



In Parashat Vayishlach the Torah makes mention of the prohibition against partaking of the *gid ha-nasheh*, the sciatic nerve of animals. Yaakov, as a result of his struggle with the mysterious assailant as told in this *parasha*, suffered a dislodged hip near the sciatic nerve (32:25), and the Torah then writes, "For this reason, the children of Israel do not eat the sciatic nerve which is upon the hip socket to this very day..." (32:32).

In Maimonides' commentary to the Mishna (Chulin, end of chapter 7), he establishes – rather emphatically – that it is not due to this verse that we abstain from partaking of the *gid ha-nasheh*. Our compliance with this practice stems solely from *Matan Torah*, the revelation at Sinai, at which point God presented *Am Yisrael* with the Torah and its code of law. Maimonides writes:

You have thus been shown that everything from which we refrain or that we observe today we do so only by force of the divine command through our teacher Moshe *a"h*, and not because the Almighty said this to the earlier prophets. For example, we refrain from eating flesh from a living animal not because the Almighty forbade this upon Noach, but rather because Moshe forbade upon us flesh from a living animal by commanding us at Sinai that the prohibition of flesh from a living animal shall remain in force. Similarly, we circumcise not because our patriarch Avraham *a"h* circumcised himself and his household, but rather because the Almighty commanded us through our teacher Moshe that we should circumcise just as our patriarch Avraham *a"h* circumcised. The same applies to *gid ha-nasheh*: we follow not the prohibition imposed upon our patriarch Yaakov, but rather the command of our teacher Moshe *a"h*.

Lest one think that we adhere to this law by force of God's command to Yaakov that he should refrain from the *gid ha-nasheh*, Maimonides asserts that we abstain from this meat only by force of the Sinaitic covenant.

One might question why this point drew such emphatic attention on Maimonides' part. Does it really matter whether we obey the *gid ha-nasheh* law because of God's command to Yaakov or because of His revelation to the Israelites at Sinai? Either way, we are still unconditionally and unwaveringly bound to this prohibition just as we are to all the Torah's commands. Why did Maimonides see fit to digress from his commentary to the Mishna in order to emphasize this distinction?

Rav Aharon Lichtenstein (as recorded by a student, documented at www.vbm-torah.org/archive/sichot/bereishit/08-62vayishlach.htm) noted several implications of this basic distinction between the command to Yaakov and the command to the nation at Sinai, including the nature of the *mitzva* in relation to others:

When we perform a *mitzva* as a result of God's command to the forefathers, all the *mitzvot* assume the nature of a motley collection of instructions and rules, for some commands were given to one person, and some to another. The *mitzvot* are thereby reduced to an ad hoc list of orders. This is not the case when we perform a *mitzva* because we received the Torah in its entirety as a single, organic, complete unit given to *Am Yisrael* through Moshe. In this instance, the *mitzvot* are perceived as *torat Hashem temima* – the whole, complete, perfect word of God – and the performance of an individual *mitzva* is perceived as part of that complete entity.

If we observe a given *mitzva* by force of its having been commanded upon the patriarchs, the *mitzva* is approached in isolation, without any connection or association with other commandments. At Sinai, however, we received more than simply a series of disjointed laws; we were given an integrated system of obligations and prohibitions that together comprise the *retzon Hashem*, the divine will. Hence, it is indeed significant that we observe *gid ha-nasheh*, for example, by force of the Revelation at Sinai, as opposed to the command to Yaakov. This factor renders *gid ha-nasheh* part of the system of Torah law, rather than simply an independent provision.

This is indeed a most significant feature in Maimonides' approach to Torah law. Both in his introduction to the commentary to the Mishna as well as in his *Guide for the Perplexed* (3:27), Maimonides asserts that Torah law is intended to help us achieve social stability and behavioral moderation, which in turn enable people to develop themselves intellectually to their fullest potential. In his view, the unique purpose served by each individual *mitzva* constitutes but part of an overarching goal for which the Torah is intended. Understandably, then, he emphasizes that the *gid ha-nasheh* prohibition is observed not in isolation, out of fealty to God's command to Yaakov, but rather as part of the unified, integrated system of Torah law transmitted to *Benei Yisrael* at Sinai.