

## Gevurah – Strength By Alan Morinis

### INTRODUCTION TO WEEK TWO

Tomer Devorah says:

*A person should not intend to derive pleasure of any sort from the evil inclination .... Rather, one should arouse the evil inclination to love the Divine Presence. One should concentrate on drawing the Divine Presence near, according to the mystical explanation of the verse: "His left arm is under my head" (Song of Songs 2:6) for the Divine Presence is initially bound only toward the Left, (i.e., gevurah). And then the verse continues: "his right arm embraces me." One should concentrate on "sweetening" all those acts of restoring the Divine Presence with the good inclination, literally reinstating the Divine Presence and causing her to rejoice by performing this divine command for the sake of the Supernal Union. Behold, in this way one sweetens all the judgments and rectifies them....*

The Hebrew word *gevurah* is not easy to translate into English. It does mean "strength," and is sometimes used to refer to brute strength, might, power and even severity. But it also has connotations of restraint, discrimination, limitation, discipline, judgment, discernment, the ability to draw lines, and strength in judgment—all of which are aspects of this soul- trait.

This trait is so central to Jewish spiritual thought that *gevurah* is numbered as one of the ten *sefirot* of kabbalah; that is, one of the ten fundamental foundations of all of reality. It is the counterbalance to the trait of *chesed*, or lovingkindness.

And so *gevurah*, though perhaps at first blush far less attractive than *chesed*, has its crucial role to play in our lives. When we manifest too little *gevurah*, we are creating a world that is too soft, too unclear. And if we bring too much *gevurah* into the world, then we are creating a reality that is rigid and unbending and, because of that, brittle.

Our ability to say "no" comes from *gevurah*. Love without judgment is like Jello without the bowl. It's just a jiggling mess. On the other hand, strong judgment without lovingkindness is harsh and unfeeling.

*Gevurah* is associated with judgment and harshness and our prayers ask God to judge

us from the side of *chesed*, not *gevurah*, because if God were to judge solely from the side of *gevurah*, no human being could endure.

Yet *gevurah* is not negative. It is the trait that gives rise to justice and stability in the world. It is also the backbone of all the order that exists in the universe. The unbending laws of nature, the orbits of the planets, the predictable cause (like fire) and effect (like getting burned) are all that way due to the working of *gevurah*. And in our daily lives, *gevurah* is the quality that gives rise to self-restraint and self-examination.

Exercising self-restraint is an inherent challenge for people, with all our in-born as well as cultivated desires. Maybe that's why literally, as well as in biblical usage, the word *gevurah* refers to that quality that makes a hero (which is called *gibor* in Hebrew, from the same linguistic root as *gevurah*). Self-restraint is nothing less than a kind of heroism, and it is nothing less than heroic to exercise that power.

It takes a hero to say no to that chocolate. Or is it coffee? Or wine? Or television? Or lottery tickets? You can fill in your own place of dynamic challenge here. Is it pulp fiction? Or sex? Or Internet searches? Or what? Where in your life do you have difficulty saying no to your desire?

*Gevurah* works for us in a positive way when it helps us say "no" to those desires that are not nourishing or aren't healthy for the soul. It creates the space and the strength for honest self-examination to see where our desires are leading us in ways that are harmful. Unbalanced self-restraint works for us in a negative way when it keeps us from doing things that actually are good for the soul. This is a classic Jewish teaching on inner strength that comes to us from Pirkei Avot, where the question is posed: "Who is a hero?" and the answer comes back, "One who conquers their inner inclinations."