

Big Questions in Jewish Spirituality

UNIT 6



UNIT 6

What is a Soul?

Unit Objectives

Students will be able to:

- Identify the three parts of the soul and how each relates to their everyday lives, spiritual behaviors, and mindsets.
- Describe the connection between the human soul and the Creator and the implications of this connection for human dignity, moral responsibility, and the potential for spiritual growth.
- Describe that God created all of the different parts of their body and soul. They are all necessary. They are all holy. They work together. They need to be nourished.
- Reflect on how they can elevate their *nefesh*, *ruach*, and *neshama* in daily life.

NOTE:

- Schools generally teach about the struggle in a person's soul between the *yetzer hatov* and *yetzer harah*. This unit presents an alternative view, which does not view the soul as struggling between these inclinations. Instead, it sees the potential for the parts or levels of our souls to work in harmony. God created humans with these different parts—some are lower and some are higher—but to reach our potential we need to determine how to make these parts work together.



Introductory Essay

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

In this unit we will encourage students to reflect on and understand their spiritual selves through a combination of textual and reflective study about the nature of the soul and its connection to the body.

There is no one single word for soul in Hebrew. Even in the creation story in *Bereshit*, the Hebrew language refers to the soul with different words. But even all these words do not help us understand its nature.

So what is the soul? In many Jewish texts, the soul is described as a Divine spark within each person, a “piece” of the Creator. This idea is rooted in the belief that every human being has a part of the Divine within them, which elevates human existence to something more than just physical matter. This Divine aspect imbues each person with infinite worth and potential. The soul is eternal, transcending the physical life and connecting each individual to God and the universe in a profound way.

The term “*tzelem Elokim*” is a concept found in the very beginning of the Torah, in *Bereshit* 1:27, where it states that humanity was created in *b'tzelem Elokim*. This Godliness gives us our inherent value and potential for spiritual growth. Acting “Godly” or embodying Divine attributes such as kindness and righteousness is seen as bringing

the presence of God into the world¹. When we engage in actions that reflect God's ways, we not only elevate ourselves, but also fulfill a higher purpose, connecting to something much larger than our individual selves. Life becomes a journey of forming a deeper connection with the Divine, using our existence to reflect God's light in the world.

Kabbalistic teachings offer a rich framework for understanding the soul's complex nature by delineating its different parts or aspects: *nefesh*, *ruach*, and *neshama*. (It is important to note that the vast corpus of Kabbalistic literature includes many such delineations and often speaks of more than three aspects or levels. For our purposes, we are limiting the discussion to the three that are most commonly spoken about). When it comes to our physical selves, the more we understand about how our bodies work and the different processes necessary for our physical selves to function, the better off our physical health can be. A similar statement can be made about our spiritual selves—though our souls are certainly more abstract and difficult to understand than our bodies, the more we try to “get to know” our souls and how they work, the richer our spiritual development can be.

The three aspects of our souls which we will learn about are:

- ***Nefesh* (נֶפֶשׁ):** This refers to the basic life force and physical existence, including instinctual behavior and actions. It's the most tangible part of the soul, relating to physical deeds in everyday life. *Nefesh* is the foundation of our existence, enabling us to interact with the physical world around us. Working on our *nefesh* means striving to align our actions and character with Divine will.
- ***Ruach* (רוּחַ):** *Ruach* is often translated as “spirit” and represents the emotional, social, and moral dimensions of our being including speech and communication. This aspect allows for the development of empathy and other moral attributes as they relate to social behavior. It encompasses the actions that relate to communication, such as saying a *beracha*, studying Torah, or even how we speak about others (avoiding *lashon hara*, or derogatory speech). *Ruach* is about how our emotions and expressions reflect our Divine spark.

1 In fact, the *midrash* in *Bereshit Rabba* 8:5 tells us the angels of Kindness and Righteousness argued that people should be created, because we embody these behaviors, and we are created *b'tzelem Elokim*.

- **Neshama (נִשְׁמָה):** This is the highest aspect of the soul and is associated with intellectual and spiritual functions, like thoughts and intentions. It is the part of the soul that allows for understanding and connection to the Divine, enabling an individual to grasp abstract and spiritual concepts. It's about the why behind our actions. When you perform a mitzvah like giving *tzedakah*, the *neshama* prompts you to reflect on your intentions—are they pure, or are they self-serving? It is through the *neshama* that a person can feel closeness to God and to strive for a higher purpose of existence.

The relationship between the body and the soul is one of interdependence and harmony. One could not exist in this world without the other. The body is the vessel that contains the soul and allows it to express itself in this physical world. The soul provides meaning and an understanding of its potential. Recognizing the interdependence of our two aspects—physical and spiritual—will allow us to nurture and care for both parts of ourselves.

The journey of spiritual growth involves engaging with and refining all three parts of the soul. It's a personal and communal path towards wholeness, where each person focuses on elevating their *nefesh*, *ruach*, and *neshama*. By doing so, one seeks to live a balanced, meaningful life to connect with God, to reach his Divine frequency.



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.

- Being created *b'tzelem Elokim* suggests that humans share Divine attributes and have potential for spiritual growth.
- We may be able to understand the soul better by defining its parts—*nefesh* (the life force and physical existence), *ruach* (the emotional and moral dimensions), and *neshama* (the highest aspect related to intellectual and spiritual functions).
- Spiritual growth involves a path of refining the three parts of the soul—*nefesh*, *ruach*, and *neshama*. This process aims at aligning our will with the Divine will in all areas of our souls, thereby strengthening Divine presence in the world, focusing on elevating each aspect of the soul to achieve wholeness.
- Recognizing and engaging with each part of the soul can enrich spiritual development.
- By recognizing the balance and harmony between our bodies and our souls, we can relate properly to our physical and spiritual selves and use both aspects to grow and reach our potential. Our bodies and souls are not separate entities but rather interconnected aspects of our whole selves that influence each other.

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.

- **Nefesh** – part of the soul, the life force and physical existence.
- **Ruach** – part of the soul, the emotional and moral dimensions.
- **Neshama** – part of the soul, the highest level of the soul, related to intellectual and spiritual function.

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, that you should write on the board. Make sure to explain that you will not necessarily answer all of the questions and some will be answered in other units.

My soul is my essence and I have to nourish it, just like my body.

Some questions may include:

- What is a soul?
- How do I know I have a soul?
- How can I nourish my soul?
- What if I feel more connected to my body than my soul?
- Does everyone have a soul?
- Are souls different from each other?
- Do animals have a soul?
- Where was my soul before I was born and where will it be after I die?

Thought Exercises/ Trigger

For both of the following thought exercises, students will be asked to reflect on themselves and why they do certain things. The idea is for them to reach an understanding that a) their body and their soul are not necessarily in conflict with each other and often work in concert AND b) we spend a lot of time understanding our physical selves and why/how we do the things we do. We should spend an equal amount of time trying to understand and getting to know our souls.

Trigger #1 - Am I my body, or am I my soul?

Ask students to create a list of attributes they would use to describe themselves. Once they have a list, have them create a Venn diagram with two circles—one circle should be labeled physical, one labeled spiritual and an overlapping section. Have them list the aspects they consider physical, which they consider to be spiritual, and which might be both.

Trigger #2 - How well do you know yourself?

Ask students to make a list of 5-7 decisions they have made in their lives—these can be big decisions (e.g. selecting a high school) or small ones (e.g. deciding what to eat for lunch). Next to each decision on the list, ask them to decide how they made that decision. Would they describe it as coming from their heart? Their brain/intellect? Their gut? Something else?

Explain to students that even though we know that our heart, our gut, and our brain do not really make decisions, it is easier for us to explain or understand it that way. Similarly, to understand our souls, we break them down into different aspects and explain that each part has a different function.

Soul Text Study

This is a text-based exploration to help guide the students to an understanding of the soul. The first sources begin with the creation of man. The final source is helpful in delineating the layers of the soul as described in Kabbalistic texts, but make sure to include the ideas from the introductory essay to help flesh out this approach.

Bereshit 2:7

וַיִּצְרֵהּ אֱלֹקִים אֶת־הָאָדָם עֶפְרָם מִן־הָאֲדָמָה וַיִּפְחֵ בְּאָפִיו נִשְׁמַת חַיִּים וַיְהִי הָאָדָם לִנְפֹשׁ חַיָּה:

***YKVK Elokim* formed man from the dust of the earth. He blew into his nostrils the breath of life, and man became a living being.**

Which word(s) for soul do you see in the verse?

Rashi on *Bereshit* 2:7

ויפח באפיו. עשאו מן התחתונים ומן העליונים, גוף מן התחתונים ונשמה מן העליונים...

And breathed into his nostrils. He made him of both, of earthly and of heavenly matter: the body of the earthly, and the soul of the heavenly...

According to Rashi, what is man made out of?

Ramchal, *Derech Hashem* Part One: 2

הרכבת הגוף והנשמה: ואולם להיות הדבר הזה נשלם כראוי גזרה החכמה העליונה שיהיה האדם מורכב מבי' הפכים דהיינו מנשמה שכלית וזכה וגוף ארצי. ועבור שכל א' מהם יטה בטבע לצדו דהיינו הגוף לחומריות והנשמה לשכליות ותמצא ביניהם מלחמה באופן שאם תגבר הנשמה תתעלה היא ותעלה הגוף עמה ויהיה אותו האדם המשתלם בשלימות המעותד ואם יניח האדם שינצח בו החומר הנה ישפל הגוף ותשפל נשמתו עמו ויהיה אותו האדם בלתי הגון לשלימות ונדחה ממנו ח"ו ולאדם הזה יכולת להשפיל חומריו לפני שכלו ונשמתו ולקנות שלימותו כמ"ש:

The joining of the body and the soul: However in order for this matter to be accomplished appropriately, the Supreme Wisdom decreed that man be composed of two opposites—meaning to say, from a spiritual and pure soul and from an earthly body. And since each one of them naturally inclines to its side—meaning to say, the body towards physicality and the soul towards spirituality—it comes out that there is a war between them in such a way that if the soul wins, it will raise the body with it; but if man allows the physical to win in him, the body will surely be lowered and the soul will be lowered with it. And that man will not be fit for perfection, and will be pushed away from it, God forbid. But that man [still] has the ability to humble his physical [side] before his spiritual [side] and soul and acquire his perfection, as I have written.

*According to the Ramchal, what is the relationship between the body and soul?
What does it mean to have these different aspects?
Have you ever felt like you had to wrestle with different parts of yourself?*

Zohar: Bereshit I (Published by Fiftieth Gate Publications and Seminars, Translated by Rabbi Matthew Miller)

Viewed from the point of view of man's service of God, these levels of soul may be described as... ascending levels of awareness of, and communion with, God. They are called (in ascending order) *nefesh*, *ruach*, *neshama*...Regarding these levels of soul, the *Zohar* states that when a person is born, he is given a *nefesh*...If, through his divine service and proper action, he makes himself worthy, he is then given *ruach*... With greater effort, he can earn the revelation of *neshama*...

Nefesh, the lowest level of consciousness, is awareness of the physical body and the physical world...the *nefesh* is in fact the life-force of the body, and it is precisely because it is the life-force of the body that the *nefesh* has an awareness of the body...The divine service associated with the level of *nefesh* is acknowledgment of, and submission to, the supreme authority of God, particularly in reference to the fulfillment of the commandments...

Ruach is the next level of soul—a higher plane of consciousness than the rank of *nefesh*...The primary manifestation of *ruach* is in the emotions...In terms of Divine service this entails arousing the emotions of love and awe of God... Although the intellect may be used extensively on this level of soul; nevertheless, the primary focus of the intellect here is contemplation in order to arouse the emotions...

The primary activity of *neshama* is in the conceptual grasp of the intellect...the primary activity is understanding...Here the heart truly desires Godliness, and love is revealed in its fullness in the heart. This is referred to in the verse as loving God "with all of your soul."

*What do you think it means to raise a level of consciousness?
Does this explanation of reaching communion with God resonate with you? Why or why not?*

Soul Exploration Activities

While students may find it interesting to discuss the nature of the soul, it may be difficult for them to transfer these new ideas from an abstract framework into a more familiar context. Putting them in familiar or real-life contexts helps students apply these new ideas so that they consider their role in their own experiences. The following explorations aim to do this.

There are three separate exploration activities, all building upon texts/ideas that are familiar to them. Select the one/s that you think will best resonate with your students and their existing knowledge/experiences.

1. *Body and Soul Exploration:*

After deepening their understanding of the soul, students will consider their full selves—both the physical and the spiritual. Review the words of three familiar morning prayers—*Modeh Ani*, *Elokai Neshama*, and *Asher Yatzar*. Ask students to think of themes for each and if they relate more to our physical or spiritual selves. Why do they think we have prayers for both our physical and spiritual selves? Do the prayers feel different from one another?

Modeh Ani

מודה אני לפניך מלך חי וקיים שהחזרת בי נשמתי בחמלה. רבה אמונתך

I thank you, living and enduring King, for You have graciously returned my soul within me. Great is your faithfulness.

Elokai Neshama

אלוקי נשמה שנתת בי טהורה אתה יצרתה בי אתה נפחתה בי ואתה משמרה בקרבי ואתה עתיד ליטלה ממני ולהחזירה בי לעתיד לבא כל זמן שהנשמה בקרבי מודה אני לפניך ה' אלקי ואלקי אבותי רבון כל העולמים אדון כל הנשמות; ברוך אתה ה' המחזיר נשמות לפגרים מתים

Elokai! the soul which You bestowed in me is pure; You created it, You formed it, You breathed it into me and You preserve it within me. You will eventually take it from me, and restore it in me in the time to come. So long as the soul is within me I give thanks to You, ***YKVK Elokai***, and God of my fathers, Lord of all creatures, Master of all souls. Blessed are You, ***YKVK***, Who restores souls to dead bodies.

Would you characterize these prayers as prayers of thanks, request, or praise? How do you know?

What are we saying about the neshama in these prayers?

Why do you think we say these prayers right after waking up?

Here is one more prayer from the morning service, which we also say throughout the day after using the restroom:

בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה ה' אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם, אֲשֶׁר יָצַר אֶת הָאָדָם בְּחָכְמָה, וּבָרָא בּוֹ מְקַבִּים מְקַבִּים, חֲלוּלִים חֲלוּלִים. גְּלוּי וַיְדוּעַ לְפָנַי כְּסֵא כְבוֹדְךָ, שְׂאֵם יִסְתֵּם אֶחָד מֵהֶם, אוֹ אִם יִפְתַּח אֶחָד מֵהֶם, אִי אֶפְשֶׁר לְהִתְקִים אֶפְלוֹ שְׁעָה אַחַת. בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה ה' רוֹפֵא כָּל בָּשָׂר וּמַפְלִיא לַעֲשׂוֹת:

Blessed are You, *YKVK Elokeinu*, sovereign of the universe, who formed humans with wisdom and created within him many openings and many hollows. It is obvious in the presence of your glorious throne that if one of them were ruptured, or if one of them were blocked, it would be impossible to exist and stand in your presence. Blessed are You, *YKVK*, who heals all flesh and performs wonders.

Concluding Questions:

Based on these prayers, in what ways do we relate differently to our bodies and our souls?

Do you think it is significant that we say Modeh Ani before we say Asher Yatzar?

How do you think saying these prayers at the beginning of the day could set your intentions and impact the way you go about your day?

2. Wrestling with Yourself Exploration:

Explore the story in *Bereshit* 32:23-33 when Yaakov wrestles with “the man” the night before his encounter with Esav. There are many different understandings of who this “man” was and the most common explanation is that it was an angel. One alternative and more modern understanding, however, is that Yaakov was wrestling with himself—with the different parts of his soul.

This can lead to a discussion about times when we wrestle with ourselves and how we emerge from those moments. Below are possible questions:

Have you ever had a moment when you felt like your soul was in conflict? Not a time when you felt a question of right versus wrong, but a time when distinct and valid parts of yourself felt at odds with each other?

Did you resolve it? If no, why not? If yes, how?

3. *Shabbat Exploration:*

Many students are familiar with the neshama yetera—the extra soul that joins us for Shabbat. On the most basic level, the idea of an additional soul is confusing—imagine getting an extra arm for a day!—but students might agree that Shabbat feels special and different from other days of the week. Why should that be the case?

Often the focus on teaching Shabbat is on the dos and don'ts, but this exploration is an opportunity to look at it from a spiritual lens. On most days, we focus on the physical world, and the spiritual world may feel distant and unattainable. On Shabbat, the active refraining from work, sharpens our spiritual awareness. It is almost as though we have an extra spiritual receptor on Shabbat.

The following texts can help students deepen their understanding of the spiritual nature of Shabbat, and think about how they may try to “bring” Shabbat to the rest of the week. How might they use their new understanding to deepen their Shabbat experiences? How might they achieve that spiritual awareness even without the framework of Shabbat?

Beitzah 16a

דְּאָמַר רַבִּי שִׁמְעוֹן בֶּן לָקִישׁ נִשְׁמָה יִתְּרָה נּוֹתֵן הַקְּדוֹשׁ בְּרוּךְ הוּא בְּאָדָם עֶרֶב שַׁבָּת וְלִמּוֹצָאֵי שַׁבָּת נּוֹטְלִין אוֹתָהּ הַיָּמִינוּ שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר שַׁבָּת וַיִּנְפֹּשׁ כִּיֹּן שֶׁשַּׁבְתָּ וְוִי אֲבָדָה נְפֹשׁ:

As Rabbi Shimon ben Lakish said: The Holy Blessed One gives a person an additional soul on Shabbat eve, and at the conclusion of Shabbat removes it from him, as it is stated: “God ceased from work and was refreshed [*vayinafash*]” (*Shemot* 31:17). Because of ceasing from work, woe for the additional soul [*nefesh*] that is lost.

Rashi on *Beitza* (explaining the above passage)

נשמה יתירה - רוחב לב למנוחה ולשמחה ולהיות פתוח לרוחה ויאכל וישתה ואין נפשו קצה עליו:

An additional soul - This means that man is given an expansiveness of the heart which allows for tranquility and delight and to be at ease; as a result, one can eat and drink and his soul will not find it repulsive.

Oruch Hashulchan: Orech Chaim 297

הטעם מבשמים להבדלה, מפני שבשבת יש נשמה יתירה, ובמוצאי שבת הולכת מהאדם, ויש כאן חלישת הדעת, והבשמים מחזקים הנפש, דכל ריח טוב מחזק הנפש. ... ואף על גב דכל אלו טעמים רוחניים - מכל מקום כל נפש מישראל מרגיש בזה...

The reason we use spices at *havdalah* is because on Shabbat we have an extra soul and at the end of Shabbat it leaves us and we end up in a weakened state. The spices strengthen us because a good smell can strengthen the נפש. And even though these are very spiritual ideas, every Jewish soul is sensitive to this...

Rabbi Arthur Green, Personal Theology

If I have spent a Shabbat at your congregation, you have heard me share my interpretation of *Lecha Dodi*. I call it a flirtation song with the *neschama yeteirah*. I do not believe, you see, that the “extra soul” we have on Shabbat comes floating down from heaven at 3:42 in the winter season and or 7:29 in the middle of summer (at least in our Boston climate!). I believe that the soul, the most intimate, and therefore most vulnerable parts of ourselves, is there within us all week long. But it is afraid to come out. It fears being trampled by the pace at which we live, shouted down by the loudness of our encounters with the hustle-and-bustle of ordinary life...But, on *erev* Shabbat we promise it, “It’s all right, you can come out now. I promise, for the next 24 hours, to live at a slower pace. No rushing, no fighting, no screaming. No despair over the stock market or the business cycle. I promise not to get depressed by watching politicians on television. It’s safe in my Shabbat world; you can come out now.”

Why do you think we receive an “extra neschama” on Shabbat and what do you think that means?

Look at Rashi’s answer to the above question—why would our souls be “disgusted” by the

way we eat on Shabbat, and how does having an “extra soul” help?

Have you ever experienced the “extra neshama” feeling on Shabbat before?

What do you think about the idea of consoling ourselves with sweet smells? What connection might there be between smells and our neshama?

Would being aware of the “extra neshama” change your approach to Shabbat? How can it uplift your Shabbat experience?

How can you “capture” some of that Shabbat experience and apply to the rest of the week?

Spirituality Journal

For the duration of this unit, ask students to write in their reflection journals daily, focused on how they engaged with their *nefesh*, *ruach*, and *neshama*.

- Did they perform an act of kindness or *tzedaka*? Did they speak well of others (avoiding *lashon hara*)? Did they make a choice that aligned with their best self?
- Did they become more purposeful in their choices?
- Did they find themselves changing or thinking more about God as they became more reflective over their choices?

Conclusion

Ask students to think of examples of when they use their *nefesh*, *ruach*, and *neshama* in everyday situations. (For example, how might they react when witnessing bullying, deciding whether to donate to a cause, or choosing between right and wrong when no one is watching. Do they wrestle with themselves? Is it cut and dry?) Which aspects of their soul do they think is activated in those situations and why? Did they feel a sense of a deep connection to their *nefesh*, *ruach*, and *neshama*, or feel a sense of God? This type of discussion and reflection helps students recognize their spiritual journey and growth.