GID HANASHEH AS FORGETFULNESS

THEODORE STEINBERG

Genesis 32:1-36:43 tells of Jacob's wrestling bout with a mysterious "divine" being. The struggle ends with the bestowal upon Jacob of a blessing and a new name: Israel. But there is something else. Just as the wrestling match ends, the mysterious creature, perhaps an angel, touches Jacob's thigh, and the *gid hanasheh* is injured, causing him to limp. The meaning of the term *gid hanasheh* is not quite clear, and calls for study. The dictionaries and translations define it variously as: *the sinew of the thigh vein* (JPS); *the thigh muscle* (NJPS, Etz Hayim, 1999); *the hollow of Jacob's thigh (*Jerusalem Bible, 1992); *sciatic nerve* (Even-Shoshan dictionary, 1980). The popular modern Hebrew commentary Hartum-Cassuto (1980) says the precise meaning is not known. If *gid hanasheh* is the sciatic nerve, it can cause considerable pain and limping when it is damaged and inflamed.

The second word of the phrase, *hanasheh* or just its root, *nasheh*, is a separate problem. It appears several times in the Bible where its contextual meaning seems to convey the notion of "forgetting," or "forgetfulness." One example is in Genesis 41:51, where Joseph names his first-born son Manasseh [Menashe], with *nasheh* as the second part of the name. In choosing this name, Joseph thanks God who *nashani* [has made me forget] all my hardship and my parental home. Thus, he names his first child after the Divine gift of forgetfulness when he needed it.

And so we now have *gid* perhaps meaning the sciatic nerve, and *nasheh* for forgetfulness. Any person who has ever had a severe attack of sciatica would be glad to forget it. Forgetfulness also helps us to understand some of the events in Jacob's life. For the brothers Jacob and Esau to be reconciled with each other they have to be forgetful of past hurts. Later on, when Joseph and his brothers come together again, a genuine reconciliation would seem to require a degree of emotional forgetfulness. Also, perhaps, for Joseph to become a high official in Egypt, second only to Pharaoh, his origins had to be forgotten.

Forgetfulness, depending upon the circumstances, can be a useful and even a wonderful thing. Family members who are able to overlook and forget ar-

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guments and slights will have a better time of it. The family that is able to forget imagined or even real insults will stay together over the years. It has been said that no woman who remembers the discomfort and pain of pregnancy and childbirth would ever willingly assent to having a second child. All of us who are not firstborn owe our lives to our mother's ability to forget. So, forgetfulness has some fine qualities. Potentially it is a great gift. But, like many such gifts, it has a dark side. The forgetting that can come with age can be terrifying.

Forgetfulness has a theological side. One example is in Deuteronomy 32:18, in the song which Moses declaims towards the end of his life. In some of his words he rebukes and reprimands the people whom he has led for 40 years: *tzur yelad'kha* [the Rock that brought you forth] *teshi* [you have forgotten]. There is irony in Moses' song-sermon: You, Israel, have been given great gifts by God, but instead of giving thanks you forget Him.

But there is a dark side of remembering: too much remembering, and too little forgetting. This can lead to bearing grudges. A thousand years ago, the wise Rabbenu Bahya taught that "Were it not for the ability to forget his fears and hatreds, a man would never be free from melancholy." To which we might add, were it not for the ability to remember his learning, a man might be like an eternal child.

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