



Institute for Jewish Spirituality™

Cultivating Mindfulness. Deepening Connection. Enlivening Jewish Life.

Omer 5781: ***Gevurah: Setting Wise Limits*** ***with Rabbi Sam Feinsmith***

Last week we began our journey in the headwaters of the *sephirah Chesed*, Loving Connection, the gushing spring of transcendent love streaming through and around us. This week, we kayak downstream to the sacred pool of *Gevurah*, Setting Wise Limits or Boundaries, which gives the divine love flowing through us and around us focus, shape, measure, and form that it might be received and digested. You may recognize the linguistic resonance between the *Gevurah* (גבורה) and the Hebrew *gibor* (גיבור), one who is mighty, strong, valiant. Setting wise limits and boundaries can require us to muster a great deal of inner strength.

Why are such boundaries needed? Would it not be preferable to just swim in the current of love? Consider the following Hasidic teaching by Rabbi Dov Ber, the Maggid of Mezeritch (d. 1772):

...During the creation of the worlds, the Holy and Blessed One needed to contract God's radiant light so the worlds could receive it without going out of existence...This contraction (*tzimtzum*) is called severity (*Din*), which contains (lit. delimits) the outflow of divine loving-kindness (*Chesed*), the nature of which is to spread. This is just like water in a vessel—the glass contains the water and doesn't allow it to flow outwards. Even though we may experience this contraction as severe, it is kindness nevertheless, for each and every thing that exists must have some good—that is, loving-kindness—mixed into it, for “the world is sustained through kindness” (Ps. 89:3). Even though the contraction is severe, without it the worlds would cease to exist.

This, then, is the meaning of “*YHVH Elohim* is both sun and shield” (Ibid. 84:12).¹ There is a well-known tradition that the name *YHVH* is called “sun.” The verse thus means to suggest that “sun and shield” are an apt

¹ In classic rabbinic literature, the name *YHVH* is associated with divine love while the name *Elohim* is associated with divine severity, contraction, and judgment.

analogy for “YHVH Elohim.” That is, just as we can’t look at the sun on account of its luminous radiance without some shield or screen to block it and thereby enable us to enjoy its light, so too with the blessed name YHVH—whose light is extremely powerful on account of its luminous clarity and the radiant loving-kindness and compassion it contains—were it not to have some dividing screen, the world could not receive that love. This is why God needed to contract Godself and contain the name YHVH in the name *Elohim*, which is the shield.²

In like fashion, the love flowing into and through us can be too intense or diffuse to be made manifest and be fully received. You may recognize this kind of overpowering or unfocused love from your own experience of someone who smothered you with too much love, or someone who didn’t know how to provide love in the right measure and at the right time, or someone who’s love was indiscriminate. If our love is to be felt and received as loving, we must learn how to set wise limits that allow us to dole it out appropriately. Sometimes being truly loving means standing firm, setting limits, and saying no, even when the recipient may experience our doing so as severe.

When lacking clear and wise limits, our desire to love may express itself as attempting to fix someone’s problem instead of listening empathetically and offering kind validation. Or the intensity of our love may crowd others out or rob them of agency. We may take on too much in an effort to shine love upon others, only to burn ourselves out. Or we may shower love indiscriminately in ways that condone harmful behavior or fail to protect those who are most vulnerable. Or we may consume too much, thinking that we are just practicing self-love even though we may be hurting ourselves and our planet. All such unhealthy expressions of *Chesed* can sever our connection with our own heart and with others, even those we had intended to hold in intimate connection.

As a current or modulation within the divine Totality of which we are an integral part, *Gevurah*, setting wise limits, is already innate in us. As we practice through meditation, yoga, or text study, we may begin to access our inner *Gevurah* in our daily lives more readily. We will become more aware of the inner obstacles to holding our tongue, stepping back to make space for others, practicing restraint, and saying a loving no.

² *Sefer Torat Ha’maggid, Va’era, s.v. Va’yedaber elohim el moshe va’yomer elav ani adonai*

And so, this week we set an intention to practice *Gevurah*, setting wise limits for the sake of enacting *chasadim tovim*, good and helpful acts of loving-kindness.³ And because (like all of these qualities) our *Gevurah* has its shadow side and imbalances, which may cause us to fall prey to anger, severity, judgment, and biting criticism on the one hand, or an anything-for-love mentality on the other, we refine and balance our *Gevurah* through the lens of each of the other *sephirot* lest it become too harsh or too flimsy. A guiding light for finding such balance: *Not too tight, not too loose*.

This week, may we cultivate awareness of the *Gevurah that is in us and all around us*, and may we put it to good use as a strong vehicle for channeling loving-kindness and shoring up our sense of loving connection. This week, may we notice the ways in which *Gevurah* can be helpful and also those in which it can cause harm. And may we find the inner strength and restraint to receive and channel transcendent love, for ourselves, for others, and for our planet.

Kein y'hi ratzon: may it be so for us, and for all beings, in this second week of the Omer.

³ A phrase borrowed from the opening blessing of the *Amidah*, the silent prayer.