

Is Reincarnation a Jewish Belief?

Question:

What is your opinion regarding Reincarnation?? I personally do not see the logic in it and find it quite absurd. I haven't found any clear reference to it in the Tanach. Do you have any teachings on it? In the last couple of years it has been mentioned in some way at almost every shiur and platform where Judaism is being taught that I have attended.

Answer:

1. You are correct. The concept of reincarnation does not appear in the T'nakh. It is similarly absent in all authentic texts of Tora sheba'al Pe (the Oral Tradition). It follows that Hazal (the Sages) knew nothing of this doctrine. A stubborn person might argue that Hazal knew of it but chose not to mention it. To such a person I say: Seeing that the T'nakh and Hazal make no mention of it, on what basis do you claim to know this?
2. It is true that certain rabbis began mentioning this idea in their writings many centuries ago; it is frequently mentioned in the Zohar literature (13th cent. Spain). It is equally true that many authorities have ridiculed this belief and considered it heretical. Reincarnation is correctly associated with Indian mysticism and religion. (See the Wikipedia entry on this topic for some background.) Volumes have been written attempting to explain how these and other Indian mystical notions made their way into Jewish circles.
3. You write that reincarnation has been mentioned at almost all shiurim which you have attended. Interestingly, the very same thing was said to me recently when overseas. All this serves to demonstrate to what extent sectarian concepts and beliefs have infiltrated the Jewish mainstream. Indeed, some would argue that due to this wide spread acceptance a Jew today must accept reincarnation. We reject this position; a view does not become correct because many believe it to be so. Until Copernicus (16th century) all educated people believed in a Ptolemaic geocentric universe. In ancient and medieval times, demonology was considered a natural science, essential for a veracious understanding of reality. Spontaneous generation was only finally discredited and disproved by Pasteur (19th century). All these views were held by Jew and gentile alike; they were the accepted wisdom. Such notions and theories, however, were never part of the Tora, even if assumed to be true in many Tora circles. Rambam (Maimonides) was centuries ahead of his time when he ridiculed astrology; today his view is commonplace. As times change and mankind progresses, we are able to perceive more and more of the Truth.
4. In brief, reincarnation is a foreign and unorthodox belief. It is pernicious and insidious because it tends to focus people's attention on non-issues, distracting them from more meaningful concerns. I recommend that you pay it no heed whatever.

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