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# Reborn Again? A Jewish Moral Argument for Reincarnation

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Special to the Jewish Week

I fear death. I think about dying frequently and often try to make meaning of my mortality. Until recently, if someone had mentioned reincarnation to me, I would have dismissed it as a non-Jewish theological belief. I imagine most people share my visceral skepticism of the possibility of reincarnation and of its authentic Jewish roots, but perhaps we can temporarily suspend this disbelief and explore the idea together in search of a theology that can improve us. Perhaps, this thought experiment can even promote certain moral virtues.



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Reincarnation is believed to occur when the *neshama*, human soul, returns to earth in a new body after death and separation from a previous body. The Jewish medieval theologians take three primary approaches in arguing for the existence of *gilgulim* (reincarnation).

Rav Sagi Nahor, who wrote in the 12th century in Southern France, in the *Sefer HaBahir* argues that transmigration, the re-embodiment of souls, offers the most compelling response to the problems of theodicy in his answer to the question: How can it be that righteous people suffer?

The Bahir answers that a righteous individual suffers as the result of wrongs done in a previous existence. The soul of this righteous person is in fact not entirely as virtuous as it appears.

One century later in Spain, Ramban and Rabbeinu Bechaya both argued fiercely for transmigration and hold that certain *mitzvot* can only be understood given the existence of the concept of *gilgulim*. The classic example is *yibum*, a ritual which brings a deceased soul back into the world through the marriage of a widow to her husband's brother.

Rav Chayim Vital in his magnum opus *Sha'ar HaGilgulim* argues that the importance of transmigration is that it gives humans the potential to seek growth, perfection, and actualization.

He argues that one must fulfill the *taryag mitzvot* (all of the Torah's commandments) completely in order to achieve complete *deveykut* (intimacy with the Infinite), and that we must all learn the Torah in all ways (namely *peshat*, *remez*, *drash* and *sod*: the simple read, hinted, midrashic, and the mysterious). We return to a new life over and over to attempt to fulfill that mission until our intellectual comprehension is mastered. This might provide us with a compelling model for thinking about Jewish continuity through a *Torat Chayim* (living Torah) since our lives are not complete until we have lived the full Jewish experience.

To recap: The three primary arguments being suggested for *gilgulim* are 1) a response to the problems of theodicy, 2) a way to explain certain *mitzvot*, and 3) an opportunity for spiritual and intellectual actualization.

I would add that a theology of the interconnectedness of our souls offers great potential for our moral lives suggesting a spiritual paradigm for universal love and solidarity. When we encounter another, we can see how our existences are intertwined. One can cultivate greater empathy for another of a different body type, gender, race, or age through the realization that we may have experienced everything in a past life or are yet to in a future life. In a sense, we are all multi-racial beings.

While a theology promoting "heaven" may seem to offer an escape from life and this world, a theology of reincarnation is about embracing life and this world. Here our striving continues and we can live as though we are eternally earthly creatures where our soul is not complete until we reach a level of worldly achievement. We are constantly engaged in a process of being made anew. The soul is not complete for heaven; rather it needs a new body and a new venue in which to continue striving before it can achieve a final state of completion. How do we reconcile this with the concept of *Olam Habah* (the world to come) and the importance we place on reaching it? Is being "Inscribed in the book of life" on Yom Kippur an argument for *gilgulim*?

Whether or not we are convinced that reincarnation adequately addresses certain issues of theodicy, we can acknowledge how these new possibilities raise new and exciting theological possibilities. Acquiring this belief offers the potential to enhance the cultivation of a certain moral consciousness. Perhaps we can return to be better parents, more ethical consumers, more spiritually minded, or more giving to the poor? The return to this world is perhaps not a punishment but a vote of confidence that we all can ultimately succeed in the game of life!

If we love life, we must seek and crave its eternal perpetuation. What seems compelling about a theology of afterlife qua reincarnation is not an avoidance of living in this world like some models of heaven may be. Rather this belief is concerned with taking ownership of our complete existence. The moral enterprise of *gilgulim* is concerned with our taking responsibility for the cultivation of the past, present, and future of our souls for our full transcendental ontological existence, our core being and deeper self. It is taking ownership for eternity and responsibility for all of creation. Global warming is not the problem for my grandchildren rather it is the problem for my own life as well. This is perhaps the highest moral and spiritual challenge: we are asked to take responsibility of our full existence! We are spiritually connected not just in the here and now but in an ongoing way as well.

Of course, there are no solid proofs for what happens for us after this world, but our guiding theology should make us better people. For me, embracing a theology of reincarnation, albeit with some skepticism, can offer that possibility.

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