

Big Questions in Jewish Spirituality

UNIT 10



UNIT 10

What is the Purpose of Existence?

Unit Objectives

Students will be able to:

- Explain the connection between God's goodness and human responsibility.
- Distinguish between the concept of earned goodness and undeserved goodness, and the impact of each.
- Consider how living a life of Torah, *avodah*, and *gemilut chasadim* can lead to a life filled with purpose and meaning through emulating and partnering with God.
- Reflect on the importance of "*lishma*," performing good acts for their own sake and not for reward.
- Describe how Jewish tradition maintains that every soul is unique and that each person has an individual mission and contribution to make in this world.
- Reflect on the idea that everyone can choose to live a life of connection to God or a life of disconnection from God.



Introductory Essay

This essay, for the teacher, is meant to provide some context and walk the teacher through the main ideas in this unit.

Why are we here? Why did God create humanity, and why did God create ME? The age-old questions about the purpose of life have perplexed humanity for centuries. From ancient philosophers to contemporary thinkers, the quest to understand our existence and its ultimate aim remains relevant. In the Jewish tradition, we start our search by exploring the relationship between God's infinite goodness and human responsibility.

As we have explored in previous units, God (or *Ein Sof*) is infinite goodness. The nature of infinite goodness is to share that goodness. God is manifest in this world as benevolent and generous, constantly seeking to bestow blessings upon His creations. However, this Divine generosity is not merely about giving, but about giving in a way that the recipient can truly appreciate and benefit from.

While receiving goodness is inherently pleasurable, unearned goodness can paradoxically feel less fulfilling and even painful. If prestigious awards like the Nobel Prize or the Oscars were distributed by lottery rather than earned through merit, the value of these accolades would fall dramatically. More than that, the pride that one feels at being acknowledged for their achievements, can turn to a sense of shame when those accolades are unearned. Far from feeling good, feeling unworthy can be agonizing, even crippling. The premise of the sitcom "The Good Place" is that even the reward of paradise can feel like torture when unearned.

To fully experience and appreciate God's goodness, it is essential for individuals to feel and be worthy of what they receive. This worthiness is achieved through effort and dedication. The process of earning something instills a sense of value and accomplishment, making the reward all the more meaningful.

This is why God created an imperfect world, endowed us with free will, and invited us to be His partners in creation, tasking us with the work of *tikkun olam*, even when that work is difficult and at times painful. Imagine gifting a friend a puzzle. In order to spare your friend the effort and frustration of struggling to put the puzzle together, you decide to do the puzzle and even have it framed. Then you present your gift. While your intention might be good, the gift loses all of its meaning, because the sense of accomplishing a difficult task is inherent to the gift itself.

Another crucial aspect of maximizing God's goodness involves aligning our desires with God. This requires a deferment of our immediate gratifications and impulses, striving instead to fulfill the Divine will. This alignment is not about self-denial, but about seeking a higher purpose and ultimate fulfillment. It emphasizes the importance of holding back from receiving until one has genuinely earned it. This self-restraint and altruism lead to a deeper sense of fulfillment and alignment with God's will.

So how do we make ourselves worthy of the goodness we receive? *Pirkei Avot* tells us that Shimon HaTzaddik used to say "the world stands upon three things: the Torah, the *avodah*, and the practice of acts of loving kindness."

Torah: Engaging in lifelong learning and the study of Torah is fundamental. It represents a commitment to understanding God's teachings and the wisdom of our tradition and applying them in daily life.

Avodah (service): Jewish practice provides a framework for partnering with God to perfect creation through prayer, ritual worship, and ethical living. It creates a structure for fulfilling the Divine command to pursue justice and be holy as we act in the world.

Gemilut Chasadim (acts of kindness): Engaging in acts of loving-kindness without expecting anything in return fosters a sense of community and selflessness, reflecting and emulating God's unconditional love and generosity.

Living lives steeped in Torah, *avodah*, and *gemilut chasadim*, we connect to, serve, emulate, and ultimately partner with the Divine. This is the first step in becoming worthy of God's goodness, but we must also examine and refine our motivations. The principle of *lishma*, performing acts for their own sake without expecting reward, is pivotal.

Ultimately, the journey to find personal meaning and purpose involves recognizing that each soul is unique and consequently, each individual has a distinct mission and contribution to make in the world. This is demonstrated in the popular Hasidic story in which the character Rebbe Reb Zusha, on his deathbed, tells his students that he will not be asked in heaven why he was not someone else (like Moshe or Esther) but rather why he was not fully himself. This personal mission involves discovering and actualizing one's unique potential and purpose in alignment with Divine will.

In the Jewish tradition, the purpose of life is a profound interplay between Divine generosity and human responsibility. It is about earning worthiness through

effort, aligning human desires with the Divine, and making a unique contribution to the world. In fulfilling our Divine mission by bringing our unique Torah, *avodah*, and *gemilut chasadim* into the world and maximizing the goodness we do, we lead a life of ultimate purpose and meaning, steeped in the goodness God created us to share.

Key Ideas

These are the key ideas of the unit. This list can be used to ensure that all the key ideas are covered over the course of the lessons.

- God in His infinite goodness created the world and humanity to share the Divine goodness in the way that will be most beneficial to man.
- In order to fully receive God's goodness, man must earn and be worthy of the goodness through our efforts.
- Our actions should be for their own sake, *lishma*, not for the reward we might receive for them.
- Humanity can partner with and emulate God through Torah, *avodah*, and *gemilut chasadim* to make the world a better place.
- Each soul and each person are unique and have a unique contribution to make in this world. Therefore, each individual's purpose is unique.
- We have multiple choices along the way and some of our choices will lead to a meaningful journey while others might lead to spiritual pain and disconnection.
- On our paths, we need to constantly ask ourselves is this choice the right choice—does it serve a long-term goal or is it a matter of instant gratification?
- There are many things in the world which are not in our control. However, even when it comes to those forces, we do control our own reactions and perspectives.



Important Terms

These are terms that may come up in classroom discussions. It is important to have definitions on hand and to make sure that the teacher and students are talking about the same thing.

- **Torah** – Engaging in lifelong learning and the study of Torah is a fundamental pillar of Jewish life.
- **Avodah** – Literally, work or service. For our purposes, the term means serving God through prayer, ritual worship, and ethical living.
- **Gemilut Chasadim** – Literally, acts of kindness. Engaging in acts of loving-kindness without expecting anything in return is a fundamental Jewish value.
- **Lishma** – Literally, for its name. It means doing a mitzvah for its own sake, as opposed to an external motivation like prestige or wealth.



Classroom Activities

In order to get the most out of this unit, and to help students understand the key ideas, we suggest that teachers complete the classroom activities (unless otherwise indicated) in the order that they appear.

Trigger and Introduction – Question Generation

Ask students to brainstorm a list of questions about the following statement. Make sure to explain that you will not necessarily answer all of the questions.

“Each of us is unique. Even genetically identical twins are different. There are things only we can do, we who are, what we are, in this time, this place, and these circumstances. For each of us God has a task: work to perform, a kindness to show, a gift to give, love to share, loneliness to ease, pain to heal, or broken lives to help mend. Discerning that task, hearing... God’s call, is one of the great spiritual challenges for each of us.”

Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks, *Studies in Spirituality*, pp. 124-125

Some questions may include:

- How does Jewish tradition view the concept of a unique purpose or calling?
- What does it really mean to be unique?
- How can we “discern that task” or discover our unique role in life?
- Can understanding our unique role in life help us navigate the ups and downs of life?
- If I am unique and only have one role, can my role change over time?
- If so, how can I adapt to these changes?

Introductory Discussion

Using the Key Ideas as a guide, ask students if they have ever received unearned praise. Ask how that made them feel. Then ask them to recall a time when they put a huge effort into a task and were recognized for their efforts. Ask how that made them feel. Students should reach the conclusion that unearned goodness may feel uncomfortable or shameful, while receiving positive feedback after a lot of hard work makes us feel good.

Ask the class how we can be worthy of the infinite goodness that God gives us? Students will offer a lot of responses. If students do not suggest the ideas by themselves, introduce the concept of *lishma* as well as the idea that each one of us has an individual mission to fulfill.

You are Unique Text Study

In this text study, students will explore the idea that each individual is unique and important, and that each person has the tools to realize their own unique mission. Students will also understand that finding and actualizing one's unique mission takes consistent effort and is hard work—but it is exactly this hard work which makes us worthy of and deserving of Divine goodness. The handout can be found on page 12, following the unit conclusion.

Gallery Walk

At this point, students should have considered their own characters, their own strengths, and their potential for impact. This next activity gives students the chance to review what they have learned over the course of the previous 10 units (or be introduced in a limited way to topics they did not cover), reflect on those ideas, and ask questions. This activity serves not only as a review, but sets the stage for the journal activity in which students will craft a personal spiritual mission statement.

Materials and preparation needed:

- Post-it notes with different colors
- Posters prepared with different phrases (see below)
- Classroom divided into six stations

Each station will highlight a different idea which has been explored in this curriculum and will have a stack of post-it notes (ideally a different color for each station). At each station students will read a brief idea or text. They should write down their thoughts/response/questions to the text or idea on a post-it note and take it with them. When they have visited all the stations, they will each have a collection of post-its with their response to each topic.

List of stations:

Station #1: What is God

- God created the world in order to share Divine goodness.
- God, or *Ein Sof*, is infinite and has an infinite capacity to give goodness.
- God IS good.

Station #2: Creation

- God created the world, humanity, and individuals with purpose.

Station #3: The Soul

- God bestowed humans with a Divine soul, and each soul is unique.
- Our souls have different aspects (*nefesh, ruach, neshama*) and we can elevate them all through our choices.

Station #4: Relationships

- Seeing *tzelem Elokim* in ourselves and others allows us to create meaningful connections and relationships.
- All meaningful relationships require effort as well as doing things for the sake of the other and not for one's own needs.
- Our relationships with others can reflect our relationships with God, and vice versa.

Station #5: Mashiach

- The world is in a constant state of refinement.
- Each individual has a role in preparing the world for the *Mashiach*.

Station #6: Free Will

- In order for humanity to receive at the highest level, we need to earn the good we receive through our choices. Therefore, God endowed us with free will.
- We are not in control of everything, but we do control our perspective.
- Desire is a strong force in our lives and we can learn to control and overcome our desires in order to live lives of connection and meaning.

After completing the gallery walk, invite the students to sit back down in their seats for a discussion. They should share their notes from the post-its and discuss. Be prepared to add your own ideas to share with students. The students will hopefully end the gallery walk in a different place from where they were when they began the course. They will have some answered questions and many unanswered ones, some new knowledge and understandings, and other areas that they would like to pursue further. This can help frame the idea that achieving true spirituality is a lifelong pursuit, and they should be encouraged to continue to ask questions and continue to seek answers.

Concluding Spirituality Journal

Ask students to write a personal spiritual mission statement using "*Ani Maamin*" ("I believe") as the format. Tell them to include several (as many as they want) of the themes or ideas we have explored in their statement. They should be encouraged to use their recorded thoughts from the post-its.

Prompts:

- What unique attributes, strengths, or passions do you have and how can you use them to bring good to the world?
- What is the individual journey you are looking forward to pursuing?

HANDOUT

You Are Unique

Jewish tradition teaches that each individual soul is unique, and therefore each person is special. God created YOU individually with a unique purpose. In this text study, we will learn about this idea from some traditional sources, and explore how we might try to understand our own unique mission in this world.

Esther 4:14

כִּי אִם־הַחַרַּשׁ תַּחֲרִישִׁי בְּעַת הַזֹּאת רֹחַ וְהַצֵּלָה יַעֲמוּד לַיהוּדִים מִמְּקוֹם אַחֵר וְאֶת וּבֵית־אָבִיךָ תֵּאבְדוּ
וּמִי יוֹדֵעַ אִם־לֵעֵת כָּזֹאת הִנְעַת לַמְּלָכוֹת:

On the contrary, if you keep silent in this crisis, relief and deliverance will come to the Jews from another quarter, while you and your father's house will perish. And who knows, if it was for just such a moment that you came to this royal position?

Mordechai is trying to convince Esther that she must go to the King to try to save the Jews, but she is frightened to do so. He asks her a question that we can all ask ourselves: "Who knows if THIS MOMENT is the reason you are here?" Mordechai is telling Esther: no one else is in the precise position to ask the king for mercy.

None of us can know our exact mission—but we believe there is a mission, and we can live each day as if it is part of our mission.

Sanhedrin 37a

לפיכך נברא אדם יחידי ללמדך שכל המאבד נפש אחת מישראל מעלה עליו הכתוב כאילו איבד
עולם מלא וכל המקיים נפש אחת מישראל מעלה עליו הכתוב כאילו קיים עולם מלא.

Therefore, Adam the first man was created alone, to teach you that with regard

to anyone who destroys one soul from the Jewish people, i.e., kills one Jew, the verse ascribes him blame as if he destroyed an entire world (as Adam was one person, from whom the population of an entire world came forth). And conversely, anyone who sustains one soul from the Jewish people, the verse ascribes him credit as if he sustained an entire world.

Have you seen this quote before? If so, in what context?

Can this be applied or relevant outside of literally saving or destroying a life?

Avot 4:3

הוא היה אומר, אל תהי בז לכל אדם, ואל תהי מפליג לכל דבר, שאין לך אדם שאין לו שעה ואין לך דבר שאין לו מקום:

He used to say: do not despise or despair of any man, and do not discriminate against anything, for there is no man that has not his hour, and there is no thing that has not its place.

What does it mean that every man "has his hour?"

This Mishna is explaining that we should not write anyone off, because every person has their hour. How do you relate to this idea? Have you ever felt written off by someone?

Determining our unique mission

Step 1: What tools did God give you?

Rabbi Akiva Tatz – *The Thinking Jewish Teenager's Guide to Life*, pp. 79-80

If you were placed on a building site with a bag of tools by an intelligent foreman, all you need to do is look around and see what is being built in your immediate vicinity and what tools you have been given and you will know immediately what you should be doing. Obviously, you have been given exactly the tools you need for the job; life is not a joke—you have a task to accomplish and you have

definitely been given all you need to accomplish it. A careful examination of your place in the world and your personal character tools will give you a clear picture of who you are and what you must do ... Again, the tools match the job exactly. We understand that the One who creates the whole enterprise gives every individual exactly what he or she needs to carry out the work that is necessary.

Rabbi Yeruchom Levovitz, quoted in *Alei Shor, Vol I*, p. 146

. רק ע"י שמירת מעלותיו הקנויות אצלו בטבע בלבד זוכה אדם לכל שלמותו וזכותו, משום שבאמת כל יסוד עבודת האדם אינו אלא במעלות הטובות אשר הנם אצלו בטבע, שאם רק ישמור עליהן ויחזיק בהן כראוי שלא יזוז מטבעיו הטובים... כל אדם יש לו מעלה מיוחדת שהנה אצלו בטבע בתכלית הטוב, עד שבמעלה זו אינו משיג כלל את חברו המושחת ומקולקל, וכמו איש מתון שלועג על חברו המושחת במדה של כעס ומתכעס על כל דבר קטן, ולעומת זה חברו הכעסן יש לו מדה אחרת טובה שבמדה זו הוא הנהו מושחת. שלכל אדם ניתנה מדה ומעלה מיוחדת שעל-ידי מעלה זו ישנה ויהפך עצמו כולו לטוב, ובזה היא כל עבודתו שמתוך זה ישיג את כל שלמותו.

... Only through guarding the qualities that are already his naturally does a person become complete, because in truth the entire basis for a person's service is only the qualities that exist in him naturally. If he will only guard them and use them in the right way, never veering from his own essential nature, he will reach his ultimate completeness. Every person has a unique quality that is naturally so perfectly good that he cannot even understand another person who is defective in that respect. For instance, a naturally patient person will scoff at someone who has the defect of anger and gets angry about everything. And that person will have some other quality that the first is defective in. Every person is given some particular quality through which he can change himself to being fully good, and this comprises all of his work through which he will achieve his completeness ...

What are your strengths? This means talents, but also which middot or character traits come very naturally to you? These are your tools!

Step 2: What are you passionate about?

Netziv, HaEmek Davar, Bamidbar, 15:41

ואם בא אדם לשאול איזהו דרך ישרה שיבחור לו ... ע"ז אמר קהלת והלך בדרכי לבך. מה שלבו נמשך אחריו. ברור שמזלו חזי כי זה ענין טוב לפי כח נפשו.

If a person asks what is the path that he should choose for himself (in his study or performance of Mitzvot) the answer is found in Kohelet/Ecclesiastes: "Walk in the paths of your heart." What your heart is pulled after is clearly what your soul perceives to be good for you.

*What are you most passionate about? What is your heart "pulled after?"
What can you accomplish in the world through your passions?*

Step 3: Perfection/Tikkun starts with yourself

Rabbi Shlomo Wolbe, Alei Shur, Vol. I, p. 146 (continued from above)

ומסתמא מעמקי היצירה היא שהותאם אופי כל אדם לתעודתו בחיים כך, שדווקא מעלתו הטבעית המיוחדת תוכל להכריע את המדה הרעת השרשית אשר בו. מי שהצליח לעמוד על מעלתו העקרית ועל השחתתו העקרית זכה לדבר גדול; מעתה הוא יודע, מה ה' אלקיו דורש ממנו.

One of the deepest secrets of creation is that each person's nature fits his individual task, such that his best natural qualities or tendencies can aid him in correcting his greatest faults. One who understands both their greatest strengths and their greatest flaws has merited greatly; he now knows what God intends for him (namely, to use one's strengths to help correct for one's flaws).

Now go back to the first source, from Megillat Esther. What will be YOUR "Mi Yodeah" or "Who knows" moment?