

Big Questions in Jewish Spirituality

UNIT 2



UNIT 2

What is God?

Unit Objectives

Students will be able to:

- Explain that while God is unknowable to humans, there are frameworks which help us to relate to and connect with God.
- Consider the concepts of *Ein Sof* and *Ohr Ein Sof*.
- Reflect on how they can connect, relate to, experience, and emulate 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.

Belief in God is the cornerstone of Jewish thought and indeed, Judaism revolutionized the world with the introduction of monotheism. The belief in one omnipotent, omniscient God who created the world and continues to sustain the world is foundational to not only Judaism, but the major world religions. But is it possible to actually know God? God is utterly incomparable to man or any other creation. God is transcendent, existing outside of time and space. In *Yeshayahu* 40:25, God asks **“To whom will you compare Me, and I will be similar to him?”** Despite this, the Torah and later the Talmud certainly speak about aspects or attributes of God, most notably with the 13 Attributes of Mercy presented to Moshe at *Har Sinai*.

The human tendency to anthropomorphize God—giving Him an age, gender, or physical features—often leads to an inaccurate perception of the Divine. This imagery, heavily influenced by Greek mythology and Western art, is not only an oversimplification but also a fundamental distortion of truth. The Torah frequently speaks of God’s body parts—eyes, nose, mouth, ears, face, hands, arms, and back. However, Chazal emphasize that **“הַתּוֹרָה דְּבָרָה כְּלָשׁוֹן בְּנֵי אָדָם”**—the Torah speaks in human terms to aid understanding.

Yet, if we allow ourselves or our students to remain tethered to these physical representations, we risk more than just misunderstanding—we risk developing a relationship with something that is not God at all. Seeking a relationship with a mental image rather than with the infinite, unknowable Divine can lead to unhealthy spirituality and a misguided sense of faith. There is a famous Chassidic story about a great rabbi who told an atheist, “The God you don’t believe in, I don’t believe in either.” He recognized that many people’s rejection of God stems from rejecting a false, human-constructed image rather than engaging with the true concept of God’s transcendence.

The Rambam (Maimonides), in an attempt to prevent the prevalence of the anthropomorphic understanding of God, promoted a rigid approach of negative theology, asserting that we can only describe God by what He is not, as any affirmative descriptions are inherently flawed. Because God is utterly unique and transcendent,

any positive descriptions or attributes we apply to God can be misleading. Rambam emphasizes that when we speak of God, it is more accurate to describe God in terms of what He *is not* rather than what He *is*.

While this approach preserves God's transcendence, it also presents a challenge—how can we form a meaningful connection with a God who is beyond all comprehension?

We can look to different Jewish traditions to grapple with this tension. The Kabbalistic concept of *Ein Sof*, a name for God which literally means “without end” or “infinite,” represents the unknowable, transcendent, and infinite aspect of God, which defies any description. The term, *Ohr Ein Sof* (Infinite Light), expands upon this idea further. *Ohr Ein Sof* describes the boundless and unknowable light of God, which is also beyond human understanding. It represents the energy flowing from the Divine, sustaining and filling the universe and originating all things. The Kabbalah tells us that it is only when the *Ein Sof* contracted through a process called *tzimtzum*, the universe was created. This contraction also introduced imperfection into the world.

This very imperfection creates the possibility for human involvement to seek to perfect it, a process known as *tikkun*. This underscores the vital role humans play, suggesting a dynamic interaction between the Divine and creation. (These ideas are explored in length in Unit 3 – Why Was the World Created?) Through the concept of *Ein Sof*, we acknowledge that though God is essentially unknowable, there is so much we can understand about the world and our place in the world through this understanding of God.

While we can't know the complete essence of God, we can come to know His attributes. In *Sefer Shemot*, God shares with Moshe His 13 Attributes of Mercy. Through the 13 attributes, we can engage with God and His manifestation in this world. This engagement allows us to connect to God, to emulate God, and to feel a sense of meaningful partnership with God.



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 is at once transcendent and immanent; unknowable and relatable.
- The 13 Attributes of God and the concept of *Ein Sof* can help us understand and emulate Him.
- We are partners with God in the ongoing process of perfecting creation.
- It is important to evaluate and adjust our understanding of God and our relationship with God throughout our lives.

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.

- ***Ein Sof*** – literally “without end” or “limitless,” this name for God, used in Kabbalistic texts, is used to explain the idea that God is limitless and beyond comprehension. Though the *Ein Sof* is the source of everything, it itself is boundless and without limits or restrictions. God created the world without being bound by the world.
- ***Ohr Ein Sof*** – literally “the infinite light.” It refers to the limitless, Divine Light of God that existed before the creation of the world. God, or *Ein Sof*, is infinite and beyond comprehension. The *Ohr Ein Sof* is the expression of God’s endless, formless, and infinite presence. It is through the process of *tzimtzum* (contraction) that God made room for the finite universe within this Infinite Light.

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 Activity - 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.

I am Hashem your God; אנכי ה' אלקיך

Some questions may include:

- What is God?
- Do we all have to have the same understanding of God?
- How do we know God exists?
- Can I follow the Torah if I am not sure that God exists?
- Let's say I accept that God exists, what does that have to do with me?
- What does it mean to have a relationship with God or to know God?
- How can I experience God in my life?

Divine Imagery Activity

In this activity, students will reflect on their own understanding of God and examine how God has been portrayed in various forms of culture throughout history, including art, music, and literature. They will also analyze statements in the Torah where God is described using anthropomorphic terms.

It is critical for students to understand that the Torah explicitly prohibits making representations of God, as this fundamentally misrepresents the Divine. None of the physical imagery or anthropomorphization of God truly represents what God is. Relying on these depictions risks developing a deeply distorted sense of God. If we seek a relationship with a depiction, or even a fixed mental image of God, we are not truly relating to God but rather to a limited, human-

constructed concept. This confines our connection to something finite, rather than allowing us to engage with the infinite reality of Hashem. Any attempt to depict God is inherently limiting and potentially damaging to our understanding of Hashem. This is why the Torah commands us not to create images of God—to ensure that our relationship remains with Hashem Himself and not with a representation.

Despite this, the Rambam explains that “**people do not easily conceive existence unless in connection with a body.**” Humans naturally seek ways to understand and relate to God, and metaphorical language can serve as a valuable tool in fostering that connection. The Torah uses metaphors to help us grasp aspects of God’s relationship with the world. These metaphors should be understood as teaching tools, not as literal descriptions.

In this activity, students will examine these cultural representations, not as accurate depictions of God, but as human attempts to conceptualize the Divine. The goal is to understand the impact of these portrayals while maintaining the fundamental Jewish principle that God cannot and should not be depicted in any physical form.

Step 1: In their spirituality journals, students will reflect on their own understanding of God. How do they understand/imagine God? What cultural or other influences have shaped their understanding of God? How has that understanding changed over time? Have they ever had an experience that caused their understanding of God to change?

Step 2: Students review several different portrayals of God in art, poetry, literature etc. and reflect on their reactions to and feelings towards those portrayals. For each portrayal, students should ask themselves what this portrayal conveys about God.

- *The Creation of Adam* - Michelangelo (fresco, 1511)
- *The Ancient of Days* - William Blake (art, 1794)
- *One of Us* - Joan Osborne (song, 1995)
- *Prince of Egypt clip* - voice of God

Step 3: Students review several sections from Torah where God is presented in anthropomorphic ways. Again, for each, students should ask themselves what this portrayal conveys about God.

- *Shemot 4:14* וַיַּחַרְאֲף ה' בַּמֶּשֶׁה
- *Bereshit 6:8* וַנַּח מִצָּא חַן בְּעֵינֵי ה'
- *Bamidbar 11:1* וַיְהִי הָעַם כְּמִתְאַנְנִים רַע בְּאָזְנֵי ה' וַיִּשְׁמַע ה' וַיַּחַר אַפּוֹ
- *Shemot 33:23* וַהֲסַרְתִּי אֶת־כַּפִּי וְרָאִיתָ אֶת־אַחֲרַי וּפְנֵי לֹא יֵרְאוּ
- *Bamidbar 12:8* פֶּה אֶל־פֶּה אֲדַבְרֶיבּ
- *Bereshit 6:6* וַיִּנְחַם ה' כִּי־עָשָׂה אֶת־הָאָדָם בָּאָרֶץ וַיִּתְעַצֵּב אֶל־לֵבּוֹ

Step 4: Students are presented with the midrashic statement (as presented in the *Moreh Nevuchim*) **דברה תורה כלשון בני אדם** and have a short discussion around this idea to try to understand why each of the portrayals was used in step 3. Students will reflect on how these portrayals might add to or detract from their understanding of, and connection to God.

רמבם מורה נבוכים: חלק א', כ"ו

כבר ידעת אמרתם הכוללת למיני הפרושים כולם התלויים בזה הענין, והוא אמרם "דברה תורה כלשון בני אדם". ענין זה - כי כל מה שאפשר לבני אדם כולם הבנתו וציורו בתחלת המחשבה, הוא אשר שם ראוי לאלוה ית'. ולזה יתואר בתארים מורים על הגשמות להורות עליו שהוא ית' נמצא. כי לא ישיגו ההמון בתחלת המחשבה מציאות כי אם לגשם בלבד, ומה שאינו גשם או נמצא בגשם אינו נמצא אצלם.

You, no doubt, know the Talmudical saying, which includes in itself all the various kinds of interpretation connected with our subject. It runs thus: "The Torah speaks according to the language of man," that is to say, expressions, which can easily be comprehended and understood by all, are applied to the Creator. Hence the description of God by attributes implying corporeality, in order to express His existence: because the multitude of people do not easily conceive existence unless in connection with a body, and that which is not a body nor connected with a body has for them no existence.

Why does the Torah speak about God in this fashion if it could lead to misunderstandings? Is it helpful for your ability to understand God to consider these images/depictions? Do you find any of the above images or depictions particularly helpful (or not) in your understanding of God?

Step 5: Many rabbis discuss the importance of continually revisiting and adjusting our conceptions of God. As children, we each likely had a specific idea of what or who God is—an idea that served our needs at the time. However, if we don't work to change these conceptions, and build a more sophisticated understanding of God, then we will be left with the ideas of a child—ideas that likely won't satisfy our more sophisticated religious and intellectual needs as adults. Ask your students to think about this idea and reflect on how their own images of God have evolved over time and how those evolving images have been necessary or otherwise served them at different moments in their lives.

Thinking about the Divine – Text Study and Discussion

Using Jewish texts, students learn about Ohr Ein Sof and the 13 Attributes of God. In the previous activity, students considered different depictions of God and the importance of reframing our own understanding of God at different times. Now, they will be introduced to two concepts to consider in their ongoing journey of understanding God. Ohr Ein Sof will highlight God's infinity and the gap between humans and the Divine, while the idea of attributes will show that despite the gap between humanity and God, humans can emulate God.

1. Rav Chaim Vital, opening chapter of *Etz Chaim*

Know that before the emanations were emanated and the creations were created, there was a supernal, simple light filling all of existence. There was no vacant space... rather, all was filled with that simple, endless light. There was no beginning and no end; rather, all was one simple light, with a single equivalence. This is what is called the *Ohr Ein Sof*.

Why do you think the idea of light is used to represent the Divine presence in the world? What do you think is meant by the idea that the "simple light filled all of existence?"

2. Rabbi Yehuda Ashlag, Ba'al Hasulam, *Introduction to Ha-Sulam*, Chapter 1

[His light] can be compared to the light of the sun, which can be viewed only through tinted lenses, which reduce its light and render it suitable for the eyes' faculty of sight... lower beings would be unable to apprehend God's light were it not covered...

*Why do you think the Ba'al Hasulam uses the tinted lenses metaphor?
Do you think it is helpful? Why or why not?*

3. The 13 Attributes of Mercy/*Middot Rachamim*

This text appears in tachanun, selichot, on Yom Kippur, and elsewhere, depending on custom. It is based on Shemot 34: 6-7.

ה' ה' אֵל רַחוּם וְחַנוּן אַרְךְּ אַפַּיִם וְרַב חֶסֶד וְאֱמֶת: נֹצַר חֶסֶד לְאַלְפִים נִשָּׂא עוֹן וְפָשַׁע וְחַטָּאָה וְנִקְיָה

The Lord, the Lord, a God compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in kindness and faithfulness, extending kindness to the thousandth generation, forgiving iniquity, transgression, and sin, and pardoning.

Does this list of behaviors help you understand God? How?

Which idea (Ohr Ein Sof or the 13 Attributes) do you relate to more? Is it possible to understand God through both lenses at the same time?

4. Rabbi Moshe Cordovero, the Ramak, *Tomer Devorah* Chapter 1

That it is fitting for a person to resemble his Creator. It is fitting for a person to resemble his Creator... As if he is alike in his body but not in his actions, he betrays the Form; and they will say about him, "A lovely form, but ugly deeds." As behold, the essence of the Highest Image and Likeness is His actions. And what will it benefit him to have the structure of his limbs like the Highest Form, but not resemble his Creator in his actions? Therefore, it is fitting that he should [make his actions] resemble the actions of the Crown (*Keter*), which are the thirteen highest traits of mercy. And they are hinted to in the secret of the verses (*Micha 7:18-20*), "Who is a power like You; He will again have mercy on us; You shall give truth." If so, it is fitting that these thirteen traits [also] be found in man.

How does the Ramak understand "tzelem Elokim?"

What do you think we can gain by emulating God's attributes?

Activity: Walking in the Ways of God

Students will learn about the 13 Attributes of Mercy (*Middot Ha-Rachamim*) with two goals in mind. First, students can appreciate the framework as a way of gaining a better understanding of God. Second, students can consider how they might be able to emulate a specific Divine trait and thereby bring more Godliness into the world.

Step 1: Begin by sharing the following 2 texts with the class and discuss—what does it mean “walk in God’s ways?” How do we know what to emulate?

Devarim 28:9

יְקִימָךְ ה' לֹא לְעַם קָדוֹשׁ כַּאֲשֶׁר נִשְׁבַּעְתָּ לָךְ כִּי תִשְׁמֹר אֶת־מִצְוֹת ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ וְהִלַּכְתָּ בְּדַרְכָיו

God has established you as a Holy nation as He made an oath to you if you will keep the commandments of God and Walk in His ways.

Midrash Sifri Devarim 49

וכי היאך איפשר לו לאדם לקרא בשמו של מקום? אלא נקרא המקום רחום אף אתה היה רחום הקדוש ברוך הוא נקרא חנון אף אתה היה חנון

Now how is it possible for a man to be called by the name of the Holy One Blessed be He? But, (the intent is) just as the Lord is called “merciful” you too should be merciful. Just as God is called ‘gracious’ so too you should act with grace...

Step 2: Introduce the 13 Attributes (below). This activity uses the 13 Attributes that appear in *Shemot* 34: 6-7. Alternatively, you can use the 13 attributes based on *Micha* 7:18-20, the text that opens the *tashlich* prayers. The Ramak provides a comprehensive discussion of each attribute in chapter 1 of *Tomer Devorah*.

Step 3: Students should read each attribute and think about how these attributes relate to their understanding of God and how they experience God in the world.

Step 4: After reading and reflecting on each attribute, ask students to select 2-3

attributes. Tell them to write one specific way they can work on each of their selected attributes in their personal development or in their interactions with others. This exercise aims to help students integrate a conceptual framework into tangible actions that contribute to their spiritual growth.

The 13 Attributes of Mercy

Hashem (God) – God’s name appears twice to show that God’s mercy is constant and unchanging even though He knows that mistakes will be made in the future.

Hashem (God) – God is merciful even after a person sins. He gives us time to repent and accepts our repentance.

El (God) – This name denotes the all-encompassing power of God. Even though He can destroy us when angry, God holds His power back and is merciful.

Rachum (Compassionate) – God is filled with compassion and love for humanity, and as a result, he does not put people into situations of extreme temptation and eases the punishment of the guilty.

V’Chanun (Gracious) – God is good to us even when we do not deserve it.

Erech Apayim (Slow to anger) – God is slow to anger, giving us the time to reflect and improve our behavior.

V’Rav Chesed (Abundant in Kindness) – God bestows infinite goodness all the time.

V’Emet (Truth) – God sticks to His word and rewards efforts to improve ourselves.

Notzer Chesed La’Alafim (Preserver of kindness for thousands of generations) – God rewards righteous and self-improving behavior even through further generations.

Noseh Avon (Forgiver of iniquity) – God forgives, He removes sins from the intentional sinner if he is making an effort to improve.

U'Pesha (Forgiver of willful sin) – God forgives even those who rebel and purposely anger Him—they are given the opportunity to repent and improve.

V'Chatah (Forgiver of mistakes) – God forgives sins that derived from our carelessness or apathy.

V'Nakeh (Who cleanses) – If we recognize our mistakes and strive to improve, God erases these mistakes as if they didn't exist.

Activity - Finding the Divine Light in the World

We are commanded to be holy, because God is holy. We look at the way God rules the universe and seek out ways to imitate God's ways. It is easiest to imitate God when we feel most strongly connected to the Divine. Sometimes that connection is easy. At moments of profound beauty or joy, a connection to God can be very accessible. At other times God can feel very distant, perhaps even absent.

The ideas and metaphors we have learned in this unit help us to understand that those moments of strong connection may be moments where the Divine Light is more prominent, while the moments of distance from God may be moments where the Divine Light is not as accessible or is hidden. Looking at the world, we may be able to easily spot the Divine Light in some places, while in others, we may have to work to uncover the light. This activity asks students to search for both places in their world—to seek out the Divine Light where it shines brightly, as well as identify the places where it may seem hidden that offer us the opportunity to bring Godliness into the world.

Over the course of a week, ask students to create a photo presentation of:

1. Where they feel a sense of Divine Light or God's presence in the world. It could be in natural elements, everyday interactions, or anything else that they find meaningful and spiritual.
2. Where it seems like the Divine Light is hidden, and where there is the opportunity for us as humans to elevate and restore the light?

At the end of the week, ask students to share their photo presentation and discuss as a class how these reflections altered or deepened their perceptions of the Divine in everyday life.

Spirituality Journal Entry #2

Close the unit by asking students to again write in their spirituality journals. They can respond to one or more of the prompts below or write about whatever has moved them during this unit:

- Did you ever imagine God in human or physical form? If so, why did you imagine God in that way? Do you think that conception of God was helpful or harmful to your relationship or connection to God? Why?
- Imagine that someone asks you to explain your understanding of God to them. What would you say?
- What are ways in which you experience or feel God in the world?
- What does God mean to you?