

Dear Rabbi,

We have learned that in India and other places people believe in reincarnation. We've had a lot of discussion and debate if Jews believe in it or not. Could you please shed some light on this subject for us?

Thanks,

Whitney L., Aryn T., Jared B.

Dear Whitney, Aryn, and Jared,

Although there are a couple of dissenting opinions, the overwhelmingly accepted opinion among experts in Jewish thought is the reincarnation exists. The "Book of the Zohar", which is the key source of Kabbalistic thought, refers to reincarnation as "*gilgul*". The word *gilgul* has many meanings. The literal meaning is to "go around", like a spinning top. The root is the word "gal", which is a wave. A wave seems to form, live out its life as a wave, and dissipate when it approaches the end of its trajectory near the shore. The repetition of the word "wave" twice, gal-gal or *gilgul*, implies that the wave didn't really die, but now is coming back again for another chance to perhaps go a little further than it did the last time around.

The Jewish concept of reincarnation, *gilgul*, is predicated upon the purpose of creation. Every soul created has a distinct purpose in this world. Each and every soul was endowed with a unique ability to perfect itself through its actions, and through those actions to perfect the world, *tikkun olam*. Unfortunately, not many of us, if any, truly live up to their purpose, pass all our spiritual tests with flying colors, and bring the world to the *tikkun* we have the ability to. It is for this reason that certain souls are sent back, perhaps more than once, to have another chance in fulfilling their purpose.

The Chofetz Chayim explains the concept as follows: *A man once left his home country and family to travel to a distant land in order to engage in business. There, after many years of unsuccessful dealings, he decided to return to his homeland and family. However, when the king of that land heard of the debts that he accrued, he sent messengers ahead, asking the king of the man's homeland to bar the man's entry until he returned to pay off his debts. Unable to return to his home and family, the man had no choice but to return to pay his debts. Only then was he permitted back into his homeland.*

This concept also shows us another side to certain tragedies we observe in this world, such as, G-d forbid, the passing of a baby or child. Without minimizing the tragedy to the parents and to the world, the Eternal Judge may have other calculations. It may just be that the soul of that baby only needed a little more perfection, and was sent to this world to finish off the final touches in order to enter an eternal world of bliss, ecstasy and joy.

The word "gal", or wave, is also the root of the word "ga'al", which means "to redeem", as in "Geulat Mitzrayim", the redemption from Egypt. The wave attempts to break loose from its shackles, to rise above. When it didn't fulfill its desire, then comes another wave, *gilgul*, to again rise above. If the soul indeed succeeds in rising above, and fulfilling its purpose, then it is "redeemed", and allowed to go to its final resting place, the place of eternal life.