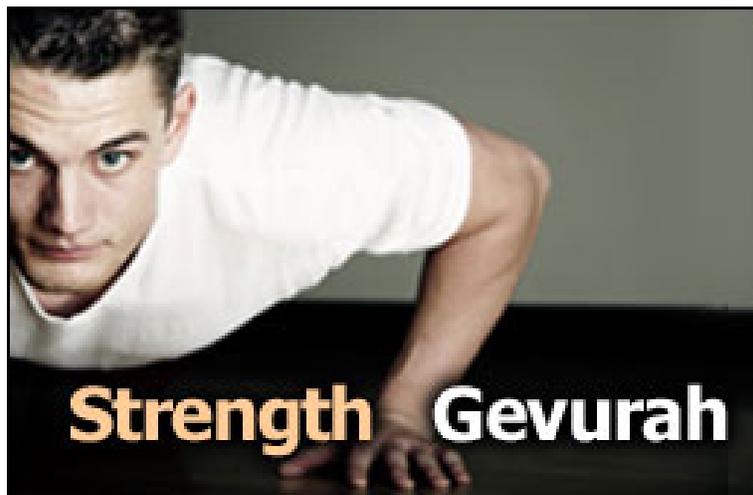




MUSSAR PROGRAM CLASS #12



LEARNING HOW TO DRAW THE LINE
ON OUR DESIRES.

BY ALAN MORINIS

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A man who does not restrain his own spirit is likened to a breached city without a protective wall. (Proverbs 25:28)

My wife keeps a cartoon stuck above her desk that is entitled: "The Surrendered Mom." The drawing is of a shell-shocked woman, and the caption reads:

"Drive you and six friends to the mall? Why, I'd love to!"

"You need \$500 for a beanbag chair? Sounds like a plan!"

"You're quitting middle school? Well, you know best."

Such a parent may be motivated by what seems to be love, but she's really off-base because she's missing the necessary counterweight of judgment and restraint. Love without judgment is like jello without the bowl. It's just a jiggling mess.

The converse is also true, which is that strong judgment without loving-kindness is harsh and unfeeling. Power – whether in the home, workplace or government – works best and is sustainable only when tempered by mercy and love.

The ideal lies in the blending, though the point of balance will be different for each of us. In Jewish thought, where these traits come to balance is a point of harmony and beauty called *tifferet*.

The middah or soul-trait of gevurah means "strength." It shows up in many places and many ways, and you can read an entire newspaper as a commentary on the role of gevurah in public and private life. Are the police using too much unrestrained power? Should the government draw the line on certain behaviors that are happening in society? Was the family lax in discipline? Where's the limit to the display of sexuality on television and advertising?

Take a look at the daily news from this point of view and you will see what an important trait *gevurah* is, and how illuminating it is to bring this framework to understanding ordinary events.

Moving Mountains

In Mussar thought, the strength that concerns us is not the power to move mountains, but the strength you need to overcome your greatest challenge: yourself. This is an especially important concern for our generation because we live surrounded by a culture that exuberantly celebrates self-indulgence, the very opposite quality of self-restraint.

It's true that not everyone needs to develop self-restraint. Some people are already masters of saying "no" to themselves, and would do much better to foster soul-traits that will help them loosen up! Still, everyone has much to gain from this exploration, even if *gevurah* is not a major issue in your spiritual curriculum at this time.

Self-restraint works for us in a positive way when it helps us say "no" to desires that are not nourishing (or maybe even unhealthy) for the soul. On the other hand, self-restraint is negative when it keeps us from doing things that actually are good for the soul.

The notion of "self-restraint" can scare us off because it makes us feel like we are setting ourselves up to *lose* something. The truth is that you stand to gain much more than whatever loss you might incur, because even as you muster the strength to say no to the body, no to desire, no to habit... at the same time, you are saying yes... yes to the soul.

Saying no to ourselves and our desires is not a hugely popular concept today. Look at the significant portion of the population that is overweight. Even among those who do want to hold their body weight within a healthy line, many prefer diet pills to the disciplined act of

pushing away the plate. How can so many people continue to smoke cigarettes in the face of all the proof that it is nothing less than suicide? And among those who would stop, sales of anti-smoking products boom because people can't simply stop themselves from striking the match. And so on with many other desires that are either fully indulged, or restrained in a way that avoids self-control.

Exercising self-restraint has always been difficult. Maybe that's why a form of the word *gevurah* – *gibor* – means “hero” in Hebrew. Self-restraint is nothing less than a heroic act!

You can be a hero by saying no to that chocolate. Or is it coffee? Or television? Or lottery tickets? Or pulp fiction? You can fill in your own dynamic challenge, where you have difficulty saying no to your desire.

Constructive Force

Casting the exercise of *gevurah* as an heroic act reveals something essential about the Mussar view of life. We all face inner challenges, and it's foolish to condemn ourselves for our weaknesses. We are actually *supposed* to have them. They define our spiritual curriculum. Life is set up to challenge us to be heroes who turn our weaknesses into strengths.

The Jewish tradition in no way *condemns* our desires per se. We have no tradition of monastic or priestly celibacy. Wine is sacramental. Feasting is more common than fasting. The issue is not desire itself, because the rabbis recognize that desire is a constructive force in life. We read in a Midrash (Bereshit Rabbah 9:7) that the world would not exist but for desire, because without it, "no one would parent a child, build a house, or make a career."

But the picture changes drastically when desire is allowed to go unbridled. Without fences and limits, our otherwise healthy desires become a source of enslavement. Jewish tradition provides us with

many guidelines to help us restrain desire – you shall not kill; you shall not steal; you shall not commit adultery; you shall not covet.

Actually, these commandments of self-restraint are not enough to guide a spiritual life. As soon as we encounter rules, it seems to be human nature to find clever ways to gratify our desires even within the parameters of the rules.

For example, my family usually goes to Toronto for Passover. A bakery there sells “kosher for Passover” bagels made from matzah flour. It's as if bagels are a life-sustaining food, and to do without them even for a week would be torture beyond bearing. (Besides that in my humble gastronomic opinion, matzah bagels are a sorry impersonation of the real thing.) Matzah bagels fit within the rules of Passover, though the disciplined act of eating matzah is evaded.

The commentary by Nachmanides (Ramban) in the Torah portion called Kedoshim (Leviticus 19:1-20:27) brings out this idea very clearly. As we encountered in Lesson #3, kedoshim means “holiness,” and Ramban helps us understand why the Torah provides the all-encompassing guideline “You shall be holy.” He points out that “The Torah permits relations between husband and wife, and permits eating meat and drinking wine.” But then he cautions against the unconstrained indulgence in these permitted activities: “Somebody with strong desires can find the opportunity to be passionately addicted to sexual relations with his wife.... or to be a drunkard, or a glutton, or to speak obscenely – for none of these things is [technically] forbidden by the Torah.”

The result is that a person can become “sordid within the permissible realm of the Torah!” No laws are contravened, yet the person is “sordid.” The only thing that will save him or her is the development of personal self-restraint. Ramban's call is to develop personal *gevurah*, which means learning how to draw the line on our desires.

Internal Restraint

"How should a person habituate himself in the trait of gevurah?" begins a chapter in the kabbalistic Mussar book *Tomer Devorah*, by Rabbi Moshe Cordovero. He warns us that a force of gevurah is latent in the universe, and that when we overindulge our desires, the consequence is that this gevurah-energy is stirred up – and that may come down on us as severe judgment. The way to avoid that externally-imposed gevurah is to exercise our own capacity for internal gevurah, in other words, self-restraint.

This rule doesn't operate 100% of the time, as we know from the fact that wrong-doers sometimes do seem to get away with it in life. But it certainly describes some of my own experience of learning 'the hard way.' Sometimes the results come almost immediately: Lips that leak lies can set up instant disasters. Sometimes the severe judgment takes longer: My wife, a physician, treats smokers with lung cancer, and the judgment that arrives decades later is severe and ugly in the extreme.

There is no choice of whether gevurah will exist in your life. But where you *do* have choice is whether you prefer to exercise *internal* gevurah, in the form of self-restraint, or would rather be subjected to *external* gevurah according to the principles of justice that God built into the universe.

Personally, at this stage in my life, I wholeheartedly opt for self-restraint, and I urge you to do the same. It is not only the less painful choice, but in the end we gain something positive through the development of our own heroic qualities. We grow closer to the ideal version of who we truly are.

Self-restraint depends on self-awareness. When you know yourself accurately, it reveals those areas where you may have the capacity to exercise self-restraint. Desires can be very powerful, and so you also need to have a sense of whether simple self-restraint is likely to be

feasible or not. The Mussar way is to set out very small steps for yourself, because no one wins through failure. If you think you may have difficulty holding back totally, try cutting the goal in half.

When Rabbi Israel Salanter wanted to help the longshoremen of Danzig to become observant of Shabbat, he didn't ask them to stop working on that day. He only suggested that they stop smoking while they worked. Similarly, you may not be able to go cold-turkey on some habit, but it may be entirely within your power every second or third day to pass up whatever currently has you in its grip.

WORKSHOP

For this lesson, let's try applying Mussar to the world at large. This is an appropriate way to approach this particular soul-trait, since the issue of gevurah is so central to interpersonal relations. Although 'self-restraint' is not the only meaning of the term 'gevurah,' it is the one we are focusing on for our collective work here and so it is the basis for your homework assignment in this period as well.

The starting point for your assignment is to read the newspaper. Every day in this period, search for news stories that embody gevurah as self-restraint. Maybe you'll come upon a story about someone who returned a valuable, lost object rather than keep it for themselves. Or there may be a report about someone who blew the whistle on some corporate misbehavior rather than join in. These would be examples where people exercised self-restraint.

Unfortunately, newspapers tend to be much more interested in the opposite situation: pages are filled with lurid tales of sexual misconduct, greed and gluttony, all of which usually revolve around someone who did not restrain themselves from a certain action.

As you read and follow these stories that have a theme of gevurah, be on the lookout for one thing in particular: Identify the limits or 'lines' that were being respected or exceeded. What line did the person who

returned the lost object *not* cross? Or what is the line that the misbehaving politician did *not* observe?

That is enough of an assignment because it will sensitize you to how important boundaries are in life. But if you want to take on an "advanced" level of this practice, don't only look for the lines and limits that represent the framework of gevurah, also note some stories that depict external, severe gevurah (cause and effect).

Use your Accounting of the Soul Diary to record brief notes on one story per day. Note the lines that are there to be respected or breached, and the role gevurah plays in the story itself. Reflect on the story as a mirror for your own life. How does the line or boundary that shows up in the story relate to your circumstances and surroundings? Are you challenged to exercise self-restraint in this area, too? How do you perform?

As you approach the news stories and their characters through the perspective of gevurah, you'll find yourself reading the news differently from how you might have in the past. Here you will see how a Mussar perspective is equipping you with tools and a compass to aid your own navigation through the pathways of life.

And don't forget your morning affirmation key-phrase. Some suggestions are:

"Holding boundaries."

"Self-control is strength." (adapted from Ben Zoma, Avot 4: 1)