

Reincarnation

Introduction

In this week's portion, *Korach*, we read what happened after Korach's rebellion failed:

The earth beneath [the rebels] opened its mouth and swallowed them and their houses, and all the men who were with Korach and all their possessions. They descended alive into Sheol, with all that belonged to them. The earth closed over them and they vanished from the midst of the congregation. [Numbers 16:32-33]

They “vanished”.

They went to “Sheol”, the mysterious biblical abode of the dead.

What happens to people after death?

I explored the biblical and Talmudic views in another d’var Torah. Today I shall explore the belief in reincarnation -- that when a living being die it comes back as a different living being (even a different species).

Reincarnation in Judaism

- Human-to-human only (in most expositions).
- Not a mainline or authoritative view in Judaism.
- Not mentioned in Torah, Mishnah, Talmud, Midrash, or by main commentators.
- Not explicitly ruled out, though. Natural extension of the belief (shared by all) in immortal soul.
- Jewish mystics and Hassidim strongly believe in it.

The Kabbalah calls it גִּלְגּוּל *gilgul* (cycle), or transmigration of souls, or metempsychosis. Zohar (pub. 13th century):

-As long as a person is unsuccessful in his purpose in this world, the Holy One, blessed be He, uproots him and replants him over and over again. [Zohar 1:186b]

-All souls are subject to reincarnation, and people do not know the ways of the Holy One, blessed be He! They do not know that they are brought before the tribunal both before they enter into this world and after they leave it. They are ignorant of the many reincarnations and secret works which they have to undergo... But the time is at hand when these mysteries will be disclosed. [Zohar 2:99b]

Some biblical texts are advanced as “proofs”, such as:

- One generation passes away, and another generation comes. [Eccl. 1:4]
- Then the Lord of Hosts revealed Himself to my ears: “This iniquity shall never be forgiven you until you die.” [Isaiah 22:14]

A Jewish man can come back as a woman or a gentile.

Many view converts to Judaism as the reincarnation of people who were Jewish in a previous life, which explains their attraction to Judaism.

Converts are frequently told that they “were at Sinai with the rest of us Jews”, citing Deuteronomy:

[I make this covenant] with he who stands here with us this day before the Lord our God, and also with he who is not here with us this day. [Deut. 29:14f; also Shabbat 146a]

History

-Kabbalah began to accept reincarnation in the 12th century (the Bahir).

-Explosion in belief started with the reincarnation teachings of 16th-century kabbalist Isaac Luria (the Arizal), compiled by his student Hayyim ben Yosef Vital in *Shaar HaGilgulim* (The Gate of Reincarnations).

-The Arizal was believed to know everybody's past lives. Today's Hassidic rebbes are believed to know the past lives of the people around them. They do not reveal them, but give advice to help people achieve their tasks.

-In 18th-century Lithuania, the Vilna Gaon wrote that the Book of Jonah is an allegory of reincarnation.

-Those who accepted it:

- Nahmanides, Recanati, Rabbenu Bahya, the Maharsha, the Vilna Gaon, Josephus, Hai Gaon;
- Mystics Joseph Karo, Shlomo Alkabetz, Isaac Luria, Chaim Vital, Moshe Alshich, Moshe Cordovero;
- All Hassidim, many Karaites.

-Those who rejected it:

-Saadia Gaon (9th-century Egypt):

I must say that I have found certain people, who call themselves Jews, professing the doctrine of metempsychosis ... or 'transmigration' of souls... Many of them go so far as to assert that the spirit of a human being might enter into the body of a beast or that of a beast into the body of a human being, and other such nonsense and stupidities. [Beliefs and Opinions, 6:8]

-David Kimhi, Hasdai Crescas, Joseph Albo, Abraham ibn Daud and Leon of Modena.

-Saadia Gaon argued with Hai Gaon.

-Those who do not mention it:

-Yehudah Halevi, Maimonides.

Some claimed reincarnations

-Abel and Cain became: Moses and Jethro; Jacob and Esau; Balaam and Balak.

-Moses and Jethro were friends, rectifying the estrangement of the two brothers. The others did not rectify.

-Adam, Eve, and the serpent became: David, Bathsheba, and Uriah.

-“Adam” is acronym for “Adam, David, Messiah.”

-Adam, Abel, Moses and Shim'on bar Yochai (possible author of Zohar) became... the Arizal!

-Job became Terah, father of Abraham.

-Jacob's daughter Dinah had wrongful intercourse with Shechem. They became Cozbi, a Midianite woman who had wrongful intercourse with Zimri, an Israelite general. Cozbi and Zimri were killed by Pinhas.

-Pinhas became Rabbi Akiva and Cozbi became the wife of the Roman general Tinneus Rufus, who divorced her husband to convert and marry Rabbi Akiva. She helped him in his work and thus atoned for “her” sin with Zimri.

-Aaron became Hillel – both mild-mannered and lovers of peace.

-Saadia Gaon (who strongly rejected reincarnation) became the Baal Shem Tov, founder of Hasidism, to atone for rejecting reincarnation!

[See, e.g., Sefer ha-Gilgulim, 1684.]

What does reincarnation explain?

-Reincarnation is punishment.

Why do bad things happen to good people? They are punished for sins in a past life. (Explains babies dying.)

This explanation conflicts with the following explanations:

-Reincarnation reflects God's mercy.

God does not write anybody off forever, gives opportunities to improve, by giving bad people a fresh start.

-But no more than three chances. Proofs:

-Behold, God does all these things, twice, three times, with a man, to bring him back from the Pit, so that he may bask in the light of life. [Job 33:29-30]

-Thus said the Lord: For three transgressions of Israel [I will revoke an evil decree], for four, I will not revoke it. [Amos 2:6]

Malbim (19th-century Poland): God makes three attempts to save a person.

-If doesn't work, ultimate punishment: Extinction.

Worst Jewish curse is *Yemach shemo v'zichro* (יִמַּח שְׁמוֹ וְזִכְרוֹ) – “May his name and his memory be erased”.

-Reincarnation perfects the world.

Lurianic Kabbalah: The essence of anything is its divine spark. The “sparks of the souls” (*nitzot ha-neshamot*) were all in Adam's soul, but were scattered away when he sinned. They must be reassembled. Performing mitzvot elevates these sparks of holiness, and when the sparks are all redeemed, the Messianic Era will begin. So there is cosmic significance to each life. Rav Nahman of Breslov:

הַיּוֹם בּוֹ נוֹלְדֶת הוּא הַיּוֹם בּוֹ הִחְלִיט הַקֵּב"ה שֶׁהָעוֹלָם אֵינוֹ יָכוֹל לְהִתְקַיֵּם בְּלִעְדֵּיהּ

The day that you were born is the day God decided the world could not be preserved without you.

This is why one who fulfilled some but not all of the 613 mitzvot comes back for an opportunity to fulfill the remaining ones. (For a gentile, the 7 Noahide Laws.) This is “Tikkun olam” – perfecting, or rectifying the world.

Needless to say, there is no science behind any of this. We are objectively ignorant of what happens after death. It's all a matter of faith.