2] points out a fascinating question. The Gemara in Chullin[3] reaches the conclusion that the *gid hanasheh* is essentially inedible. Its taste is compared to wood. (כעץ בעלמא).


Rabbi Avigdor Nebenzahl

In fact, the halachic principle is that the *gid hanasheh* does not impart taste in the normal way. The **Shulchan Aruch** therefore rules: - **אין בגידין בנותן טעם מדאורייתא** The sinews do not impart taste according to Torah law.[4]

Based on the above, Rav Nebenzahl asks a simple but powerful question: Why did the Torah have to prohibit eating the *gid hanasheh* if nobody really wants to eat it in the first place? If it tastes like wood and provides no meaningful pleasure, what is accomplished by prohibiting it from being eaten?

Rav Nebenzahl offers two answers.

1. HASHEM GIVES PROVIDES US MITZVOT EVEN FOR ACTS WE WOULD PERFORM ANYWAY

The first answer is based on the famous Mishnah at the end of **Masechet Makkot**:

1. Bereshit 32:33
2. Rav Avigdor Neventazl, on the Parsha
3. Chullin 92b
4. Shulchan Aruch, Yoreh Deah 65:9

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רַבִּי חֲנַנְיָא בֶּן עֲקַשְׁיָא אוֹמֵר, רָצָה הַקָּדוֹשׁ בָּרוּךְ הוּא לְזַכּוֹת אֶת יִשְׂרָאֵל, לְפִיכָךְ הִרְבָּה לָהֶם תּוֹרָה וּמִצְוֹת.

Rabbi Chanania ben Akashya says: The Holy One, Blessed is He, desired to grant merit to Israel; therefore He gave them an abundance of Torah and mitzvot.[5]

What does it mean that Hashem wanted to give us merit? One explanation is that Hashem transforms even ordinary human behavior into an opportunity for mitzvah. There are things we would refrain from doing anyway, but Hashem says: I will make your restraint into a mitzvah. For example, the Torah prohibits eating blood. Most people have no desire to drink blood in the first place, yet Hashem gives us reward for refraining from it. Similarly, on Erev Yom Kippur, there is a mitzvah to eat. We are probably going to eat anyway, but that act which would naturally be done is transformed into a mitzvah.

This may be the message of the *gid hanasheh* as well. Even though it is not something we ordinarily want to eat, it is transformed into a mitzva. Even though we would ordinarily would refrain from eating the *gid hanasheh*, the Torah nevertheless commands us not to eat it. Hashem is giving us another opportunity fo***r zechut***, another opportunity to earn reward through something that otherwise would have gone unnoticed.

Rav Nebenzahl then offers a second much deeper explanation.

2. THE *GID HANASHEH* AND THE ILLUSION OF PLEASURE

We usually think about the the angel of Eisav, as representing the *Yetzer Hara*. Chazal associate this force with the Satan and, ultimately, with the *Malach HaMavet*.

We tend to understand the Yetzer Hara's message as follows: "Enjoy yourself. Follow your desires. Live for the pleasures of this world and worry about Olam HaBa later." The Yetzer Hara convinces us that following our physical desires will give us happiness in this world, even though ultimately it may cost us in the world to come.

Rav Nebenzahl suggests that the *gid*

5. Mishna Makkot 3:16



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hanasheh teaches us something very different. The *gid hanasheh* is the product of the encounter with the angel of Eisav, and yet it has no real taste and no real pleasure. It is, as Chazal put it, **כעץ בעלמא** - like a piece of wood. Perhaps the Torah is teaching us: The Yetzer Hara does not merely take away our Olam HaBa. It can take away our Olam HaZeh as well.

We imagine that if we give in to every desire, pursue every pleasure, and live according to whatever feels good at the moment, we will enjoy life more. But often the opposite is true. A person who allows *kinah, taavah, and kavod* - jealousy, uncontrolled desire, and the pursuit of honor, to dominate his life may believe that he is enjoying Olam HaZeh. In reality, those very pursuits can destroy his ability to enjoy life. As Chazal teach: **הַקִּנְאָה וְהַתַּאֲוָה וְהַכָּבוֹד מוֹצִיאִין אֶת הָאָדָם מִן הָעוֹלָם.** Jealousy, desire, and the pursuit of honor remove a person from the world.[6]

We often understand "remove a person from this world" as referring to the next world. But perhaps there is another way to interpret this phrase. They can remove a person from this world as well. A person consumed by jealousy cannot appreciate what he has. A person controlled by desire is never satisfied with what he possesses. A person obsessed with honor is constantly measuring himself against others. He may have everything and still be miserable.

THE REAL MESSAGE OF THE *GID HANASHEH*

That is the deeper message of the *gid hanasheh.* The Torah is warning us not be fooled by the Yetzer Hara into thinking that every pleasure is truly pleasurable. There are things that appear attractive but ultimately leave us empty. The *gid hanasheh* is the ultimate symbol of this. It looks like food, but it provides no nourishment or pleasure. That can be true of many of the things the Yetzer Hara places before us.

The greatest Olam HaZeh is not necessarily the world in which we satisfy the greatest number of desires. It is the world in which we learn to desire the right things. When a person lives life according to the precepts of the Torah, he discovers that Torah and mitzvot do not merely prepare us for Olam HaBa, they teach us how to live in Olam HaZeh. They give us the ability to appreciate what we have, to control our desires, to rise above jealousy, to stop measuring ourselves by the opinions of others and ultimately to experience a deeper and more enduring form of happiness.

The *gid hanasheh* reminds us that not everything that the Yetzer Hara calls "pleasure" is true pleasure. Sometimes what appears to be the good life is really nothing more than "etz be'alma" - a piece of wood, with no taste or purpose. The greatest gift Hashem can provide to us is the wisdom to recognize the difference. ■

6. Pirke Avot 4:21



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