

Bridging East and West: Reincarnation

I. Greek Views

1...the conviction that the soul both leaves the body at death and passes into another body can only be securely attributed to Pythagoras (6th c. BCE)...It was Plato...who gave definitive shape to the idea of reincarnation as a punishment...At death, the soul goes to the underworld to face judgment for its past life. Recompense is meted out either solely in the underworld or also by a new incarnation...life in the body is inimical to the soul and something from which it desires to be released. (Professor Steve Mason, *Flavius Josephus on the Pharisees*, 162-3)

II. Jewish Views

2. *Josephus, War 3:374*

[good] souls...are allotted the most holy place in heaven, whence, in the revolution of the ages, they return to find in chaste bodies a new habitation.

3. **ספר האמונות והדעות מאמר ו (R. Saadya Gaon, Babylonia, 10th c.)**
אבל אומר שאנשים ממי שנקראים יהודים...ענינו אצלם שרוח ראובן תשוב אל שמעון, ואחר כן בלוי, ואחד כן ביהודה...יש פעמים שתהיה רוח האדם בבהמה, ורוח הבהמה באדם, ודברים רבים מזה השגעון והערבוב, והסתכלתי במה שחושבים שהביאם אל המאמר הזה... שראו מדות רבים מבני אדם, ומצאום דומות למדות הבהמות. כמי שרואים אותו ענו כמדת הצאן, ורע כמדת החיות, ורעבתן ככלב, וקל כעוף, והדומה לזה. והסכימו בעבור אלה הענינים, שאלה המדות לא היו בבני אדם, עד שהיה בהם מרוחות הבהמות וזה ירחמך האלקים מורה על רוב סכלותם, כי הם חושבים שגוף האדם מהפך הנפש מעצמותה, עד ששימנה נפש אדם אחר שהיתה נפש בהמה.

Those who believe in reincarnation have erred because they believe human traits to be similar to those of animals- e.g., humility is sheepish, wickedness is bestial, ravenousness is canine, etc. (paraphrase)

4. **שו"ת הרשב"א א:תיח (13th c. Spain)**
יזיקנו זה גם כן באחת מן פנות אמונתנו החזקות שהיא תחיית המתים שאם לא נמצאת בין שני גופות או שלשה כי אם נפש אחת איך יחיו שנים או שלשתם יחד? כי לכל חי יש נפש אחת בהכרח.

Reincarnation interferes with one of our cardinal beliefs, namely resurrection. For if there is but one soul residing in a number of bodies, how can all three bodies be resurrection? Rather, each body must have only one soul.

5. **R. Yosef Karo, *Maggid Mesharim (Book of Jewish Mystical Testimonies)*, 148**

When you die, the Rambam will come out to meet you because you have defended his decisions and, even now, he pleads on your behalf. And he is among the saints, not as those sages who say that he has been reincarnated, etc. For let it be that so it was decreed because of certain heretical views he expressed by the Torah he had studied

6. רמב"ן בראשית לח:ח

אבל הענין סוד גדול מסודות התורה בתולדת האדם...והיו החכמים הקדמונים קודם התורה יודעים כי יש תועלת גדולה ביבום האח, והוא הראוי להיות קודם בו ואחריו הקרוב במשפחה, כי כל שארו הקרוב אליו ממשפחתו אשר הוא יורש נחלה יגיע ממנו תועלת:

There is a secret that the ancients understood about the efficacy of the brother marrying his sister-in-law. (paraphrase)

7. Vilna Gaon, *Commentary to the Book of Yonah 4:3*

How does one know where he erred in a previous incarnation?

There are two signs: (a) He stumbles many times in the same area in this incarnation, and (b) He has great desire for this transgression. He became accustomed to it in the past, and it became part of his nature. Therefore, some people desire one transgression more than another.

III. Kabbalah

8. חגיגה ב,א אין דורשין בעריות בשלושה, ולא במעשה בראשית בשניים; ולא במרכבה ביחיד, אלא אם כן היה חכם ומבין מדעתו

9. **Development:** The earlier, influential compositions like Sefer HaBahir and the Zohar only refer to reincarnation into human form. From the early 14th century onward, some mystics espoused transmigration into animals, plants, and even rocks as a form of spiritual punishment. (R Elie Kaplan Spitz, *Does the Soul Survive?* 83)

Truly, all souls must undergo transmigration; but men do not perceive the ways of the Holy One, how the revolving scale is set up and men are judge every day at all times, and how they are brought up before the Tribunal, both before they enter into this world and after they leave it. They perceive not the many transmigrations and the many mysterious works which the Holy One accomplished...(Zohar III:99b)

10. חגיגה דף כז. - אמר רבי אבהו אמר רבי אלעזר: תלמידי חכמים אין אור של גיהנם שולטת בהן

11. **Reincarnation (human):**...the part of the soul* that one personally elevates, that which he was especially connected to in his lifetime, never reincarnates. It is your soul...It is the real you. The other parts of the soul, those which were not elevated in the individual's lifetime...has no real connection with the individual...For example, an individual who is considered a kind and loving person, a person of *Chesed* and charity, is connected to, and therefore elevates the part of the soul which corresponds to the

mitzvah of charity...It is this part of the individual's soul, the part that was his/her distinct part, the "me" of the soul, that goes to Gan Eden, and it is with this portion of soul that he/she will be resurrected...(DovBer Pinson, *Reincarnation and Judaism*, 66-7)

*parts of the soul: nefesh (being), ruach (emotions), neshama (thought)

12. Reincarnation (animal/veg/inanimate): In this type of reincarnation, the "you" of the soul, the part of the soul that one has elevated and associated with, is the same part that now reincarnates...Through this incarnation the soul will receive its fitting punishment...this punished soul does not animate the being, it merely resides within it and suffers. (Pinson, 90)

תהלים כב:כא - הצילה מחרב נפשי מיד כלב יחידתי:

13. Lurianic Version: The first human existed on a high spiritual plane... [but] fell several spiritual levels...soul sparks from Adam's body fell into lower spiritual realms...All future generations of people would bring life with soul sparks that originated with Adam Harishon...613 bodily locations (including eyes, hands, feet, sinews, and the inner organs) of Adam's body...were the source of soul sparks...each incarnation presents an opportunity to purify soul sparks and to elevate them to the higher spiritual realm of Adam Harishon before the fall...(Kaplan Spitz, 86)

14. שער הגלגולים מאת הרב חיים ויטאל הקדמה כב עמוד רז
המדבר לשון הרע וכיוצא בו מתגלגל באבן דומם...כי תמורת הדבור הוא דומם המאכיל נבלות לישראל מתגלגל בעלה האילן...מתגלגל בעלה הנובלת לארץ...מי ששופך דמים...מתגלגל במים וסימנך על הארץ תשפכנו כמים...וענשו הוא שעומד בקלוח המים ... ושם המים נקלחים עליו תמיד והא רוצה לקום ולעמוד ומים מפילים אותו בכל רגע

One who speaks lashon hara will be reincarnated as a stone; one who feeds *nevelot* will reincarnate as a leaf which withers (*novel*); one who murders will reincarnate as one within a flow of water, and the water will knock him/her down. (paraphrase)

IV. Hindu Views

15. Samsara: Hindus believe that the individual is composed of the physical (gross) body, the subtle body (*jiva*) and the soul (*atman*). When a person dies, it is only the first that perishes. The last two entities take rebirth...A person with a good record of actions (*karma*) in his/her previous births takes rebirth in a handsome body...in a rich or a noble household...a person with too many bad actions in his/her record is born as an insect, a plant, etc...This cycle of birth and death continues indefinitely till the individual attains salvation. In the state of salvation...only the soul survives, in blissful communion with God – the Universal Soul...good actions and right belief are not sufficient for obtaining salvation. These merely make a person fit to embark upon the

path of realization of spiritual truths. (*Transmigration or Resurrection*, Vishal Agarwal)

As a goldsmith forms newer and fairer form from a rough nugget, so the soul fashions for itself another newer, fairer form (*Brihadaranyaka Upanishad* 4. 4.4)

He is reborn here either as a worm, or as a butterfly, or as a fish, or as a bird, or as a lion, or as a serpent, or as a tiger, or as a person, or as some other being in this or in that condition, according to his works, according to his knowledge (*Kaushitaki Upanishad* 1.2)

V. Buddhist Views

18. *Encyclopedia of Death and Dying, Transmigration, Resurrection*

According to Buddhism, the proclivity of human beings to pursue self-centered activities results in their karma, the force of such activities, imprisoning them in a process of transmigration in the realm of samsara...It is possible to transcend this repetitive cycle by appreciating the emptiness of the sensible world and thus breaking out of the transmigratory process...Buddhism...does not accept the existence of a permanent and stable self...the idea that there is just one self which goes from body to body is not acceptable from a Buddhist point of view...Once we overcome ignorance and adopt a properly contemptuous attitude to the ordinary world we are in a position to break out of the cycle of life and death, and can then stop becoming reincarnated in something or someone else.

VI. Teshuva and Reincarnation

19 . ספר שיעור קומה (רב משה קורדוויירו) פרק ד עמוד 168

התשובה תשלים כל פגם ויפטור כל גלגול...כי התשובה היא שינוי השם שינוי מקום שינוי מעשה כענין הגלגול ממש שיש בו שלשתם...לזה ישוב בתשובה וישנה עצמו ממקומו אלא ישב את ענינים בשפלות וענוה שינוי מעשה עד עתה היה מכעיס את קונו ועתה הוא משמח לקונו בתורתו ובמעשיו הטובים...שינוי השם עד עתה גאה עתה עניו עד עתה מכעיס ועתה משמח...שהוא משתנה משם רע לשם טוב ממחלל למקדש ולזה אין צריך גלגול כי הוא משובח מאד מהמגולגל שמגולגל נפש ולא גוף וזה מתקן גוף ונפש...

Teshuva can exempt a person from reincarnation, for Teshuva incorporates all three components of reincarnation- change of location, change of name, and change of behavior. (paraphrase)