

Yeshurun waxed fat, and rebelled. (32:15)

The *pasuk* implies that wealth is the source of *Klal Yisrael's* rebellion, indicating that prosperity may not contribute to a strong spiritual balance. It is almost as if wealth is a curse, not a blessing. Yet, two *pesukim* earlier the Torah tells us that we will be blessed with material abundance: *Yarkiveihu al bamesei aretz, va'yochal tenuvos sadai*, "He shall cause them to ride the high places of the Land and eat the produce of its fields" (ibid. 32:13). *Klal Yisrael* will enter the land and be greeted with incredible prosperity. Apparently, here prosperity comes across as a blessing.

On the one hand, we pray for material bounty, so that we may better serve Hashem and help others. We ask for *Chaim shel osher v'kavod*, "A life of wealth and honor." Yet, we see from the above *pasuk*, that *gashmius*, materialism, can lead us to turn away from Hashem. We are ironically praying for the very trait that can cause us to fall into the abyss of sin.

Perhaps, the Torah's use of the word *va'yishman*, "Yeshurun waxed fat," indicates a change within the person, much like one who eats excessively, causing him to put on weight. He is different from the person who is carrying excessive baggage. When they stand on a scale, they both weigh the same – only one is himself overweight, while the other is weighed down by his baggage. There are those who, upon striking it rich, allow the newly-found wealth to change them. The wealth becomes assimilated into their psyche, such that their whole perspective on life, people and G-d becomes altered. For them, prosperity can be a curse. There are others for whom wealth is like an extra suitcase. They have not changed; they just have more baggage to manage.

In addressing the question of whether prosperity is a blessing or a curse, **Horav Yisrael Belsky, Shlita**, comments that it very well depends on how-- and at what rate-- one becomes wealthy. *Parashas Ha'azinu*, which decries the Jewish People's insubordination due to their excess materialism, is warning of the hazards of sudden wealth. Such prosperity presents a new set of *nisyonos*, challenges and trials. One who has become accustomed to watching the balance in his checkbook scrupulously after he shops at the grocery, might become overwhelmed when he has more credit cards than he knows how to manage. Newfound wealth can confound a person if he is not prepared for it gradually.

We see it all of the time with the lottery winners who spend their winnings almost overnight on frivolities and foolishness. The temptations which were once out of reach are suddenly available for the picking. How often do we hear of a lottery winner donating a portion of his winnings to charity – or sharing with friends and family?

Those who accumulate wealth slowly and moderately become gradually accustomed to wealth. They learn to save, to guard their assets, to invest wisely, to purchase astutely. They are still challenged by wealth, but now they are not overwhelmed by it. It is something with which they can cope. Wealth and material abundance are truly blessings, since they allow one to expand his horizons, to achieve more, to help a greater number of people. The danger is in how quickly he

becomes wealthy. He should not want to “strike it rich,” but rather, to amass wealth gradually, by installments, establishing a stronger foundation to overcome the eventual challenges which present themselves as his portfolio grows.

The *Rosh Yeshivah* explains that wealth poses another challenge: it is addictive. *Mi she'yeish lo manah rotzeh masayim*, “One who has a hundred (coins) wants two hundred.” A person is not satisfied with his bounty. It is never enough. It has nothing to do with how quickly one ascends the ladder of affluence. Suddenly, what used to be considered a luxury becomes a necessity. The “once in ten-year” vacation becomes a bi-annual requirement. People who had been accustomed to a simple lifestyle are now exposed; they suddenly indulge in extravagant and exorbitant diversions.

At the end of the day, such a person had been much better off when he was not wealthy. The simple life presented fewer challenges – or, at least, challenges that he was able to handle. Now, he cannot seem to cope with all of the added requirements placed on him by virtue of his prosperous circumstances. More is expected of him. His home is inundated with people seeking his help; his privacy is invaded; his “advice” is sought – day and night. While all of these are really a good thing – one must be ready and willing to accept it. A “rich” wallet with a “poor” mind does not balance very well.

Rav Belsky adds another practical malady from which people who achieve wealth may suffer. They become preoccupied with the fear of uncertainty. “What will be if my wealth comes to an end? What will I do if I make a bad investment and lose my money? How do I know the market will produce this year?” There is no guarantee to prosperity – regardless of its size. People make mistakes; natural disasters can wipe out a portfolio overnight. When one does not have something, he does not worry about losing it. When one is heavily invested in many areas of commercial trade, the newspaper’s business section becomes his Bible.

After all is said and done, I think the answer to our original question-- whether prosperity is a blessing or a curse -- depends on one factor: Does the individual acknowledge and never forget the Source of his wealth? When a person realizes that whatever he has is derived directly from Hashem and that this gift comes along with responsibility, the wealth then becomes a blessing. The person who foolishly believes that his affluence is the result of his own doing, however, his acumen – even his good fortune – is far from blessed. He had better prepare a contingency plan for himself.