

[My Turn](#)

Category : [November 1994](#)

Published by Anonymous on Nov. 01, 1994

My Turn

Reincarnation in Judaism

Rabbi Yonassan Gershom

While traveling on the spiritual speaking circuit, I have met many Hindus who were surprised to learn that Jews have teachings about reincarnation. This is because Hindus have often heard about Jews and Judaism only through Christian missionaries, who refer to "Judeo-Christian tradition" as if it were a single religion. Although Christianity sprang from Jewish roots (similar to the way Buddhism came from Hinduism), Christian theologians have long ago rejected or completely reinterpreted many Jewish teachings. For example, the well-known saying of Jesus, "You must be born again," was probably about reincarnation, and not necessarily a reference to changing one's religion. (Jews do not have missionaries.)

The Hebrew word for reincarnation, gilgul, is derived from a verb which means "turning in a circle"-just like samsara, the wheel of death and rebirth described in Hindu scriptures. Jewish teachings about gilgul are not explained in the Bible, but can be found in a collection of mystical writings called kabbalah, which means, in the Hebrew language, "that which has been received." For many centuries, kabbalah was a secret, esoteric doctrine, passed only by word-of-mouth and initiation from teacher to disciple within Jewish circles. Today, many of these mystical teachings have been written in books and translated into other languages besides the original Hebrew and Aramaic, making them more accessible to everyone.

Not all Jews believe in kabbalah, however. Like Hinduism, Judaism has different schools of thought, which do not always agree with each other. Today there are four main ideas about the afterlife taught among Jews: 1) genetic survival through one's children; 2) resurrection; 3) Heaven and Hell; and 4) reincarnation. Among the more

Westernized, rationalistic sects of Jews, reincarnation is rarely mentioned, but, on the other hand, many traditional Orthodox Jews and all Hasidic Jews still believe in it.

Hasidic Jews are followers of the Baal Shem tov ("the Master of the Good Name"), an enlightened spiritual teacher who lived in Eastern Europe during the 1700s. Each Hasidic community is made up of families of Hasidim-which means "pious ones"-who are organized around a rebbe, which is somewhat different from a rabbi. While a rabbi is a scholar of sacred texts, similar to a pundit, a Hasidic rebbe is more like a guru.

The leadership of a Hasidic sect is passed from father to son, because the Hasidim believe that the soul of a previous rebbe often comes back as his own great-grandchild, in order to continue guiding the community. If the rebbe has no son or the son is unworthy, then a successor is chosen from another branch of the rebbe's family line. In addition, it is believed that ordinary Jews, who have not yet become enlightened, will continue to return many times, in order to atone for sins in previous lives.

Kabbalah also teaches that souls will come back much sooner if their earthly lives were cut short prematurely. Examples of this can be found in our own century. In recent years, I have met many people who believe that they have reincarnated from World War II. Since the publication of my book, *Beyond the Ashes: Cases of Reincarnation from the Holocaust* (A.R.E. Press, 1992), I have been receiving correspondence from people in the United States and Europe, who have past-life memories of dying in the Nazi concentration camps. In some cases, they were born into non-Jewish families this time around, but can clearly remember details about Jewish life in Eastern Europe that are not well-known to the outside world.

Jewish mysticism, like Hinduism, also teaches that some souls break the cycle of birth and death, to become like angels in the spiritual world. Elijah the Prophet is one of these, who, like a Jewish version of the immortal Babaji, appears to worthy seekers and initiates them into the deeper mysteries of kabbalah.

Rabbi Yonassan Gershom is a traveling storyteller/teacher in the tradition of the Hasidic Jews. He is the author of two books and numerous articles on Jewish

mysticism, and teaches at the Institute for Adult Jewish Studies in Minneapolis, Minnesota, USA.