

Big Questions in Jewish Spirituality

UNIT 4



UNIT 4

How Do I Build a Relationship with God? Part 1

Unit Objectives

Students will be able to:

- Describe the foundational principles about relationships that can be understood in Biblical sources (*Bereshit* 2 and *Vayikra* 19).
- Explain the role of the Divine spark (*tzelem Elokim*) in relationships.
- Explore the concept of *deveikut* in relationships with both God and others.
- Reflect on the fact that our relationship with God mirrors other relationships we have, and what we can learn from that.
- Internalize that relationships take effort.

NOTES:

- This is unit one of two parts. Some of the objectives and ideas touched upon in this unit will be more fully developed in the second part. An important framework for relationship building is found in part two.
- This unit is about relationships and love. Some students may have trouble relating to or using the word “love,” while others may have experienced difficult or even unhealthy relationships. This may create tension for them in this unit. It is important to be sensitive to this reality and strike a balance between encouraging genuine reflection and maintaining generality in the discussions.



Introductory Essay

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

This unit (How Do I Build a Relationship with God? Part 1) and the following unit (How Do I Build a Relationship with God? Part 2) work together to explore the nature of both interpersonal and Divine relationships and the challenges of navigating those relationships. In this unit, we will look at two foundational Jewish texts about relationships and explore a number of key relationship principles.

First, we will look at the creation of Adam and Chava as told in the second *perek* of *Bereshit*. This story illuminates several key aspects of relationships: the need for effort and care, the recognition of oneself in another, and the importance of appreciating the unique qualities each individual brings to a relationship. We will also look at the mitzvah from *Vayikra* 19: “Love your neighbor as yourself, I am God.” From this one verse we can learn about the three “loving” relationships—between man and himself, between man and God, and between man and man. One must love himself in order to love others, and one must seek out the Divine both in himself and in others in order for that love to be complete. Our relationships are interconnected and we can learn much about each type from the other.

Finally, we explore the following relationship principles, principles which are true in all of our relationships—those with family, friends, life partners, and the Divine:

Relationships Require Work and Care

The narrative in *Bereshit* demonstrates that, unlike the seemingly effortless command that brought the cosmos into being (“**Let there be light**”), the creation of humans—and by extension, human relationships—required a Divine touch, a breath of life. This distinction underscores the idea that relationships demand ongoing attention and care. Relationships are dynamic and grow over time.

Recognizing Ourselves in Others

At the heart of human connection lies the ability to see oneself in another. When Adam first beholds “*isha*,” his immediate recognition of her as “**bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh**” speaks to a clear sense of identification with another being. This moment transcends mere recognition; it signifies the acknowledgment of the *tzelem Elokim*, the Divine image, within each other. Notably, Adam first encountered each of the animals but did not recognize any of them as being potential companions or helpmates. It was only when meeting “*isha*” that he felt a spark of connection. In fact, the title he initially called her, “*isha*,” is an extension of his own title, “*ish*.”

It is this shared Divinity that links us to one another and to the Divine. By recognizing the *tzelem Elokim* in others, we affirm their inherent value and dignity, fostering a sense of unity and shared purpose. This shift in perception opens the door to deeper empathy, allowing us to connect with others in a way that transcends our own ego and personal biases. It encourages us to look for the good in others, even (or especially) in those who might challenge or frustrate us, thereby transforming our relationships into opportunities for spiritual growth and connection.

Appreciating the Uniqueness of Others

While connecting to others through our shared *tzelem Elokim*, and recognizing ourselves in others is crucial, a full and meaningful relationship also demands an appreciation of the qualities that make each person distinct. Adam’s journey from seeing Chava as an extension of himself to ultimately recognizing her as a separate entity, capable of things he cannot do, mirrors the evolution of relationships from initial identification to a deeper appreciation of individuality. We seek partners, both in friendship and romance, who challenge us, bringing new perspectives and strengths to the relationship.

Interconnected Relationships

Through the commandment to “**Love your neighbor as yourself,**” we can examine each of our different relationships and how they are interconnected.

- Parental relationships teach us about unconditional love and the complexities of respect and obedience. This can help us understand our connection with the Divine, emphasizing reverence, gratitude, and the understanding that love can coexist with awe. In turn, recognizing God as a parental figure enhances our appreciation of Divine compassion and patience, which can deepen our relationships with our parents.
- Friendships teach us about mutual respect and understanding from others. Understanding friendships helps us appreciate the reciprocal aspect of love commanded in “**ואהבת לרעך כמוך,**” that relationships must be built on mutual understanding and support. We seek strong relationships with our friends and hopefully this can guide us to seek a strong relationship with God.
- Romantic relationships teach us about vulnerability, sacrifice, and the need to make space for the other. When we speak about Divine love, we speak of the quest for *deveikut* or closeness. This is the highest form of connection and love and teaches us about the essence of love, transcending physicality to embrace a spiritual, all-encompassing union. By striving for *deveikut*, we learn to see the Divine spark within others and ourselves. The Divine relationship acts as a mirror, reflecting the ideals of unconditional love, eternal commitment, and self-transcendence that can inspire our deepest human connections—including our romantic relationships.
- Lastly, the relationship with ourselves is the foundation upon which all other relationships are built. Understanding and loving oneself is a prerequisite for truly loving others, as implied in “**ואהבת לרעך כמוך.**” While we will touch on this relationship in this unit, it will be explored more fully in the unit on the soul.



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.

- The commandment of **“ואהבת לרעך כמוך, אני ה'”** encompasses the three types of love we experience—loving oneself, loving another, and loving God. We can learn about each type of love from the other types and vice versa.
- Seeing the Divine spark, *tzelem Elokim*, in others can transform relationships, promoting deeper respect, empathy, and connection.
- Understanding one's own *tzelem Elokim* is crucial for personal growth and meaningful relationships.
- Relationships, even those based in love, demand practice and dedication to flourish.
- Through navigating and nurturing love within human relationships, particularly those fraught with challenges, one can ultimately foster a deeper connection with 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.

- **Deveikut** – literally, cleaving. A profound, spiritual, and intimate connection with God. *Deveikut* is the aspiration to achieve a close relationship with God and a constant awareness of the Divine presence.

- **Tzelem Elokim** – literally translated to “the image of God,” this term describes the belief that humans are created in the image of God and embody Divine qualities. The term *tzelem Elokim* underscores the inherent dignity and value of every individual, highlighting the Divine spark within each person, the basis for meaningful relationships.

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

Prompt students with the *pasuk* “ואהבת לרעך כמוך, אני ה'” and ask them to brainstorm a list of questions about relationships and love. Make sure to explain that you will not necessarily answer all of the questions.

Some questions may include:

- How can I be commanded to love? (texts tells us to love God, love neighbors...)
- Do I have to love my neighbor if they are a bad person? A challenging person? Someone I just do not like?
- Who does “ואהבת לרעך כמוך” apply to?
- How can I feel a strong connection with God if I do not really understand God?
- What does Jewish tradition say about soulmates and romantic love?
- How do I know if a relationship is good for me or not?
- How do I deal with difficult relationships (with friends, peers, parents, siblings etc.)?
- What kind of work do I need to do in order to be in a successful relationship?

Thought Exercise

Now that the students have started thinking about relationships and love, use the following thought exercise to frame the unit. Students will explore the interconnectedness of various relationships and what they can teach us about each other. If students do not bring this up on their own, this is the time to introduce students to the idea that relationships with God are like the other real and dynamic relationships in their lives. Students will brainstorm a list of different relationships and then try to categorize them.

Ask students to build a “relationship web” (see example below) and answer the following questions: What is the name of the relationship? How intense is it? What do they learn from it? What can they take from the relationship and apply to other relationships in their lives? (For example: what can they learn from a relationship that they have with their close friend and apply to their relationship with their mother?)

If the students do not suggest it, suggest adding God to the lists and ask students what they think of that addition.

Relationship Web Example:

Name	Relationship	Intensity of connection	Lessons Learned
Emily	Best Friend	High	Trust, Loyalty
Josh	Boyfriend	High	Intimacy, Support
Mom	Mother	High	Unconditional Love, Guidance
Dad	Father	High	Protection, Wisdom
Mr. Smith	Teacher	Medium	Inspiration, Knowledge
Lucy	Acquaintance	Low	Social Skills
Ms. Carter	Mentor	Medium	Guidance, Encouragement
Community Group	Community	Medium	Belonging, Support
God	Spiritual	High	Faith, Hope

As an optional expansion of this activity, students can create a visual representation of their different relationships and using arrows and lines to suggest “learning connections” between them.

Tzelem Elokim Text Study

The text of Bereshit focuses on the creation of man and the search for an ezer k'negdo, literally translated to a corresponding helpmate. Man does not find a worthy partner until he encounters another being made in the image of God. To seek meaningful relationships with others we must acknowledge and seek out their Divine nature. Only then can we begin to approach deveikut. The next section goes through these ideas, text-by-text.

Introduce some key Jewish ideas about relationships which are found in *Sefer Bereshit*. Students can engage in traditional text study, or you can review the ideas of the texts without learning them inside.

Source #1: *Bereshit* 1:27

ויבֵרָא אֱלֹקִים אֶת־הָאָדָם בְּצַלְמוֹ בְּצַלְמֵי אֱלֹקִים בָּרָא אוֹתוֹ זָכָר וּנְקֵבָה בָּרָא אֹתָם

And **Elokim** created the earthling in his image, in the image of God did he create it, male and female he created them.

How many beings did He create?

What genders did He create?

Source #2: *Bereshit* 2:7 and 2:18

וַיִּצַר ה' אֱלֹקִים אֶת־הָאָדָם עֹפָר מִן־הָאֲדָמָה וַיִּפַּח בְּאַפָּיו נִשְׁמַת חַיִּים וַיְהִי הָאָדָם לְנֶפֶשׁ חַיָּה.

And **YKVK Elokim** formed the earthling, dust from the ground; and blew into its nostrils the breath of life and the earthling became a living being.

וַיֹּאמֶר ה' אֱלֹקִים לֹא־טוֹב הִיּוֹת הָאָדָם לְבַדּוֹ אֶעֱשֶׂה־לּוֹ עֶזֶר כְּנֶגְדּוֹ

YKVK Elokim said: "It is not good for the earthling to be alone; I will make it a corresponding helpmate."

How does God create the being in 2:7, what are the steps?

What do you think God means by "ezer k'negdo?"

What do you think the being needs in order to feel genuine companionship?

Source #3: Bereshit 2:19-20

**ויצר ה' אלקים מן-האדמה כל-חית השדה ואת כל-עוף השמים ויבא אל-האדם לראות מה-יקרא-
לו וכל אשר יקרא-לו האדם נפש חיה הוא שמו**

ויקרא האדם שמות לכל-הבהמה ולעוף השמים ולכל חית השדה ולאדם לא-מצא עזר כנגדו

So YKVK Elokim formed from the ground all the wildlife of the field and all the birds of the heavens and brought [each] to the earthling, to see what he would call it; and whatever the earthling called it as a living being, that became its name.

And the earthling called out names for all the herd-animals and for the birds of the heavens and for all the wildlife of the field, but for the earthling, there could not be found a corresponding helpmate.

How does God create the animals?

Look back at pasuk 2:7. How is it different from the way God creates the person? What step is missing?

Look closely at the word each pasuk uses for "create." How is it different? What do you think it might mean? How do you think this relates to the fact that the Adam does not find an ezer k'negdo among the beings created in these psukim?

Source #4: Bereshit 2:21-23

ויפל ה' אלקים תרדמה עליהאדם ויישן ויקח אחת מצלעתיו ויסגר בשר תחתנה. ויבן ה' אלקים אתהצלע אשר-לקח מן-האדם לאשה ויבאה אל-האדם. ויאמר האדם זאת הפעם עצם מעצמי ובשר מבשרי לזאת יקרא אשה כי מאיש לקחהזאת. עליכן יעזב-איש את-אביו ואת-אמו ודבק באשתו והיו לבשר אחד.

So *YKVK Elokim* caused a deep slumber to fall upon the earthling, so that it slept; then He took one of his sides and closed up the flesh in its place. And *YKVK Elokim* built the side that he had taken from the earthling into a woman and brought her to the earthling. The earthling said: "This-time, she-is-it! Bone from my bones, and flesh from my flesh! She shall be called: *Woman/Isha*, for from *Man/Ish* she was taken! Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and cleaves to his wife, and they become one flesh.

What is different about the creation of the **אשה** from the way God tried to create the other creatures?

Based on your earlier study, what else besides "**bone of my bone**" and "**flesh of my flesh**" does the **אשה** have that the animals do not?

How do you think this relates to the Adam finding his *ezer k'negdo*?

What do you think the term **דבק באשתו** means?

It is important that students understand that man did not find a "corresponding helpmate" among the animals because none of them contained the Divine spark that God breathed into humans. That Godly Divine spark is unique to humanity. Only when the man encountered another with an equal measure of that Divine spark did he find a worthy עזר כנגדו.

We are only able to achieve דבקות, or true connection, with God and with other humans. When we seek true connection, we seek the Divine in others. Just as the original earthling was created with one Divine breath/soul which was split between Adam and Chava and then reconnected in their partnership, we seek out the other with whom we share a Divine breath/soul.

V'Ahavta Text Study

Now you should review another key text that the students have already encountered, **ואהבת לרעך כמוך** from Vaykira. Students are likely familiar with the phrase and its meaning, but we will analyze it through the prism of relationships, and ultimately understand the different types of relationships and how they relate to each other.

Study the following texts inside or review the key ideas:

Source #1: Vaykira 19:18

...ואהבת לרעך כמוך אני ה'.

...And you shall Love your fellow [Israelite] as yourself: I am ה'.

*What different relationships are in this pasuk? (Hint: there are 3)
How does love relate to each?*

Source #2: Shabbat 31a

שוב מעשה בנכרי אחד שבא לפני שמאי א"ל גירני ע"מ שתלמדני כל התורה כולה כשאני עומד על רגל אחת דחפו באמת הבנין שבידו בא לפני הלל גיריה אמר לו דעלך סני לחברך לא תעביד זו היא כל התורה כולה ואיך פירושה הוא זיל גמור.

The same man approached Hillel with the same request (to convert him on condition that he teach him the whole torah while standing on one foot). Hillel replied "whatever is hateful to you, do not do to others. This is the whole Torah, the rest is commentary. Now, go and learn."

*Where in the Torah does it say what Hillel said? (Hint: see above)
Why do you think Hillel stated this in the negative instead of the way it is stated in the Torah?
Why do you think Hillel taught that this is the entirety of Torah?*

Source #3: Rabbi Yehuda Ashlag, Ba'al Ha-Sulam, *Matan Torah*, First Discourse: The Giving of the Torah

"...but you shall love your neighbor as yourself" (*Vayikra* 19:18). "Rabbi Akiva said: 'Love your neighbor as yourself' is the central tenet (*kelal*) of the Torah" (*Bereshit Rabbah* 24:7)

1. This saying of our sages begs for an explanation. The word *kelal* also means the sum of all the details, which, when joined together, create a whole (*kelal*). It transpires that when he said that the commandment to "love your neighbor as yourself" is the central tenet of the Torah, we should understand that the other six hundred twelve commandments in the Torah, with all its verses, are neither more nor less than the sum of all the details that lie in and are conditional on this one commandment to "love your neighbor as yourself." These words are enigmatic. This is true when it relates to interpersonal commandments; but how can that one commandment contain and support within it all the commandments between a person and God, which are the foundations of the Torah, its supports, and its structure? ...

2. Furthermore, if we can work and find some way to settle what they said here, let us consider a second, even more striking saying by the gentile man who came before Hillel and asked him to "teach me the entire Torah while I am standing on one foot... He... said to him: That which is hateful to you do not do to another" (tractate *Shabbat* 31a), (which is the Aramaic translation of "...but you shall love your neighbor as yourself") "and the rest is its interpretation. Go study" (Ibid.). We have before us a clear ruling that none of the six hundred twelve commandments or any of the verses of the Torah is better than the single commandment to "love your neighbor as yourself" since their only purpose is to interpret and allow us to properly observe the commandment to love one another, as it clearly states, "and the rest is its interpretation. Go study," which means that the rest of the Torah is an interpretation of this single commandment so that it is impossible to fulfill the commandment "love your neighbor as yourself" without them.

Do you agree with Rabbi Ashlag—is this the central tenet of the Torah? Why or why not?

Source #4: Rabbi Judah Loew ben Bezalel, Maharal, *Sefer Netivot Olam*, Netiv Ahava

ונראה לפרש, כי מה שאמר מה דסנילך לחברך לא תעביד, כל זה מפני שאוהב לחבירו כמו שהוא אוהב את עצמו, וכל זה שראוי לאהוב את חבירו מפני שנברא חבירו בדמותו ובצלמו, ומפני שיש להם דמות וצלם אחד הרי בצד הזה חבירו והוא עצמו דבר אחד כאשר יש להם צלם אחד לגמרי...

We can suggest that when we avoid doing things to others that are hateful to us, we are doing so because we love the other as ourselves—and this is fitting because our friend was created in God's image and because you share that Divine image with your friend, in that way, you and your friend are really one and the same. By understanding this, and loving the Divine in your friend, you are also understanding the greatest ideas of the Torah and creation....

How does the Maharal's understanding of these ideas relate to the three relationships—between man and man, between man and himself, between man and God—that are noted in V'ahavta?

What does the Maharal think is the unifying idea/the constant in all these relationships?

Portraits of Love Jigsaw Activity

You will now explore different types of relationships by studying a number of different stories that appear in Jewish texts. You may want to cover these ideas by doing a jigsaw activity in your classroom—described below:

Step 1: Divide students into 4 groups and assign each group to learn about one of the relationships below. Students should learn the texts together and discuss—they should use the questions provided as guidance.

Step 2: Create new groups ensuring that each new group has one member from each original group. In their new groups, students should take turns sharing what they learned in the original grouping. They can quickly explain the text/narrative that they learned and then share what they learned about that type of relationship.

Yitzchak and Esav - *Bereshit 25:28 and Bereshit Rabba 65*

- What is noteworthy about the way the text presents Yitzchak's and Rivka's love for their sons, and how might that have impacted both Yaakov and Esav?
- While we are commanded to both fear and honor/respect our parents, we are never commanded to love our parents. Why do you think that is?
- How does the *midrash* portray Esav's *kibud av*?
- Can you think of any examples of actions you take in order to show your parents or other family members respect? How about love?
- Can you think of any ways that your family members show you love and respect?
- What can these sources teach us about complex family relationships?
- How does Ben Gamliel's choice of Esav as a positive example of honoring parents broaden our understanding of the importance of this mitzvah?

Rabbi Akiva and Rachel - *Nedarim 50b*

- How does the story of Rabbi Akiva and his wife exemplify support and mutual growth in a marriage?
- What do you think about the sacrifices of Rachel in this marriage? What do you think about Rabbi Akiva's responses to Rachel throughout the story?
- What might this story teach about the role of partnership and loyalty in marriage or romantic relationships? How?

David and Yonatan - *Shmuel I, 18:1-4; Shmuel I, 20*

- What qualities of friendship do you learn from this story?
- Why do you think the Mishna refers to this as an unconditional love?
- What does it mean that Yonatan loved David as himself?
- How do you think Yonatan was able to keep himself from being jealous of David?
- What can you learn from this relationship that you can apply to your own friendships?

Moshe and God - *Shemot* 33:12-23 (Moshe asks to see God's face); ***Bamidbar* 12: 6-8** (description of Moshe's relationship with God as unique); ***Shemot* 4: 1-17** (Moshe questioning God's appointment of him as the leader)

- Moshe's relationship with God includes moments of questioning and even negotiation (when he challenges the mission at the burning bush, when he pleads on behalf of the Jewish people, etc.). Have you ever challenged, questioned, or tried to negotiate with God? How does that impact your relationship with God?
- What can we learn about communication and trust from the way Moshe speaks to God?
- Moshe's communication with God is described as "face to face" and he was in constant communication with God. How do you think this impacted Moshe's *deveikut* with God? How can we experience *deveikut* with God?

Conclusion/Spirituality Journal

Tell students that you will be continuing to explore relationships in the next few units. Ask students to write in their spirituality journals, using one or more prompts from the list below.

- Go back to the questions from the question generation section of this unit. Do you feel that you have answered or started to answer any of your questions? Which one(s)? What ideas have you developed through this learning?
- Thinking about the three loving relationships in the *pasuk* of **ואהבת** (yourself, your neighbor, and God), which relationship do you think is the most difficult and why? What do you do to work on that relationship?
- How do you experience or strive for *deveikut*, a closeness to God, in your daily life? Can you draw parallels between this pursuit and the effort you put into your closest human relationships?
- Write about a lesson you learned from one type of relationship (e.g., friendship, romantic, familial) that you successfully applied to another. How did this lesson enhance both relationships?
- How have your relationships contributed to your personal growth? Consider things like self-awareness, spiritual development, or understanding of others.
- Can you think of a time when you felt that your *tzelem Elokim* was seen by someone else or that you truly saw someone else's *tzelem Elokim*? What effect, if any, did this have on your connection or relationship with that person?