

Gilgul Neshamot - Reincarnation of Souls

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The subject of gilgul neshamot, the reincarnation of souls, is not mentioned explicitly in the Torah. In the Zohar, on the other hand, in Parashat Mishpatim, under the title Saba deMishpatim (the Old Man or the Grandfather of Parashat Mishpatim), the secrets of reincarnation are discussed at length. They are then further expanded upon by the Ari HaKadosh, Rabbi Yitzhak Luria, in a book dedicated to this subject, Shaar HaGilgulim, The Gate of Reincarnations.

There is a reason why we do not find any explicit mention of gilgul in the Tanach (only by insinuation and hint). God wants man to be completely free to do whatever he wants, so that he can be totally responsible for his actions. If a person were to be explicitly told that he will surely reincarnate if he fails to rectify his actions, he might remain indifferent and apathetic. He might not do all he could to accelerate his personal evolution. Thinking that he could have no influence on the course of his life, he might renounce all responsibility and leave all in the hands of "fate."

In Shaar HaGilgulim, the Ari explains that Adam had a universal soul (neshamah klalit) that included [aspects of] all creation [i.e. every individual angel and every individual animal - all were asked to give an essence part of themselves to Adam; only as a miniature reflection of the entire universe could he be connected to all creation, and either elevate it or lower it...]. His soul also included all the souls of mankind in a higher-unity. This is why even one action on his part could have such a powerful effect. After he ate from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, his soul fragmented into thousands of thousands of sparks (fragments and fragments of fragments) which subsequently became clothed/incarnated in every single human being that was ever born and is alive now. [The main job of these soul-sparks is to bring about all together the tikkun (rectification) that Adam was to do alone.]

It is important to understand the difference between one great all-inclusive universal soul being in one piece, on the one hand, and split up into many pieces (scattered into many bodies), on the other hand. There are two reasons for (differences to) this:

1) In one great all-inclusive soul, it is difficult to discern the parts (the individual souls) because they are still bound in one great unity. This is not the case when each and every soul- spark takes on a separate body. We can then recognize the uniqueness of each and the characteristics particular to each.

In the end, all souls will return to that higher level of Unity from which they all originated, but on a higher level (i.e. returning to Unity but retaining the special individuality they worked for and acquired). [The Sages have a code-name for this type of progression: Klal U'Prat U'Klal V'Ei Atah Dan Ela K'Ein HaPrat: Klal (moving from a primeval Unity) U'Prat (to a breakdown of Unity), U'Klal (and back to a higher level of Unity), V'Ei Atah Dan Ela K'Ein HaPrat (the final stage of Oneness does not negate the individuality earned during the stage of breakdown).]

2) The second reason (or difference) is that many different souls playing a small (but significant) part in rectifying creation is "easier" than when all are together. By way of analogy, this is like a heavy load that requires being moved from one location to another. It is easier for many people to do their share and carry what they can of the entire load than for a single person to try carrying the entire thing alone.

The same applies to Adam. When he ate from the Tree of Knowledge [before he was supposed to, instead of waiting for the first Shabbat to enter] he damaged all the souls that were part of him. His unified soul was subsequently splintered into many pieces, each destined to be born in a different body, such that each and every one would be able to fix its own small piece of the great soul of Adam of which it is a part, so they could all eventually reunite again as one.

Based on this, the Or HaChaim HaKadosh (Rabeinu Chaim ben Attar, Parashat Veyechi) explains why the initial generations (Adam's and those immediately following his) lived hundreds of years. Only as the generations diminished in spiritual stature did people's lifespans dwindle to 70 and 80 years. The reason for this is because earlier generations had very large, inclusive souls. They therefore needed more time in each lifetime to fix whatever they had to fix. When they then did not utilize their long lives for this purpose, for the purpose of tikkun (for instance, the generation of the Flood), their souls were diminished and fragmented

into "smaller" people with less soul illumination, in order to make the work of tikkun "easier" for each person. This is why people's lives became shortened. From the point of view of the whole system, all of these souls still are part of one great soul that is split up and incarnated into countless distinct bodies generation after generation.

We see from this that the soul is a divine light that enlivens the body which in turn becomes a vehicle for the soul capable of revealing its (i.e. the body's) distinct qualities. This is similar to the power of electricity that flows into a household appliance and turns it on. The electric current itself cannot be seen. We can only perceive it through the medium of the particular appliance we are using. For instance, we can plug a heater or a fan, a washing machine or a dryer into an electric socket, and see that the differences between each appliance are due to slight modifications in their mechanisms (heating vs. cooling, washing vs. drying) rather than in the electrical current that makes them run.

In the same way, we can understand that all the different bodies that ever existed were particular manifestations of one great soul. The differences between them (the souls) lie in the different bodies that they incarnated into, for no one body resembles the next (each incarnation is totally unique). This is why our bodies must presently be buried to return to the basic elements of which they are composed. The soul, on the other hand, that enlivens the body, is eternal. Thus, the bodies of each generation of souls that are born are likened to so many pairs of clothing that are taken off when a person goes up to heaven.

The Law of Energy Conservation

Modern physics has reached similar conclusions. Energy is always conserved. When a physical object burns or rots, the energy, or energy configuration, or information contained in that physical object is not destroyed. It merely passes on to another form. This is actually the same thing we said about the souls. A soul is life and energy, as the Torah states, "[God] breathed into his nostrils a nishmat chaim (living soul)." According to this, we again see that the sum total of incarnations of all the generations is really that of one great soul - Adam - that passes through many bodies. In each generation, and in each body, it takes on a different form. In the end, whatever change takes place takes place in the bodies. Ibur Neshamot - More than one soul inhabiting a single body
There is another kind of gilgul that can take place while a person is still alive. The Ari calls this form of reincarnation, Ibur.

It is usually thought that gilgul takes place after a person passes from this world, after the death of the body, at which time or soon after the soul transmigrates into another body. Ibur does not work like this. It involves receiving a new (higher) soul sometime during one's lifetime. That is, a new soul comes into a person's heart while he is still alive. The reason this is called Ibur, gestation or pregnancy, is because this person becomes "pregnant" with this new soul while he is still alive. This phenomenon is the deeper explanation behind certain people going through drastic changes in their lives. They either undergo a change of mind about certain things or change their lifestyle, and thereby ascend to the next spiritual level. This is also included under the general heading of gilgul-incarnation because they are now hosting a new soul [or an aspect of their own soul or a higher soul of which they are a part] in order to be a vehicle for that soul's rectification. This is what occurs when a person is ready to advance in his soul evolution. This is why the soul has five names, each higher than the other, nefesh, ruach, neshamah, chayah and yechidah. [According to the Zohar, the four higher levels of the soul usually enter a person during his lifetime in Ibur: First, a person receives nefesh when he or she is born; then, when they merit it, they receive ruach; when they merit it, they receive neshamah; when they merit it, they receive chayah. The higher the level, the rarer its occurrence. Very few have ever merited to neshamah, let alone chayah. Nobody has ever received the highest level, yechidah. Adam would have received it had he not sinned.

The Names of Biblical Personalities who returned in Gilgul

In the Ari's Shaar HaGilgulim, we find many instances of transmigrated souls. Moshe, for instance, was a gilgul of Hevel (Abel) and Shet (Seth), as his name indicates (the Mem of Moshe stands for Moshe, the Shin stands for Shet, and the Heh stands for Hevel). Yaakov's father-in-law, Lavan, later reincarnated as Bilaam (during the time of Moshe) and Naval (during the time of David). Rebbi Akiva was a gilgul of Yaakov Avinu. Yoseph's ten brothers who sold him were punished by having to reincarnate into ten great tannaim, the ten martyrs who were killed by the Romans. The reality of gilgul can also help us understand why God forbid young infants die. For there are souls that must descend into the world for a short time in order to do a minimum amount of rectification. Then they are free to leave.

Gilgul in the Mineral, the Vegetable, the Animal and the Human

We have mentioned the principle that everything contains a power that enlivens it. In a human being, this power is truly godly, and is called the neshamah. Animals as well have a soul which is called nefesh ha'beheimit (animal soul). [Plants and other growing things have a vegetative soul.] Inert matter also contains a portion of that power called nefesh.

A human soul can also incarnate in these lower forms as punishment for its sins. In Shaar HaGilgulim, the Ari brings numerous examples of such incarnations in which the soul of a person who has deliberately done wrong, depending on the severity of the sin, enters into various forms of inert or organic matter, or into animals. Only after a long and arduous journey can such a soul return [and be reincarnated as a human being again] and finally have become purified enough to return to its Source.

In conclusion, we were recently engaged in Sefirat HaOmer, the Counting of the Omer. It is known that we mourn during this period for the 24,000 students of Rabbi Akiva who died because they did not treat one another respectfully. When we study Parashat Balak, we see that Bilaam failed time and again to curse Israel, but rather blessed them. At the very end, before he departed, however, he gave Balak advice on how to really undermine the Jewish people by enticing them to sin with the Midianite women, and incur Hashem's wrath... Balak took Bilaam's advice and the result was a plague in which 24,000 people died. It was these same 24,000 souls who reincarnated as Rabbi Akiva's students and died from Pesach until the 32nd day of the Omer.

The total number of days that we count is 49, from the day after Pesach till the last day before Shavuot. Shavuot itself is the 50th day. The numerical value of the words Lev Tov (Good Heart) is $32 + 17 = 49$. Rabbi Akiva's students only merited to Lev (Heart), not to Tov (Good). It was only Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai who merited to Tov (Good), as the verse says, "How great is the Good that You have stored up for those who fear you" (Tehillim), concerning which the Zohar says, this Good is none other than the Hidden Light that was concealed when Hashem created the world. It was Rabbi Shimon who brought this light down into the world, in the merit of which Israel departed Egypt and received the Torah on Sinai. The hint for this in the Torah (that we left Egypt in the merit of something that happened much later in history) is in the Aramic translation of the verse, U'Bnei Yisrael Yotzim BeYad Rama - The Children of Israel left Egypt with a triumphant hand - which Onkelos translates BeResh Galia - they left with a revealed head (i.e. a very exalted level of intellect). The word BeResh has the same letters as Rashbi, the initials of Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai (Resh-Shin-Beth-Yod). Similarly, in Tehillim, the verse states, "You (Moshe) ascended to the heights, and took a Shevi (hostage)." The word Shevi is again the same as the initials of Shimon bar Yochai.

It is also known that Rashbi reincarnated in the Ari, who opened up the Zohar and made it accessible, and whose initials are also Yod-Beth-Shin (Yitzhak ben

Shlomo = Shevi). The Baal Shem Tov's initials as well were Yod-Beth-Shin (Yisrael ben Sarah). In our generation as well, Rav Yehudah Ashlag, who authored a complete commentary on the Zohar - his initials also were Yod-Beth-Shin (Yehudah ben Simcha). In their merit, may we merit to the complete Redemption, in our days, Amen.

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