Reincarnation and Jewish Tradition
by Yaakov Astor

Does Judaism believe in reincarnation?

The word eschatology is defined in the dictionary as a branch of theology concerned with the final events of the history of the world. The truth is that eschatology is not exclusively the domain of religion. The most striking example of a secular eschatology would be Marxism: the convulsions and agonies of the class war, its evils resolving themselves into the classless society, the withering of the state and the blissful existence ever after.

Jewish eschatology is made up of three basic pieces:

1. "The Era of the Messiah."
2. "The Afterlife."

The Messiah, according to traditional Jewish sources, will be a human being born of a flesh and blood mother and father, unlike the Christian idea that has him as the son of God conceived immaculately. In fact, Maimonides writes that the Messiah will complete his job and then die like everyone else.

What's his job? To end the agony of history and usher in a new era of bliss for humanity at large. The time period in which he emerges and completes his task is called the Messianic Era. According to one Talmudic opinion it's not an era of overt miracles, where the rules of nature are overturned. Rather the only new element introduced to the world will be peace among the nations, with the Jewish people living in their land under their own sovereignty, unencumbered by persecution and anti-Semitism, free to pursue their spiritual goals like never before.

The Afterlife proper is called in the traditional sources *olam habah*, or the World to Come. However, the same term, "olam habah," is also used to refer to the renewed utopic world of the future -- the World of Resurrection, *olam hat'chiah* (as explained in the next paragraph). The former is the place righteous souls go to after death -- and they have been going there since the first death. That place is also sometimes called the World of Souls. It's a place where souls exist in a disembodied state, enjoying the pleasures of closeness to God. Thus, genuine near death experiences are presumably glimpses into the World of Souls, the place most people think of when the term Afterlife is mentioned.

The World of Resurrection, by contrast, "no eye has seen," the Talmud remarks. It's a world, according to most authorities, where the body and soul are reunited to live eternally in a truly perfected state. That world will only first come into being after the Messiah and will be initiated by an event known as the "Great Day of
The World of Resurrection is thus the ultimate reward, a place where the body becomes eternal and spiritual, while the soul becomes even more so. 

In comparison to a concept like the "World To Come," reincarnation is not, technically speaking, a true eschatology. Reincarnation is merely a vehicle toward attaining an eschatological end. It's the reentry of the soul into an entirely new body into the present world. Resurrection, by contrast, is the reunification of the soul with the former body (newly reconstituted) into the "World To Come," a world history has not witnessed yet.

Resurrection is thus a pure eschatological concept. Its purpose is to reward the body with eternity (and the soul with higher perfection). The purpose of reincarnation is generally two-fold: either to make up for a failure in a previous life or to create a new, higher state of personal perfection not previously attained. The purpose of resurrection is to reward the body with eternity and the soul with higher perfection. Resurrection is thus a time of reward; reincarnation a time of repairing. Resurrection is a time of reaping; reincarnation a time of sowing.

The fact that reincarnation is part of Jewish tradition comes as a surprise to many people. Nevertheless, it's mentioned in numerous places throughout the classical texts of Jewish mysticism, starting with the preeminent sourcebook of Kabbalah, the Zohar:

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 I 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, and of the number of naked souls, and how many naked spirits roam about in the other world without being able to enter within the veil of the King's Palace. Men do not know how the souls revolve like a stone that is thrown from a sling. But the time is at hand when these mysteries will be disclosed. (Zohar II 99b)

The Zohar and related literature are filled with references to reincarnation, addressing such questions as which body is resurrected and what happens to those bodies that did not achieve final perfection, how many chances a soul is given to achieve completion through reincarnation, whether a husband and wife can reincarnate together, if a delay in burial can affect reincarnation, and if a soul can reincarnate into an animal.
The Bahir, attributed to the first century sage, Nechuniah ben Hakanah, used reincarnation to address the classic question of theodicy -- why bad things happen to good people and vice versa:

*Why is there a righteous person to whom good things happen, while [another] righteous person has bad things happen to him? This is because the [latter] righteous person did bad in a previous [life], and is now experiencing the consequences? What is this like? A person planted a vineyard and hoped to grow grapes, but instead, sour grapes grew. He saw that his planting and harvest were not successful so he tore it out. He cleaned out the sour grape vines and planted again. When he saw that his planting was not successful, he tore it up and planted it again. (Bahir 195)*

Reincarnation is cited by authoritative classic biblical commentators, including Ramban\(^2\) (Nachmanides), Menachem Recanti\(^2\) and Rabbenu Bachya.\(^3\)

Among the many volumes of the holy Rabbi Yitzchak Luria, known as the "Ari,"\(^4\) most of which come down to us from the pen of his primary disciple, Rabbi Chaim Vital, are profound insights explaining issues related to reincarnation. Indeed, his *Shaar HaGilgulim*, "The Gates of Reincarnation,"\(^5\) is a book devoted exclusively to the subject, including details regarding the soul-roots of many biblical personalities and who they reincarnated into from the times of the Bible down to the Ari.

The Ari's teachings and systems of viewing the world spread like wildfire after his death throughout the Jewish world in Europe and the Middle East. If reincarnation had been generally accepted by Jewish folk and intelligentsia beforehand, it became part of the fabric of Jewish idiom and scholarship after the Ari, inhabiting the thought and writings of great scholars and leaders from classic commentators on the Talmud (for example, the Maharsha, Rabbi Moshe Eidels ),\(^6\) to the founder of the Chassidic Movement, the Baal Shem Tov, as well as the leader of the non-Chassidic world, the Vilna Gaon.\(^7\)

The trend continues down to this day. Even some of the greatest authorities who are not necessarily known for their mystical bent assume reincarnation to be an accepted basic tenet.

One of the texts the mystics like to cite as a scriptural allusion to the principle of reincarnation is the following verse in the Book of Job:

> Behold, all these things does God do -- twice, even three times with a man -- to bring his soul back from the pit that he may be enlightened with the light of the living. (Job 33:29)

In other words, God will allow a person to come back to the world "of the living" from "the pit" (which is one of the classic biblical terms for *Gehinnom* or "Purgatory") a second and even third (or multitude of) time(s). Generally
speaking, however, this verse and others are understood by mystics as mere allusions to the concept of reincarnation. The true authority for the concept is rooted in the tradition.

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**FOOTNOTES:**

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2. Commentary to the Mishnah, Sanhedrin 10:1; cf. Sanhedrin 99a.
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4. Sanhedrin 91b, 99a; *Berachos* 34b; *Pesachim* 68a; *Shabbos* 63a; cf. Maimonides, Teshuva 9:2, *Melachim* 12:2.
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6. Ramban (Nachmanides), *Shaar HaGemul*. According to the Ramban and other authorities, the "World of Souls" is also often referred to as the Garden of Eden.
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7. Sanhedrin 99a.
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8. Ramban, *Shaar HaGemul*. Citing Talmudic and Midrashic sources, the Ramban writes that there are three judgment days, i.e. three times the soul is judged:
   1) Rosh Hashannah, which reviews the past year and determines material circumstances for the upcoming year;
   2) Day of death, which reviews the deceased's life (life review) and determines whether its needs to continue the trying experience of further review or is ready for Paradise.
   3) The Great Day of Judgment, which is when all who lived are resurrected, the righteous for everlasting life (in a spiritualized physical world, according to the Ramban) and the wicked for what amounts to termination (according to others there will be a middle category of those who are worthy to continue in a disembodied spirit form but not the more rarified physical form of the resurrected body in a resurrected world). There will also apparently be different degrees of reward (i.e. experiencing the Presence of God) in this Renewed World after the Great Judgment Day, all depending on one's life's actions.
   It has been asked: If a person is judged at his death as to his status in the World to Come what is the purpose of the Great Day of Judgment? One answer given is that after a person dies all the children, all the good and bad deeds and influences he had on others are "still in motion." Only at the end of history can the "final tally" be made, then, as to the impact a person had on the world in his or her life.
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10. Shaar HaGilgulim, Chapter 8; *Derech Hashem* 2:3:10.
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11. Many are equally as surprised to discover that reincarnation was an accepted belief by numerous of the great minds underpinning Western civilization. Although Judaism, obviously, does not necessarily agree with all their thoughts and philosophies, nevertheless Plato, for instance (in Meno, Phaedo, Timaeus, Phaedrus,
and the Republic), espouses belief in the doctrine of reincarnation. He seems to have been influenced by earlier classic Greek minds such as Pythagorean and Empedocles. In the eighteenth century, the Age of Enlightenment and Rationalism, thinkers like Voltaire ("After all, it is no more surprising to be born twice than it is to be born once") and Benjamin Franklin expressed an affinity for the notion of reincarnation. In the nineteenth century, Schopenhauer wrote (Parerga and Paralipomena), "Were an Asiatic to ask me for a definition of Europe, I should be forced to answer him: It is that part of the world which is haunted by the incredible delusion that a person's present birth is first entrance into life..." Dostoevsky (in The Brothers Karamazov) refers to the idea, while Tolstoy seems to have been quite definite that he had lived before. Thoreau, Emerson, Walt Whitman, Mark Twain and many others acknowledged and/or espoused some form of belief in reincarnation. It should be noted, however, that some classic Torah authorities, most notably, 10th century authority Saadia Gaon, denied reincarnation as a Jewish tenet. Emunos V'Deyos 6:3.

12. The Talmud relates that second century sage Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai and his son Elazar fled to a cave to escape Roman persecution. For the next thirteen years they learned all day and night without distraction. According to Kabbalistic tradition (Tikkunei Zohar 1a) it was during those thirteen years that he and his son first composed the main teachings of the Zohar. Concealed for many centuries, the Zohar was published and disseminated by Rabbi Moshe de Leon in the thirteenth century.

13. Although the Zohar is generally referred to as a single multi-volume work, comprising Zohar, Tikunei Zohar and Zohar Chadash, it is actually a compilation of several smaller treatises or sub-sections.

14. Zohar I:131a, 186b, 2:94a, 97a, 100a, 105b, 106a, 3:88b, 215a 216a; Tikunnei Zohar 6 (22b, 23b), 21 (56a), 26 (72a), 31 (76b), 32 (76b), 40 (81a), 69 (100b,103a,111a,114b,115a,116b), 70 (124b,126a, 133a, 134a, 137b, 138b); Zohar Chadash 33c, 59a-c, 107a; Ruth 89a.

15. The Zohar (I 131a): "Rabbi Yosi answered: 'Those bodies which were unworthy and did not achieve their purpose will be regarded as though they had not been?Rabbi Yitzchak [disagreed and] said: For such bodies the Holy One will provide other spirits, and if found worthy they will obtain an abiding in the world, but if not, they will be ashes under the feet of the righteous." Cf. Zohar II 105b.

16. E.g. Zohar III 216a; Tikunei Zohar 6 (22b), 32 (76b) suggest three or four chances. Tikunei Zohar 69 (103a) suggests that if even a little progress is made each time, the soul is given even a thousand opportunities to reincarnation in order to achieve its completion. Zohar III 216a suggests that an essentially righteous person who experiences the travails of wandering from city to city, house to house - even to try to drum up business (Zohar Chadash Tikkunim 107a) -- is as if he undergoes many reincarnations.

17. The answer is that, yes, it's a possibility, Zohar II, 106a.

18. "After the soul has left the body and the body remains without breath, it is forbidden to keep it unburied (Moed Katon, 28a; Baba Kama, 82b). For a dead body which is left unburied for twenty-four hours causes a weakness in the limbs of the Chariot and prevents God's design from being fulfilled; for perhaps God decreed that he should undergo reincarnation at once on the day that he died, which would be better for him, but as long as the body is not buried the soul cannot go into the presence of the Holy One nor be transferred into another body. For a soul cannot enter a second body till the first is buried?" Zohar III 88b

19. Tikunnei Zohar 70 (133a). Later Kabbalists detail the circumstances that can lead to reincarnation in vegetative and even mineral form. Shaar HaGilgulim, Chapter 22 & 29; Sefer Haredim 33, Ohr HaChaim 1:26.

20. Bahir 122, 155, 184 and 185 also discuss reincarnation.

21. Genesis 38:8, Job 33:30
22. E.g. commentary to Genesis 34:1; his Taamei HaMitzvos (16a) says reincarnation is the secret underlying the ten Talmudic sages who were slaughtered by the Romans.


24. His main works are the Etz Chaim (Tree of Life) and Pri Etz Chaim (Fruit of the Tree of Life), as well as the Shmoneh Shaarim (Eight Gates), which deal with everything from Bible commentary to divine inspiration and reincarnation.


27. Commentary to the Book of Jonah, and many other places. For example, R. Meir Simcha of Dvinsk in Ohr Somayach, Hilchos Teshuva 5, s.v. vyodati; R. Israel Meir HaKohen [the Chofetz Chaim] in Mishnah Berurah 23:5 and Shaar HaTzion 622:6; R. Yaakov Yisroel Kanievsky [the Steipler Gaon] in Chayei Olam.

28. Gehinnom refers, generally, to a limited-time (Edyos 2:10) experience in the afterlife where the soul is purged of its blemishes in a process, after all is said and done, described as painful, albeit cathartic. In a deeper sense, the callous person is recompensed measure for measure. Just as he acted callously by sinning, acting as if God was not present, he is paid back by having to experience Gehinnom, a place, in contrast to Heaven, where God's Presence is in a way hidden, or at least not as open and free-flowing. (The name ?Gehinnom? comes from the valley to the south of Jerusalem, known as the valley [Gei] of the son of Hinnom, where children were at one time sacrificed to Molech (II Kings 23:10; Jer. 2:23; 7:31-32; 19:6). For this reason the valley was deemed accursed, and Gehinnom thus became a synonym for Purgatory.

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Yaakov Astor, a former yeshiva teacher and principal, has written or edited more than 20 books, including for the ArtScroll Series and all of Rabbi Ezriel Tauber's books. He is currently developing a Holocaust Curriculum for Jewish high schools. Visit his website at: www.jewishsoulssearching.com