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# Reincarnation

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# Reincarnation

*Leore Sachs-Shmueli*

Reincarnation (metempsychosis, transmigration, referring to the same Hebrew concepts *ha'atakah*, *gilgul*) is a belief that has been historically present in Jewish culture since at least the tenth century, with written kabbalistic traditions circulating among Kabbalists in medieval Spain, France, and the Rhineland since the twelfth century. This belief holds that the human soul can be reborn in a new body after death. Although it does not replace other traditional Jewish beliefs about the postmortem fate of the righteous soul in paradise, it does moderate the role of hell in some instances. While the idea is not found in the Hebrew Bible or ancient Rabbinic texts, Kabbalists have found hints and proofs for it in scripture and have gradually developed the belief to address various theological problems, including theodicy, and to understand human destiny and purpose. Kabbalists also used the concept for moral purposes, warning sinners of their postmortem fate if they do not repent and correct their deeds during their lifetime. Reincarnation of human souls into animal bodies has been viewed as a punishment for sins, particularly sexual sins.

This belief has reconfigured the understanding of the meaning of life, body, and soul and has intrigued Kabbalists from the Middle Ages to the present. Questions about the circumstances under which a soul reincarnates, which souls undergo the process, and whether there is a limit to the number of times a soul can reincarnate have been the subject of controversy and debate among Kabbalists. This article will outline the main principles of this belief, its historical development, and the major literary sources discussing it. It will also examine the reception of the belief, the controversies it has stirred, and its cultural and social significance. The terms reincarnation, metempsychosis, and *gilgul* will be used interchangeably throughout the article.

**Keywords:** Jewish theology, Reincarnation, Body, Soul, Kabbalah, Mysticism, Purification, Animals, Transmigration, Theodicy, Self, Eschatology

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# 1 General introduction and historical background of the belief of reincarnation

Reincarnation, also known as metempsychosis and *gilgul*, has sparked interest and debates in Jewish tradition. Shared among all theories of metempsychosis is the concept that a distinct entity or entities within an individual, commonly referred to as the 'soul' in Western terminology, possesses a form of existence separate from the body (Ogren 2009). Upon the individual's physical demise, the souls of certain individuals persist and transition into new physical or spiritual bodies or realms of existence.

While not addressed in the Hebrew Bible or Rabbinic sources, the concept of the soul's transmigration into a new body has been explored in various Jewish texts (Gondos and Sachs-Shmueli 2024b: 1). There are many opinions regarding the origins of this idea in Jewish tradition. Generally, there is no clear evidence of the familiarity of the ancient Rabbinic sages with such a belief. It is possible that there was an implicit familiarity with Greek theories of the soul, not through the study of Greek texts but through oral tradition (Ripsman Eylon 2003: 67–73; Scholem 1948: 45). From the Middle Ages to modern times, diverse views on metempsychosis have emerged within the Jewish community.

Evidence of belief in reincarnation among Jews in the East can be found from the tenth century onwards, and opposition to this belief can be found, for example, in the writings of R. Saadia Gaon. (For an exploration of tenth-century perspectives on reincarnation, refer to Ben-Shammai 1991: 117–136; Ogren 2009: 11–21. A comprehensive historical perspective on the belief in reincarnation is presented in Shekalim 1994: 23–38; and for an examination of the concept of reincarnation prior to the ascent of Kabbalah, drawing on philosophical and Muslim influences, see Schwartz 1993: 104–113.) In order to understand the background of the development of this belief among Jews, Chagai Ben-Shamai described the conceptions of reincarnation that existed in Islam in the tenth century. Certain Shiite sects, exposed to Indian, Greek, and Manichaean traditions through Abu Al-Rihan Al-Biruni, believed in the transmigration of souls and reincarnation in animals as punishment for human sins. Ben-Shamai identified two types of beliefs regarding reincarnation: one that believed in the reincarnation of the divine spirit in the prophets and the other that believed in the transfer of souls between bodies. Additionally, the Karaites believed in four levels of reincarnation, two of which implied reincarnation in animals or plants. Were there channels through which these Indian, Karaite, and Muslim traditions were transferred to Kabbalah? This is a question that has not been clarified.

Medieval kabbalistic works, such as the *Sefer ha-Bahir* and the Zohar, introduce nuanced theories about the individual, family, and human history, including discussions on the soul's afterlife. Gershom Scholem outlined a theological and historical picture of the development of the idea of reincarnation in Kabbalah and its connection to the Cathar

movement that operated in southern France, who believed in the reincarnation of animals. (Regarding reincarnation and the Catharist view, see Scholem 1991b: 199–200, 205.) In earlier kabbalistic texts, such as *Sefer ha-Bahir* of the twelfth century, the concept of reincarnation is portrayed as a universal process that operates within the framework of cosmic circumstance. From the thirteenth century onwards, kabbalistic works such as those authored by Joseph Hamadan and *Tikkunei ha-Zohar* emphasize the role of individual actions, whether in rituals or ethical conduct. In these subsequent works of Jewish mysticism, reincarnation is depicted mainly as a theological consequence emerging from human transgressions and sins.

Following the expulsion of Jews from the Iberian Peninsula in the sixteenth century, there was a surge of interest in metempsychosis, as it provided theological explanations for the challenges faced by Jews and offered a framework to understand their historical experiences within a broader scope (Gondos and Sachs-Shmueli 2024b: 3–4, 8–12). The Safed Kabbalists of the sixteenth century and later Hasidic masters emphasize the significance of the soul's interiority, intentions, and past experiences, presenting death as merely one stage in the soul's quest for completeness.

As will be delineated in this article, reincarnation in Jewish tradition encompasses a range of theological and cultural perspectives and has been studied across different historical periods.

## **2 Major principles of the belief and their theological framework in the Middle Ages**

Kabbalistic teachings played a significant role in the development of the belief in reincarnation. (For an introduction to notions of reincarnation – variously referred to as *gilgul*, transmigration, and metempsychosis – in Kabbalah, refer to Scholem 1974: 344–355; 1991b: 197–250; Oron 1989: 277–289; see also Hallamish 1999: 281–309; Matt 2009: 38–39; Levin 2016: 48–98; Gondos and Sachs-Shmueli 2024b.) *Gilgul* (reincarnation) is harnessed to address theological quandaries, including the predicament of innocent or righteous individuals subjected to suffering. This multifaceted belief has been interpreted as both a form of retribution and an avenue for individuals to fulfil unaccomplished commandments, thereby achieving a sense of completeness. Divergent perspectives emerged within various kabbalistic traditions regarding the scope of reincarnation's application. Some Zoharic traditions limited its scope to offer opportunities for those who had not procreated (Haskell 2024), while other branches of kabbalistic thought extended reincarnation's purpose to encompass soul purification and atonement for a range of transgressions (Sachs-Shmueli 2024b: 197–262).

Notably, the belief in the transmigration of human souls into animals developed during the thirteenth century (Sachs-Shmueli 2023). Despite encountering resistance from some scholars (Gottlieb 1971; Ravitzky 1989), this notion found wide acceptance in the modern period, permeating both folklore and practices such as kosher slaughter, underlining the intricate ethical relationship between human beings and the animal kingdom.

Moreover, the concept of reincarnation served as an invaluable hermeneutical tool, facilitating the identification of connections between various biblical and Rabbinical images. In the sixteenth century, the concept took on a new role, illuminating the historical trajectory of individual souls through a chain of reincarnations. This facilitated the establishment of a unique self-identity and a personal mission for spiritual restoration (Fishbane 2024). Importantly, this process held broader implications for national and cosmic redemption, with the belief that individual reparations contribute to the advancement of the messianic era (Lachter 2024). The cyclical nature of existence, central to this belief, provided a comprehensive framework for understanding the historical–national journey from exile to redemption and ultimately to the dawn of the messianic age.

In certain kabbalistic strands, the scope of reincarnation expanded further, transforming into a cosmic law that encompassed all aspects of creation (Schnytzer 2024). This all-encompassing perspective saw reincarnation as a mechanism for the transformation of all beings and matter, from the lowest to the highest, symbolizing the interconnectedness and interdependence of the entire cosmic order.

## **2.1 Reincarnation and impregnation**

Terms like *gilgul* (reincarnation) and *ibbur* (soul-impregnation) were introduced to distinguish between the soul's entry into a new body at birth and its entry into a person's body at an unspecified point in their lifetime. Moshe Idel sought to differentiate between the concept of impregnation (*ibbur*) as understood in the early stages of Kabbalah – as the parallel concept to the secret of the moon (*sod ha-yareach*), which pertains to the descent of abundance within the realm of the sefirot and the transition of the tenth *sefirah* – and the concept of *gilgul* or *ibbur* as understood by Nachmanides (Moses ben Nachman, known as Ramban; Girona, thirteenth century) and his followers, which conveys a sense of horizon, namely the transmigration of the soul from one body to another, typically as a reward or punishment for human transgressions (Idel 2024). Nachmanides attributed esotericism to this doctrine, and hinted at its meaning as a secret for the commandment of levirate marriage (*yibbum*). (Concerning the aura of secrecy towards reincarnation in Nahmanides' attitude, see Scholem 1991b: 207–208.)

Idel discerned a difference between Nachmanides' interpretation and the understanding of *ibbur* shared by the Kabbalists of Girona, who viewed *ibbur* as a process occurring within the world of theosophy and not directly associated with the transmigration of souls

between human bodies. Later on, he identified a merging of these traditions that led to a blurring of the distinction between them, as exemplified by the works of the late thirteenth-century Kabbalist Isaac of Acre in *Me'irat Einayim* and by later authors within the kabbalistic tradition of Safed.

In the sixteenth century, the concept of 'soul impregnation' encompassed the belief that an individual could, within their lifetime, assimilate an additional righteous soul into their being. This supplementary soul would operate in conjunction with the person's existing soul, amplifying their virtuous conduct. While closely related, this concept maintains a distinction from the notion of a *dybbuk*, wherein a person is intruded upon by a second soul that disrupts their inner equilibrium (Chajes 2003; Gondos 2024). However, both the concepts of soul impregnation and *dybbuk* diverge from the idea of reincarnation, which involves a previously experienced soul entering a new body. The latter concepts pertain to the introduction of a secondary soul, from a past life, into a body already inhabited by another soul.

## **2.2 Reincarnation, procreation, and gender**

Following the connection between reincarnation and the 'secret of *yibbum*' (levirate marriage), the Zoharic unit *Saba de-Mishpatim* primarily explores reincarnation through the lens of procreation, highlighting how rebirth serves the purpose of sustaining birth itself (Haskell 2024; Giller 1998; 2001: 36, 41, 54–60; Yisraeli 2005; Kaniel 2015). This perspective aligns with Jewish traditional emphasis on the commandment to multiply (Cohen 1989), and with the Zoharic preoccupation with family, marital sexuality, and life (Biale 1997: 97–98; Haskell 2012: 92–95, 106–108, 151–154; Sachs-Shmueli and Goldman 2021; Sachs-Shmueli 2021; on the obligation to procreate as the preservation of the divine form, see Wolfson 1995: 92–98). The Zohar extends this commandment beyond life, linking it to the soul's disposition after death. Those neglecting progeny face exclusion from the world to come. Building upon images from the *Sefer ha-Bahir*, the Zohar likens childless individuals to barren trees, necessitating 'replanting' through reincarnation for rectification (Haskell 2024: 52). For the image of sowing and planting of soul in the *Sefer ha-Bahir*, see Scholem 1991b: 201–202.

The Kabbalists viewed the soul as androgynous, and able to alternate between male and female bodies (Mopsik 2005: 38–48). In *Tiqqunei ha-Zohar* (or *Tikkunim*), if a soul changes gender in the course of *gilgul*, gender dysphoria could result in the soul's next incarnation (Giller 2024: 84). Infertility is another result of gender confusion in the processes of reincarnation. Nonetheless, these perspectives did not uphold gender equality; instead, a male soul's reincarnation into a female body was often seen as a form of punishment, implying a degradation of the soul to a lesser human existence (Sachs-Shmueli 2024b: 245).

## 2.3 Purification of the soul from its sin

The idea of reincarnation appeared more widely and exoterically in the last quarter of the thirteenth century and the beginning of the fourteenth century, with works like *Rationales of the Negative Commandments* by R. Joseph of Hamadan. In this stage, the idea of reincarnation was established as both punishment for sin and an opportunity to purify one's soul in order to enable its eternal existence in union with the divine. Following the image of a garment in the *Sefer ha-Bahir*, Kabbalists active mainly in Spain in the thirteenth and fourteenth century, like R. Todros Abulafia, Joseph of Hamdan, Joseph Angelet, and R. David Ben Yehudah the Pious, viewed the role of reincarnation as a process of purifying and whitening the soul from its sins. In the *Sefer ha-Bahir*, the parable of the garment likens the soul to a garment which requires cleansing and serves to underscore the process which prepares the soul for its return and conjoining (*devekut*) with the creator (Scholem 1991b: 200–203, 207–209, 219–221; 1997: 203–204). (Avishai Bar-Asher offers a different understanding of the origins of the *Sefer ha-Bahir*'s notion of *gilgul*; see Bar-Asher 2019: 512–513.) Following this imagery, Kabbalists in the thirteenth century likened the cleansing of the soul from the corporeal thickness created by sin to washing a stained garment. This process is also compared to a woman returning to her first husband. The cleaving and conjoining of this process depends on thoroughness.

Kabbalists use the active verbs 'to clarify', 'to refine', and 'to whiten' in order to elucidate the purpose of reincarnation as a means of purification for the soul, which has become tarnished by the blemishes of transgressions. However, humans can anticipate their own purification and refinement from sin through the rectifications of transgressions and the detailed process of repentance. An effective course of repentance has the potential to spare the soul from undergoing the ordeal of reincarnation. Conversely, an individual who does not succeed in rectifying their transgressions entirely is fated to experience reincarnation. This serves as a means of purifying their soul and affording them a second opportunity to amend their behaviour.

## 2.4 Reincarnation as an opportunity for completion

In the school of R. Shlomo ben Aderet (known as Rashba, thirteenth-century Spain), the concept of reincarnation was classified into two distinct categories: (a) for those who had not fulfilled their allotted lifespan, and (b) for those who had committed transgressions (Scholem 1991b: 209–212). This view not only encompassed individuals who had sinned but also righteous ones who had yet to fully achieve their designated purpose in their initial life. Notably, this conception of reincarnation was not solely punitive; rather, it provided an avenue for individuals to address commandments they had not managed to fulfil during their lifetime.

This concept was further refined within the context of the *Tiqqunei ha-Zohar*, which laid the foundation for the subsequent development of Lurianic Kabbalah in sixteenth-century Safed. The idea of reincarnation was linked to the medieval concept of the ‘garment of the soul’ (*haluqqa de-rebanan*) as an ‘ethereal’ or astral body, providing and promising the immortality of the soul, and continuity of the individual personality in paradise, influenced by Nachmanides’ teachings (Wolfson 1990; Bar-Asher 2014; note that this was a separate concept from the parable of the garment described above). It posited that the soul is a spiritual entity composed of spiritual limbs, and its perpetuity depended on a ‘garment’ woven through the practice of commandments during one’s life. Building upon this framework, *Tiqqunei ha-Zohar* suggested that if any of these spiritual limbs were compromised due to transgression or neglect of its corresponding commandment, reincarnation would facilitate the completion of that specific aspect. Thus, each lifespan awarded an opportunity to repair and rectify (*tiqqun*) a ‘damaged’ limb. Once this progression culminates, the soul experiences ultimate liberation, undergoing a final reincarnation and within the domain of the tenth *sefirah*, enabling a union of the soul to the feminine deity, the Shekhinah.

In the evolution of Lurianic Kabbalah, the concept was broadened. Lurianic Kabbalah introduced the notion that most individuals, if not all, could not comprehensively fulfil the entirety of their commandment obligations in a single lifetime (Fishbane 2024; Tamari 2009; Fine 2003: 192, 300–358; Magid 2008: 64–68, 136–140, 184–195, 223–225). As discussed by Eitan P. Fishbane, individuals were now encouraged to engage with each commandment on five distinct spiritual levels of the soul and through the fourfold method of interpretation (the PaRDeS) (Fishbane 2024: 210–212). This encompassed not just the practical execution of the commandment and knowledge of all its legal aspect, but also necessitated a comprehension of kabbalistic wisdom and the rationale underlying each one. This enriched perspective deepened the significance of reincarnation within the framework of Lurianic Kabbalah.

## **2.5 Reincarnation as theodicy and justification for human suffering**

The notion of reincarnation already was testified by Saadia Gaon in the tenth century. In his *Book of Beliefs*, reincarnation functions as a mechanism for theodicy, seeking to provide an explanation for the enduring enigma of why the righteous undergo suffering (Diamond 2024; Ogren 2009: 12–13). This belief, also expressed in the *Sefer ha-Bahir* and expanded by later Kabbalists, proposes that the soul’s transgressions in prior lifetimes offer a resolution to this perplexing dilemma. This interpretation not only cultivates a heightened sense of personal responsibility and accountability for the individual soul’s past transgressions but also underscores a belief in divine justice. It asserts that suffering is not arbitrary; rather, it stems from concealed causes embedded within previous lifetimes,

thus remaining beyond human perception. This principle continued to be embraced by Kabbalists across different eras and found its way into folklore and Hasidic narratives in the modern era.

From a different vantage point, and related to an eschatological view, according to authors like Shem Tov in *Sefer ha-Emunot* and *Sefer ha-Temunah*, Jewish souls undergo a process of self-purification through enduring the turmoil of national displacement and the associated sense of disempowerment and oppression across multiple lifetimes (Lachter 2024; on reincarnation in *Sefer ha-Emunot*, see Shekalim 1994: 247–345; Geotschel 1987: 70–71). This process necessitates the elimination of the accumulated ‘dross’ resulting from the inherent nature of the present Sabbatical cycle (*shemittah*), even if it brings about pain (Lachter 2024: 130). As Hartley Lachter demonstrates, within this perspective the afflictions experienced both collectively and individually by the Jewish people contribute to propelling history towards redemption.

## **2.6 Reincarnation of the righteous, chain of transmigration, soul-ancestry, and self-identity**

According to Scholem, the trend restricting reincarnation to punishment contradicted the expansion of the idea of reincarnation to include the souls of the righteous who reincarnate for their own benefit or for the benefit of the world, which he identified in the late Zoharic stratum composed in the early fourteenth century (*Ra’aya Mehemna* and in the *Tiqqunei ha-Zohar*). The identification of soul ancestry or chain of transmigration of biblical and Rabbinical images emerged as a potent hermeneutical tool within the theological framework of *Tiqqunei ha-Zohar* (for example, Abel or Adam was reincarnated into Moses, and Cain into Yithro) (Scholem 1991b: 212–215). This interpretive approach was subsequently adopted and expanded upon in Lurianic Kabbalah. Isaac Luria extensively utilized the concept of soul ancestry, believing he could perceive the history of souls, weaving connections between figures mentioned in both biblical and Rabbinical texts with living individuals, including himself and his contemporaries (Fine 2003: 300–358; Magid 2008: 223–225; Fishbane 2024; Berman 2024). For adherents to Lurianic Kabbalah, this tool unveiled distinct traits of individuals and their unique divine callings, referred to as *tiqqun*. Through tracing one’s soul ancestry, individuals crafted a framework for their self-identity and gained insights into the specific redemptive steps necessary to achieve soul completion.

## **2.7 Reincarnation as a national and historical process leading to the messianic age**

The *Sefer ha-Bahir* introduces the notion of cyclical existence, elaborating on the theme of reincarnation by employing biblical references and the recurring motif of successive generations being infused with souls from preceding generations. While it refrains from

explicit use of this specific term *gilgul*, one can find evidence that in *Sefer ha-Bahir*, the coming of the Messiah is linked to the execution of all reincarnated souls. Interpretation building upon Nachmanides and *Sefer ha-Bahir* contend that once souls have undergone adequate refinement, their cycle of reincarnation into human bodies, comes to an end. This cessation enables them to reunite with their divine source and pave the way for the advent of the messianic era. Reincarnation is intricately linked to the gradual advancement of individual souls towards perfection through successive lifetimes, as well as the collective journey of the Jewish people toward national redemption (Lachter 2024).

Furthermore, as Lachter (2024) shows, according to *Sefer ha-Temunah* (fourteenth century, place and author unknown) the prolonged postponement of the messianic era within the present prolonged period of exile allows Jewish souls to engage in the requisite cycles of reincarnation, leading to the purification of their essence. The depth and duration of the current exile are deliberately aligned with the objective of facilitating the essential spiritual transformation, ultimately culminating in the realization of a spiritual and physical national redemption.

Within the Lurianic framework of cosmic disruption and restoration, there exists a twofold aspect: one pertaining to the broader cosmic context and the other addressing individual psychological disintegration and mending on a specific level. According to the grand narrative of Lurianic thought, the original cosmos underwent a cataclysmic rupture. This, in turn, led to the fragmentation of the once-unified entirety into divine light sparks, forming the roots of human souls. (For reflection on this primordial rootedness in Adam and the role of *gilgul* in the construction of soul identity, see Magid 2008: 53–74.) At the heart of this narrative lies the primary process of restoration, whereby the shattered and fragmented state is mended, ultimately leading to the redemption of the cosmos. This restoration is facilitated through the gradual observance of an array of commandments by individual Jews.

## **2.8 Reincarnation as a cosmic law**

Alongside the view of reincarnation as punishment, there were those who saw it as a necessary cosmic law called *din bnei halof*, which includes all creatures. As Jonnie Schnytzer (2019) shows, the late thirteenth-century Kabbalist R. Joseph Ben Shalom Ashkenazi expanded on the rules and aspects of reincarnation, exploring concepts such as metempsychosis (the transmigration of physical matter) and metamorphosis (the radical transformation of both spiritual and physical aspects). Differing from other Kabbalists and the conventional interpretation of reincarnation as metempsychosis, or the transmigration of a spiritual essence from one human body to another, Ashkenazi introduced a cosmological framework for reincarnation. Within this construct, every facet and element of creation, ranging from the spiritual to the material, engages in cyclical

rejuvenation (Schnytzer 2019; 2024). These cycles encompass both divine justice and divine compassion, thereby upholding all facets of existence. The concept of *din bnei halof* accentuated the intricate interdependence among all aspects of existence, spanning from the celestial realms – encompassing the divine pleroma, the *sefirot*, and the angels – to the influences of impurity, and down to the minutest entities within the universe.

## **2.9 Reincarnation into animals, kosher slaughter, and other implications**

The inception of the concept of animal reincarnation within a kabbalistic framework can be traced back to the thirteenth century. In the late thirteenth or early fourteenth century, the writings of R. Joseph of Hamadan, R. Joseph Ashkenazi, R. David ben Judah he-Hasid, and *Tiqqunei ha-Zohar* indicate the emergence of reincarnation notions. If we accept the credible dating of *Sefer ha-Temunah* to the latter half of the fourteenth century, this kabbalistic work becomes a pivotal source addressing reincarnation, with R. Joseph being the first Kabbalist to explicitly introduce, develop, and articulate the notion of animal reincarnation (Sachs-Shmueli 2023). The interpretative guideline of ‘measure for measure’, prominently featured in R. Joseph’s *Ta’amei ha-Mitzvot*, assumes a pivotal role in the conceptualization of reincarnation as a form of retribution. Specifically, this principle is employed to ascertain the specific species of animal into which the soul of a transgressor is reborn. This notion is articulated through the traditional Rabbinic adage, ‘in the measure with which a person metes out to others, they mete out to him’, or alternatively, using the technical term ‘measure for measure’. Within the context of reincarnation as a measure-for-measure punishment, the gravity and dread associated with sin are underscored. The nature of one’s transgressions can wield profound implications for the destiny of their soul and dictate the metamorphosis they undergo postmortem.

The concept that humans might experience reincarnation as animals is intricately linked to the imperative of treating animals with compassion and recognizing the presence of the divine within them. R. Joseph’s endorsement of animal reincarnation offers a distinctive stance concerning the relationship between humanity and the animal realm. Through this belief, animals possess reincarnated human souls, essentially rendering them akin to fellow humans. This viewpoint serves as a rationale for various commandments, such as the emphasis on humane kosher slaughter, utilizing a sharp knife to minimize the animal’s pain, and the prohibition against consuming an animal’s limb while it is still alive.

Additionally, this notion underpins the kabbalistic intentions associated with eating that emerged in the sixteenth century (see Meroz 1992), and influenced ritual slaughter practices within eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Hasidism, which had an economical and social impact (Shmeruk 1955; Sachs-Shmueli 2024a).

### **3 The dispute concerning the belief in reincarnation and attitudes expressed by Jewish philosophers**

Jewish philosophers exhibited a range of attitudes toward the concept of reincarnation, revealing a blend of resistance and cautious openness. However, unlike kabbalistic thinkers who largely embraced reincarnation, philosophical circles never fully endorsed it in the same manner. The inability of philosophical objections to quell the growing inclination toward reincarnation underscores its compelling theological allure, often outweighing rational arguments. The engagement of Jewish philosophy with reincarnation extends beyond the mere question of a soul's transmigration. As James Diamond (2024) demonstrates, it is entwined with differing interpretations of the soul, personal identity, and whether Platonism or Aristotelianism guided one's philosophical leanings; additionally, a philosopher's stance on kabbalistic beliefs influenced their perspective on this issue. Despite philosophical reservations, the belief in reincarnation entrenched itself deeply, leading figures like Menasseh ben Israel in the seventeenth century to declare it a genuine principle of the Torah, a solution to the problem of righteous suffering.

Saadia Gaon (882–942), the first Rabbinic philosopher to explicitly address reincarnation in the context of the soul (see [section 2.5](#)), directed his criticisms primarily towards Karaites, or 'certain people'. Regardless of the specifics, Saadia Gaon found transmigration so deeply offensive that he deemed it incompatible with authentic Jewish identity.

As Diamond shows, Jewish philosophers were concerned that the belief in reincarnation ultimately undermines one's trust in the goodness of God. Yedayah Bedersi, a prominent Provençal philosopher (c. 1270–c. 1340), is widely recognized for his role in advocating the pursuit of philosophy amidst the fervent Maimonidean debates, and he introduced innovative perspectives to the discussion on reincarnation. According to Bedersi, for example, suffering usually acts as a catalyst for profound self-examination among the righteous, motivating them to engage in extensive self-confessions, repentance, and an intensified love for God. However, Bedersi contends that embracing the idea of reincarnation could potentially hinder the individual's spiritual relationship with God. This is because they might attribute their suffering to the malevolence of another individual, which could trigger skepticism about God's providence. Additionally, their firm belief in their own innocence could dissuade them from pursuing repentance.

In contrast, the philosopher Hasdai Crescas (1340–1410, Spain) justified his endorsement of reincarnation, despite rational objections, through a resignation of reason to the supremacy of the Jewish tradition, possibly influenced by the wider dissemination of

certain portions of the Zohar during his era and their embraced theological concepts (Diamond 2024).

This contention led to debates, as evidenced in regions such as Italy and Candia (see Gottlieb 1971; Ogren 2009: 41–101). R. Michael ha-Cohen Balbo and R. Moshe ha-Cohen Ashkenazi, both prominent Jewish communal leaders, found themselves at the opposite ends of philosophical spectrums within the Candia community on the Venetian-controlled island of Crete (Ogren 2009: 3, 41–70). In 1466, these two figures engaged in an unprecedented and extensive debate centred around the validity of metempsychosis. Balbo advocated for the authenticity of metempsychosis based on a combination of kabbalistic and philosophical reasoning. In contrast, Ashkenazi opposed the doctrine by critiquing Kabbalah, drawing on philosophical arguments, and referencing prevailing Halakhic opinions from around the world.

More specifically, as demonstrated by David Ruderman (1986), the idea of animal reincarnation remained contentious, even in the sixteenth century when reincarnation gained widespread traction in Jewish discourse and acquired the status of a faith principle (for an updated version of the discussion, see Ruderman 1988: 121–138).

## **4 Conclusion**

The intricate belief in reincarnation within Jewish tradition has woven a tapestry of theological, philosophical, ethical, and cultural dimensions. While its roots are not explicitly found in foundational Jewish texts, the concept has flourished within kabbalistic teachings, extending from the Middle Ages to contemporary discussions. Philosophers have engaged in discussions about the implications of reincarnation, highlighting the tension between theological belief and philosophical reasoning, as well as its potential impact on trust in divine providence.

Reincarnation served various purposes within the framework of Jewish thought. Through the lens of kabbalistic thought, reincarnation emerged as a multifaceted construct addressing profound theological inquiries. Theodicy found resolution, as the belief in reincarnation explained the apparent injustice of righteous suffering through the lens of past-life transgressions. The interplay of divine justice and individual accountability underscored the belief's ethical dimensions, while the notion of purification through successive lifetimes offered a framework for spiritual growth and ultimate unity with the divine. The belief carried implications for personal and national redemption, with souls undergoing cycles of purification and refinement in preparation for a messianic era. Reincarnation's influence extended beyond theology to shape cultural attitudes and practices. Its implications for animal ethics and compassionate treatment, as seen in rituals

such as kosher slaughter, revealed intricate connections between the belief and practical aspects of Jewish life.

From its origins in medieval kabbalistic texts to its influence on modern Hasidic attitudes and popular culture, the belief in reincarnation has left an indelible mark on Jewish intellectual and spiritual exploration.

## **Attributions**

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This entry draws extensively from the volume co-edited by the author with Andrea Gondos:

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