

Big Questions in Jewish Spirituality

UNIT 3



UNIT 3

Why Was the World Created?

Unit Objectives

Students will be able to:

- Explore the idea that God created the world with purpose.
- Define the concept of *tzimtzum*.
- Explain how *tzimtzum* provides a foundation for the concept of *tikkun olam*.

NOTES:

- Due to the complexity of the ideas in this unit, this unit may require more frontal teaching than other units.
- In the introductory essay, we use human language to discuss God. We do so not to limit an infinite God, but rather to help us in our understanding of Him.
- In this unit, there are activities relating to creativity. Please be mindful of the fact that some students may not believe that they are creative, while others may not want to share that they are due to peer pressure or social anxiety/feeling rejection.



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 did God create the world? It's a profound question that some (for example, the Rambam) say we can't fully understand. Those who hold this opinion believe that God is beyond our comprehension, so it's impossible to know why God does anything. But many other leading scholars suggest that despite this theological difficulty, we can still learn a lot by asking the question and searching for answers.

Throughout this unit, we'll explore several reasons for why God created the world, including:

- To bestow goodness upon humanity
- For humanity to know, understand, and ultimately love the Divine
- For humanity to glorify the Divine

Let's delve deeper into these ideas. A prevalent viewpoint—echoed by thinkers like Rabbi Moshe Chaim Luzzatto, the Ramchal—suggests that God created the world out of infinite goodness to share true goodness with His creations. True altruism

involves sharing good with others, hence God created everything—the world, people, their bodies, souls, and capacity for experience—to share His goodness with. However, it is a bit more complicated than God simply sharing His goodness.

Getting something—all the goodness in the universe—when we didn't earn it doesn't actually make us feel good about ourselves. Getting something undeserved brings with it a kind of shame (this is often called the "bread of shame"), whereas getting the exact same thing when earned gives us the of feeling pride. If we do not work for God's goodness that we have already received—if we have not earned it some way—we will feel ashamed.

So how do we earn this goodness? In order to make sure that we have the capacity to earn His goodness, God created humans with free will. We can choose to align our actions with His will, drawing close to God, or we can decide to follow our own temptations and distance ourselves from God. This links the idea of creation directly with humanity's role in the world—the main aim of this unit.

Another approach is that the world was created by God for His honor. This is based on *Yeshayahu* 43:7, "כל הנקרא בשמי ולכבודי בראתיו", **All who are linked to My name, I have created them for my glory.**" In fact, Jewish texts and liturgy are full of references to the ways in which creation is shown as a manifestation of God's glory, and its creatures are meant to glorify the Creator.

Still other sages focus on the importance of knowing God as reflected in the verse from *Yirmiyahu* 9:23, "כי אם־בזאת יתהלל המתהלל השכל וידע אותי", **But only in this should one glory: In knowing and understanding Me.**"

There is a kabbalistic idea that suggests that God withdrew His infinite presence to create space for the finite universe (*tzimtzum*). This idea can help us to understand our imperfect world and why it was created: humanity would not have been able to improve a perfect world, but we can try to work towards perfection. Thus, the world serves as a platform for humanity to engage in acts of *mitzvot* and righteousness, fulfilling their purpose of working for—putting in the effort to be worthy of—the goodness bestowed by God. This is *tikkun olam*, the ongoing process of repairing the world and revealing God's presence.

Throughout this unit, students are encouraged to delve into the profound reasons behind God's creation of the world. This can empower teens to consider their role in the world and their relationship with the Divine, laying the groundwork for further exploration in subsequent units.



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 created the world for a reason.
- *Tzimtzum* is the contraction of God. It is the idea that God is *Ohr Ein Sof*, Infinite Spiritual Light, and that He had to “contract” Himself to make space for the creation of the world. Since the *Ohr Ein Sof* was everywhere, the only way to have the space for creation was to draw back or to limit that light to make room for something else.
- The idea of *tzimtzum* helps explain an imperfect world, suggesting that this imperfection is intentional, allowing for human participation in its improvement. In a perfect world, there would be no motivation to seek change or growth. However, If there is just a little darkness it can inspire us to bring light into the world.
- Engaging in *tikkun olam* is a tangible expression of our connection to God, contributing to the fulfillment of the world’s purpose. Each individual plays a crucial role in revealing God’s presence in the world through acts of goodness, understanding, and glorification of the Divine.

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.

- **Bread of Shame** – a term referring to the shame and discomfort humans feel when they receive something without earning it. This underscores the value of earning God’s goodness through our choices and actions.

- **Tzimtzum** – literally, contraction. The idea that God is *Ohr Ein Sof*, and that He had to “contract” Himself to make space for the creation of the world.
- **Tikkun Olam** – the Jewish concept of “repairing the world,” emphasizing the human responsibility to improve and perfect the world.

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.

God created the world and humanity with a purpose.

Some questions may include:

- What was the purpose of creation?
- How did God create the world?
- Did God NEED to create the world?
- What do we mean by creation?
- Is creation a process with a beginning and an end? Is it just infinite?
- If God is perfect, why or how would God need to create the world?
- Is it actually possible for humans to understand why God created the world?
- What does God want from humanity?
- How does God’s purpose relate to each individual’s purpose or meaning in life?

Thought Exercise: Designing an Imaginary World

In this activity, students pretend that they are authors/designers and think about how they would design a fictional world. This activity helps jumpstart thinking about creation itself.

Step 1: Begin by introducing the concept of an imaginary world—a world like in the Harry Potter or Star Wars universes. Though fictional, these worlds are very comprehensive, with the smallest details thought through. Explain that in this activity students will act as authors/designers and they will create fictional worlds.

Step 2: Give students about 10 minutes to write/draw about their fictional world. They can focus on physical characteristics, inhabitants, governing laws, or anything special to make the world unique.

Step 3: Ask students to reflect on their motivations for creating their specific world and facilitate a discussion. Why did they choose this world? Why did they choose this type of inhabitant? This type of rule? Conclude with a discussion/acknowledgement about the complexity of creation and explain that in this unit you will be exploring both the reasons for creation as well as its implications for humanity.

Introducing *Tzimtzum* - Light and Darkness

Turn off the lights in your classroom and make it as dark as possible. Light a candle and discuss how its light is visible in the darkness. Then turn on the light, or open windows to allow in sunlight, and ask students to talk about how they see the candlelight. Though the light is still there, it is more difficult to see and it does not have the same effect.

This demonstration can help explain the concept of *tzimtzum* and how it relates to creation. If there is a bright room, it is difficult to see a candle burning. Similarly, if God's presence filled the whole world, it would be difficult to see anything else. You can share that this metaphor can help explain a concept in Kabbalistic thought called *tzimtzum*. *Tzimtzum* occurs when God contracts His infinite light to make space for the finite world and finite beings.

The Purpose of Creation – Text Study and Discussion

Why did God create the world? Utilizing the sources below, facilitate a group discussion on the purpose of creation. There are six excerpts—use some or all of the sources.

1) Rambam (Maimonides), *Moreh Nevuchim/Guide for the Perplexed*, Part III 13:2

Rambam explains that we really cannot answer the question of why God created the world (and mankind) other than to say that it was His Will.

But of those who accept our theory that the whole Universe has been created from nothing, some hold that the inquiry after the purpose of the creation is necessary, and assume that the Universe was only created for the sake of man's existence, that he might serve God. Everything that is done they believe is done for man's sake; even the spheres move only for his benefit, in order that his wants might be supplied... Those who hold this view, namely, that the existence of man is the object of the whole creation, may be asked whether God could have created man without those previous creations, or whether man could only have come into existence after the creation of all other things. If they answer in the affirmative, that man could have been created even if, e.g., the heavens did not exist, they will be asked what is the object of all these things, since they do not exist for their own sake but for the sake of something that could exist without them? Even if the Universe existed for man's sake and man existed for the purpose of serving God, as has been mentioned, the question remains: What is the point of serving God? He does not become more perfect if all His creatures serve Him and comprehend Him as far as possible; nor would He lose anything if nothing existed beside Him. It might perhaps be replied that the service of God is not intended for God's perfection; it is intended for our own perfection—it is good for us, it makes us perfect. But then the question might be repeated: What is the point of our being perfect? We must in continuing the inquiry as to the purpose of the creation at last arrive at the answer: It was the Will of God, or His Wisdom decreed it; and this is the correct answer.

2) Rabbi Saadiah Gaon, *Emunot V'Deot*, First Section 5:1

Rabbi Saadiah Gaon explores the reasoning behind God's creation. The first answer suggests that unlike humans, for whom working without a purpose might seem pointless, for God, creating without a specific reason highlights His transcendence. The second answer points to God's desire to showcase His wisdom to humanity, demonstrating His power and capabilities. The third answer focuses on the benefits to the creatures themselves, implying that God's guidance and the opportunity to serve Him are in themselves reasons for creation. Finally, he addresses the question of timing in creation, suggesting that time, as we understand it, does not constrain God, and that beings with free will (like God) can choose their actions freely, including the timing of those actions.

ואולי יחשב: לאי זו עלה ברא הבורא אלה הנמצאות? ובזה שלש תשובות. הראשונה שנאמר בראם לא לעלה, ולא יהיה עם זה לבהלה, כי האדם יהיה פועל לבטלה, כשהוא פועל ללא עלה, מפני שהוא מניח תועלתו, וזה מרומם מהבורא. והשנית שרצה בזה להראות החכמה ולגלותה, וכמו שאמר (תהלים קמ"ה י"ב) להודיע לבני האדם גבורותיו. והשלישית רצה בזה תועלת הברואים, במה שמנהיגם בו ויעבדוהו, וכאשר אמר (ישעיה מ"ח י"ז) אני יי' אלקיך מלמדך להועיל מדריךך בדרך תלך. ואם יאמר למה לא בראם קודם הזמן הזה? נאמר כי לא היה זמן שנשאל עליו, ועוד כי זה דרך כל בעל בחירה שיעשה בכל עת שירצה:

And perhaps one might wonder: For what purpose did the Creator create these existences? There are three answers to this. The first is that it's said He created them without a purpose, and there should be no alarm at this, for a human might work in vain when they work without a purpose, because they set aside their benefit, but this is not true of the Creator. The second reason is that He wished to demonstrate and reveal His wisdom, as it is said (*Tehillim* 145:12) "to make known to the sons of men His mighty acts." The third reason is for the benefit of the creatures, in what He guides them in and they serve Him, as it is said (*Yeshayahu* 48:17) "I am the Lord your God, who teaches you to profit, who leads you in the way you should go." And if one might say, why did He not create them before this time? It is said that there was no time to be asked about, and moreover, this is the way of all beings with the power of choice, to act at any time they wish.

3) Rabbi Yehuda Ashlag, Ba'al Hasulam, *Matan Torah*, First Discourse: The Giving of the Torah 6

Rabbi Ashlag argues that the purpose of creation is for us to observe the Torah, and as we do, we will ultimately reach a spiritual level where we are connected to God. You can relate this back to the definition of spirituality in Unit 1 - What is Spirituality. (The idea of dveikut is explored in another unit).

But when we fully understand the essence of the Torah and the commandments that were given us and their desirable outcome to the degree that the sages have instructed us, which is the purpose of the entire great creation that is laid before our eyes, we shall understand everything. The sages have instructed us that the world has been created only for the sake of observing the Torah and the commandment... This perfection is expressed in the words of the Torah, the prophets and of the sages using the simple term "cleaving" (דבקות). We deduce with our words that the ultimate purpose of creation is that the lowly created beings would be able, by observing the Torah and the commandments, to gradually rise up and evolve until they will merit to cleave to their blessed Creator.

4) Rabbi Aryeh Kaplan, in his introduction to *Sefer HaBahir / The Book of Illumination*, pp. xxi-xxii

Rabbi Aryeh Kaplan explains how tzimtzum demonstrates how creating an imperfect world allowed space for human independence, creativity, and growth.

In its literal sense, the concept of *tzimtzum* is straightforward. God first "withdrew" His Light, forming a vacated space, in which all creation would take place.... Virtually all the later Kabbalists warn that the *tzimtzum* is not to be taken literally, since it is impossible to apply any spatial concept to God. Rather, this is speaking in a conceptual sense, since if God filled every perfection, man would have no reason to exist. God therefore constricted His infinite perfection, allowing a "place" for man's free will and accomplishment.

5) Rabbi Chaim Friedlander, *Siftei Chaim, Emunah & Bechirah*, Vol. II, p. 57

Rabbi Friedlander talks about bread of shame, and how people need to work to prove they are worthy of receiving the goodness of God.

נמצא איפוא, שאחד מטעמי הבחירה: כדי שהאדם יקבל את ההטבה מהקב"ה בשלימות ללא רגש של בושה. ודאי, הקב"ה היה יכול לברוא עולמו ללא עבודת הבחירה וללא עמל ויגיעה, אבל אז האדם היה מרגיש רגשי בושה שמקבל בחנם ולא בזכות, וע"י הבחירה בין הטוב והרע שיעבוד ויעמול בתורה ומצוות לא יחוש שמקבל מתנת חנם, אלא הרגשה שמגיעה לו ההטבה, כדוגמת בעל המלאכה שאיננו בוש לקבל שכר עבודתו, כיון שהוא טרח במלאכה א"כ מגיע לו, כך האדם ע"י הבחירה לא יהיו לו רגשי בושה בקבלת השכר...

We find, therefore, that one of the purposes of free will is that a person will accept goodness from God without any feeling of embarrassment. Surely God could have created His world without the necessity for man to exercise free choice or to work and toil, but then man would feel ashamed that he is receiving a reward as a handout and not because he deserved it. By choosing between good and evil, as well as toiling in Torah and *mitzvot*, he will not feel that he is receiving a free gift. Rather he is earning the goodness, just as a worker is not embarrassed to accept payment for his work, since he has earned [compensation] through his workmanship. Similarly, through exercising free will, a person will not be ashamed when accepting his reward.

6) Rabbi Moshe Chaim Luzzatto, *Ramchal, Derech Hashem*, 1:2:1- 1:3:2

The Ramchal explains that God created the world in order to bestow goodness, and for that good to be absolute, those receiving the goodness must earn it.

The purpose of creation: See that the purpose of creation was to give from His goodness, may He be blessed, to another besides Him...His wisdom therefore decreed that the nature of this true benefaction be His giving created things the opportunity to attach themselves to Him to the greatest degree possible for them...God's wisdom, however, decreed that for such good to be perfect, the one enjoying it must be its master. That is, he must earn it for himself... man must earn his perfection through his own free will and desire... It was necessary, therefore, for man to be given free will, to be balanced between good and evil and not compelled toward either..

The Idea of “Space” - Discussion

Ultimately, the world was created in such a way to give humanity “space” so we have freedom of choice and freedom to grow.

Lead a discussion with students: what should humanity be doing with the “space” we are given? If students do not mention it on their own, raise the idea of *tikkun olam*. Some students will be familiar with this idea, but link it directly to the idea of the creation of an imperfect world, and humanity's striving to perfection and connecting to God.

The Idea of “Space” - Activity

Similar to the “Finish the story” game where different people write one line of a story and then pass it onto another person to add another line, in this activity, students will begin a creative project but not finish it.

Step 1: Tell students to start by initiating a creative project (e.g., drawing, writing) that should reflect their own artistic style and vision and then they will ultimately be handing it off to other students. As a result, they need to leave space, both literally (physically) and metaphorically (creatively) for the other students who will be partnering in the finished project.

Step 2: You can decide to further enhance the metaphor by adding additional constraints that metaphorically represent *tzimtzum*—creating by constraining. Some suggested constraints are:

- defining the “space” by limiting their canvas or narrative scope
- providing a limited supply of artistic tools
- providing a short amount of time

Spirituality Journal

Ask students to take out their journals and address one of the prompts below:

- Think about your personal goals or ambitions in life. How do these goals and ambitions align with the goals of *tikkun olam* and partnering with God? How can you align your goals and ambitions with these larger ideas?
- Think about a time when you saw someone engaged in an act of righteousness or goodness. Reflect on how this moment may contribute to revealing God's presence in the world. What actions do you do that might contribute to that goal?

Conclusion

To conclude this unit, invite students to discuss one (or more) of the following:

- How does understanding our limitations and the concept of "making space" impact our relationships with others and with God?
- How did the act of constraint impact their creative process and/or the final outcome?
- How might the concept of *tzimtzum*, or constraining oneself, particularly in order to make space for others, apply to their daily lives?
- Why is it necessary to make space for others in relationships? When have others made space for them? When have they made space for others?