

# **God Is With Me, I Will Not Fear**

## **For Yom Kippur Evening**

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As children, many of us were told by our parents that Judaism is a this-worldly religion. In Religious School we were taught that Judaism does not believe in life after death and has nothing to say about heaven and hell.

Nothing could be further from the historical truth. Judaism affirms a deeply, strongly, and profoundly held belief in life after death. The concepts of heaven and hell were well-known within ancient Judaism.

These mistaken notions about Judaism have impoverished us and robbed us of the comfort and consolation that could have and should have been ours. As my colleague Rabbi Marc Gellman writes, “Many of us have forgotten that the afterlife is a fundamental tenet in Judaism. We have chosen to abandon the most hopeful belief in Jewish tradition in nearly every Reform pulpit, and thus in nearly every Jewish heart. And because of our forgetting, I have seen Jews die with less serenity, grace, and hope, and with more agony, than Christians who believe in heaven.”

So let’s set the record straight. What is Judaism’s true core teaching about life after death? Death is real. But death is not the end. Death is not what it seems to be. Death is not a closed door but an open portal. In the words of Dr. Elisabeth Kubler-Ross, “Death is simply a shedding of the physical body like the butterfly shedding its cocoon.”

Jewish spirituality teaches that we may live on in five possible forms: we may live on through the immortality of influence, the legacy we leave behind. We may live on through the immortality of the soul that survives our physical death. We may live on through the immortality of reincarnation – yes reincarnation -- when the soul migrates to other bodies and lives on in multiple incarnations. We may live on through the immortality of the resurrection of the dead in the messianic era, when body and soul will be reunited. We may live on through the immortality of *olam haba*, the world to come, when all will live as angelic rather than human beings.

On this Kol Nidrei night, I want to explore with you Judaism’s take on reincarnation. I want to talk about reincarnation not only because of the huge influence of Eastern religions on American spirituality. I want to talk about reincarnation because historically reincarnation is such a major part of Jewish belief. I know that sounds strange, but it’s true. In Hebrew, reincarnation is called *gilgul haneshamot*, “the revolving of souls.”

Now reincarnation did not come into Judaism through contemporary “Jubus,” Jewish Buddhists. Actually, Jewish belief in reincarnation has been around since the 12<sup>th</sup> century. The concept of reincarnation is mentioned for the very first time in *Sefer Habahir*, “the Book of Illumination,” written by 12<sup>th</sup> century Jewish mystics in southern France. The principle of reincarnation is championed within the classic work of Jewish mysticism, *Sefer Hazohar*, “the Book of Splendor,” composed by the 13<sup>th</sup> century Jewish mystic, Moses de Leon, in Spain.

As Jewish mysticism, or *Kabbalah*, became more mainstream among Jews all over the world, so did the doctrine of reincarnation. Even though some medieval Jewish theologians opposed or ignored reincarnation, by the late 16<sup>th</sup> century the belief in reincarnation had gained wide acceptance among the Jewish people. Reincarnated souls became a regular part of Jewish folklore, Chassidic stories, and even the prayer liturgy. Let me give you just one example.

A 17<sup>th</sup> century kabbalistic prayer before the recitation of the Shema at bedtime goes as follows: “Master of the universe, I hereby forgive anyone who angered or antagonized me or who sinned against me...whether through speech, deed, or thought whether in this reincarnation or another reincarnation...” You can still find this prayer in the current Orthodox Artscroll prayerbook.

Now I know there are skeptics among us. To be honest, as a religious naturalist and a scientifically-minded person myself, I was skeptical about reincarnation. But something changed inside me this summer after I read Dr. Brian Weiss’ first book about reincarnation and past lives entitled Many Lives, Many Masters. I found myself opening up to the possibility of reincarnation.

Now it’s true I read the book while on a most enjoyable cruise. Maybe it was the pina coladas at poolside. Maybe it’s because I’m 55 years old. Maybe it’s because talk of parallel and alternative universes have become commonplace. Maybe it’s because our ignorance of the cosmos is still so vast. In any case, I no longer feel wedded to scientific materialism, the view that only physical matter is real, and so if there is no physical body, there is nothing -- no mind, no consciousness, no soul.

But love, courage, integrity are real and they are not products of physical matter. They arise from the realm of soul. I love what William Faulkner said upon receiving the Nobel Prize for Literature: “I believe that man will not merely endure: he will prevail. He is immortal, not because he alone among creatures has an inexhaustible voice, but because he has a soul, a spirit capable of compassion and sacrifice and endurance.”

So I am a believer in reincarnation because it makes more and more sense. Everything is in a process of evolution: you, me, the earth, the universe. Our human purpose is to evolve and to help the universe evolve. Reincarnation teaches me that soul also grows and evolves. Soul plays a role in *tikkun olam*, the perfection of creation. Each soul is here to accomplish a task, to rise to a challenge, to fix a flaw. Reincarnation teaches me that life is not to be measured in years lived, but in lessons learned and in missions fulfilled.

Reincarnation teaches me that I am more than my body. What's my body without the "me" that animates it? The soul is the DNA of our individual uniqueness. Physical self is just the shell that encloses our spiritual self. Created *betzelem elohim*, in the image of God that has no physical form or shape, God has magnificently endowed us with the capacity to be liberated from physical self and live on as spiritual self, as spiritual energy. Now that's a gift.

Reincarnation teaches me not to be afraid of my own death. Judaism's belief in reincarnation teaches us that life is endless. There is birth, death, life after death, and rebirth. Judaism gives us hope that we will be reunited with those we have loved and lost. Judaism gives us hope that each of us has lived before and will live again.

So I believe in reincarnation because it teaches me how to die -- with serenity and unafraid. Ironically, I also believe in reincarnation because it guides me in how I most want to live—growing, evolving, with purpose, with direction, with soul!

*Adonai li velo ira.* "Into God's hands I entrust my soul, when I sleep and when I wake; and along with my soul, my body too. God is with me. I will not fear."