

Jacob's battle with the Angel makes for some meaty lessons

by rabbi judah dardik

Vayishlach

Genesis 32:4-36:43

Hosea 11:7-12:12

Friends tell me that filet mignon is delicious, but I've never tasted it myself. While the hindquarter meat of a cow could theoretically be prepared in a kosher manner, there are not very many kashrut professionals trained in proper removal of the gid hanasheh (sciatic nerve) to make it easily available to me. And it all goes back to Jacob and the Angel.

In the dark of night, Jacob prepares in fear for a fateful meeting with his older brother Esav. More than two decades earlier, Jacob fled home as his sibling swore to kill him. Now returning to face him, he makes anxious last minute preparations, sending half his family across the nearby river to hide and moving his camp once again. "Jacob was left alone (32:25)" in the dark, and an angel appears to wrestle with him until dawn. When the angel sees that he cannot overcome Jacob, he strikes him in the thigh and sends him on his way limping. "Therefore the Children of Israel are not to eat the sciatic nerve to this day, because he struck Jacob's leg on the sciatic nerve" (32:33).

As a reader and descendant, I am proud of Jacob. He struggles with an angel, and successfully defends himself. I think of him when struggling with the powerful whirlwinds that life sends on occasion. Yet the prohibition leaves me confused; marking this event by putting something off-limits seems more like a punishment to the Children of Israel than a celebration of a great moment. Why put the sciatic nerve on the "no" list of kashrut?

A closer look at the narrative raises a more subtle question. The text suggests specifically that the angel was "unable to overcome" Jacob. If so, how did he injure his leg so badly? If a person emerged from a fistfight with a black eye and claimed that their adversary "couldn't touch them," one might inconveniently point out that that was clearly not the case!

The commentary of the Chizkuni suggests that the law of the sciatic nerve is indeed a reprimand, a chastisement not of Jacob but of his children. Think about Jacob's mindset. He was forced to run away from his brother so many years ago in fear for his life. He travels many miles, and goes to live with his uncle Lavan. All those years he knows that Esav is likely stewing and getting increasingly bitter. More than twenty years later, he heads home and hears that Esav is approaching with 400 troops. The news is cause for great concern and confirmation of Jacob's fears.

So he prepares on all fronts. He works on the diplomatic front, prays fervently for Divine assistance, and prepares for battle as well. He splits his camp so that if Esav destroys one part, the other will survive. How awful! Half his wives and children will die! Yet that is a possible reality for which he must prepare. He can't sleep. He paces the floor, desperate to do something — anything. And his children leave him all alone.

The angel may not have been able to overcome Jacob personally, as he was too strong for that. But he did have a vulnerability; his weak spot was the absence of family support in his darkest hour. Thus he is struck in the thigh area, a region of the body that is Biblically symbolic of procreation and future generations. The Torah bans the sciatic nerve for Jacob's descendants in memory that those children left their father alone at this crucial and terrifying moment in his life.

I don't necessarily blame the family. Jacob is a strong and independent man. Their father has taken care of them in many a difficult situation over the years, and always seemed to know best. They trust him and look to him for guidance and protection. But therein lies the danger, as even the strongest person still has moments of fundamental human need for support. And we are left by the Torah to ask: are there "towers of strength" in our own lives who may be a bit too lonely in the personal dangers that they face.

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