

This week's Torah portion is actually a beautiful poem that is essentially Moshe's farewell address to the Jewish people. Moshe's beautiful prose is actually an allegorical microcosm of Jewish life with references to the many good times and sad times throughout our history. Describing an unfortunate tendency of the Jewish people in Biblical times, the Torah says, Vayishman yeshurun vayivat- Yeshurun has become fat and kicked. This verse is describing the myriad of times in our past when we became fat off the land, when we experienced wealth, luxury and opulence. Yet, this did not strengthen our religious connection to G-D, rather we became complacent and detached from G-D. We rebelled against our faith and tradition, feeling that there was no need for prayer, observance and spirituality in this land of prosperity and affluence.

The Gerrer Rebbe, R. Yitzchak Meir Alter asks that the word used in this verse to describe the Jewish people is a rather strange choice. Yeshurun, literally means the straight ones. Although it is often used to refer to the Jewish people, it is usually used as a positive reference. It is used to describe the times that we display moral compunction, punctilious observance, and unchecked spirituality. The verse in our Parsha is describing our failures as a people, that we rejected G-D and moved away from appropriate religious behavior. Why then should the Torah use the word "Yeshurun" to describe us? The Torah is using a complimentary phrase in an apparently uncomplimentary context.

People often act inappropriately and engage in immoral behavior, yet if the person is an immoral person that behavior is quite normal for him. People steal because they lack the moral fortitude to view another's possessions as off limits to him. Similarly, people speak gossip because they lack the sensitivity to their friend's feelings. The fact that depraved people act in a depraved fashion is commonplace and unfortunately expected in today's society. However, community leaders, moral and spiritual individuals assume that they will always act in a manner that is consistent with their standing as well. They believe that they will never fall prey to temptation. They are certain that they will never rebel against G-D. They are confident in their faith and feel that it will never be seriously challenged. The Gerrer Rebbe explains that the Torah is warning us precisely against this overconfidence and this self-assuredness. The Torah is warning us that even the Yeshurun, the upright and fine people; they too can fall from their spiritual heights. They too can become complacent and lax in their observance. Yes, even the strong and mighty can come tumbling down from their religious perch.

After Rosh HaShanah and Yom Kippur we are all experiencing this unique state of Yeshurun. All of us have hopefully made significant improvement in our religious lives and feel that we are at the height of our spiritual greatness. Yet, we cannot become complacent and relaxed in our service to G-D, because no matter how great we are we can very quickly return to not being so great. We must continue to grow and improve in every possible way, because if we are not growing spiritually, we are declining spiritually. Perhaps this is the challenge of Sukkot, to insure that we do not become satisfied with our growth over Rosh HaShanah and Yom Kippur, rather we continue to find new means and outlets for our spiritual yearnings. For as Jews we must always be looking for improvement and growth.

***Shabbat Shalom
Chag Sameach
Rabbi Meir Tannenbaum***