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*Body And Soul:
Teḥiyyat ha-Metim
and Gilgulim
in Medieval and Modern
Philosophy*

A statement by R. Ovadiah Yosef that Holocaust victims suffered as a result of sins committed in their previous lives raised a storm of protest in Israel because it insinuated a justification of the victims' suffering. Clearly, the notion of *gilgulim* (transmigrations of souls) is part of Jewish tradition. But can it help explain the apparent injustices in the world of human experience? And is such a theodicy really equivalent to blaming the victim? The controversy over Rav Ovadiah Yosef's statement revealed that debates regarding transmigration did not cease after the Middle Ages but are still very much alive today.

Indeed, the debate continues not only within the rabbinic world, but in the halls of academia as well. Surprisingly, *gilgulim* interest modern academic philosophers and not only medieval theologians, and a number of recent thinkers have added considerably to the philosophical discussion on the subject. The works of John Hick,¹ Terence Penelhum² Peter T. Geach³ and others on the nature of personal identity add a new dimension to an old debate. In this article, we will look at the relevance of these writers to a discussion of the Jewish tradition.

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The Philosophical Background

Before surveying medieval views on *tehiyyat ha-metim* (resurrection of the dead) and *gilgulim*, we must briefly review the Greek philosophical background, since much of medieval Jewish philosophy revolves around the acceptance or rejection of the ideas of Plato, Aristotle and their followers. In terms of our topic, as well, the Greek writings on the soul and the nature of the afterlife provide the starting point for Jewish writings on the topic.⁴

Plato taught a dualism of the mind and body. In Plato's view, the soul and body exist independently: the soul represents the real person. Thus, we talk about an individual using his hands in the same way that we would speak about a person using an axe. Just as the axe exists separately from the person, so too the body exists separately from the soul animating that body. Plato argued that the linguistic truth expressed here indicates that the body is not the real person, but rather something utilized by the person, namely, the soul.⁵

Plato further argued, based on his notion of learning as *anamnesis* (recollection), that the soul predates the body. Human beings seem to be born with certain concepts and knowledge of truths, notably truths of geometry and mathematics, and these innate concepts and items of knowledge, Plato reasons, must have been acquired in a previous life. It seems reasonable to assume that just as the soul existed prior to the body, it lives on after the body's death. Unlike the physical body which decays and dies, the soul's immaterial nature allows it to persist forever. Thus, in a famous passage in the *Phaedo*, Socrates faces his death with equanimity because only his body will die; the soul, the real Socrates, is immortal. Socrates actually looks forward to the soul achieving freedom from the shackles of the body so that it can achieve true knowledge.⁶

Aristotle, on the other hand, writes of the soul as the "form of the body."⁷ The notion of Aristotelian forms is complex, but we can safely say that a form does not exist independently from matter. A parallel drawn by Aristotle should clarify this point. Aristotle compares the relationship between body and soul to the relationship between eyes and sight. Sight makes an eye what it is, but sight never exists independently of the eye. Similarly, Aristotle calls the soul "the principle of life." The soul defines the body as alive but lacks independent existence.⁸

Thus, Aristotle would seem to deny the immortality of the soul. However, in another passage in *de Anima*,⁹ Aristotle speaks of the immortality of the intellect. This has led some commentators on Aristotle to sug-

gest that intellectual attainment allows a person to achieve immortality. Some of these commentators struggle with the question whether Aristotle's conception of the immortality of the intellect reflects the personal immortality spoken of in the Judaeo-Christian tradition.

We have examined the philosophical background to the medieval controversy regarding resurrection. The controversy revolves around Rambam's (Maimonides') position as set forth in a number of his works. Rambam discusses the nature of the future existence in *Mishneh Torah*,¹⁰ in his preface to *Perek Helek*¹¹ and in his *Treatise on Resurrection*, or *Ma'amar Tehiyyat ha-Metim*.¹² While Rambam's disparate works contradict each other on a number of issues, they exhibit remarkable uniformity with regard to our subject. In all of the above, Rambam states that the World to Come, *ha-olam ha-ba*, will ultimately be a purely spiritual existence. As a prooftext, he cites the talmudic statement by Rav that "the world to come will not consist of eating, drinking or human relations but rather the righteous will sit with adorned heads enjoying the radiance of the *Shekhinah*" (*Berakhot* 17a).¹³ The image of crowned heads serves another purpose within Rambam's scheme as he interprets it as a metaphor for the knowledge necessary to attain immortality.¹⁴ Rambam's different writings uniformly view intellectual achievement as the prerequisite for immortality.

Rambam's appropriation of the Greek writers' position is unmistakable. His emphasis on the need for intellectual understanding in achieving immortality reflects the Aristotelian approach. Furthermore, Rambam follows both Plato and Aristotle in denying the physical nature of the afterlife. Though Rambam does cite a talmudic prooftext, many other talmudic texts talk of the clothes worn in the world to come (*Ketuvot* 111b) or the celebratory eating of the Leviathan (*Bava Batra* 74b). Indeed, Ravad criticizes Rambam's view by referring to these other Talmudic sources.¹⁵

Several of Rambam's detractors accused him of denying *tehiyyat ha-metim* (understood as resurrection of the body), a sin the Mishnah (*Sanhedrin* 10:1) equates with heresy. In his famous *Treatise on Resurrection*, Rambam states that in the messianic age, bodies will be temporarily resurrected only to die again. While affirming his belief in *tehiyyat ha-metim*, then, Rambam sees the eventual immaterial existence as the true goal to strive for. Rambam could not deny a concept deemed fundamental in the Mishnah, but he did accept the Greek notion that the spiritual afterlife, as distinct from bodily resurrection, is of ultimate significance.

Rishonim before and after Rambam, such as R. Sa'adyah Gaon (Rasag),¹⁶ Ramban¹⁷ and R. Meir ha-Levi Abulafia (Ramah),¹⁸ all take issue with this view and argue that man's future existence will consist of both body and soul. It should be stressed, however, that these three authorities did not view the afterlife as the gigantic smorgasbord/orgy that we sometimes hear about from contemporary religious spokespersons and that Rambam denounced in his introduction to *Perek Helek*. They accepted the import of Rambam's talmudic proof-text that the World to Come will not include eating or other physical functions but still maintained that the body would persist. Both R. Sa'adyah Gaon and Ramban employ Mosheh and Eliyahu as paradigms for a physical existence without physical needs.¹⁹ In the *Treatise*, Rambam rejected this possibility because a body without physical functions would serve no purpose; God would not bring back the body without reason.²⁰

To this critique, Rambam's opponents provide two answers. Ramban writes that from a kabbalistic perspective, a person's physical body somehow connects with the supernal realms and must by necessity continue.²¹ From a more rationalistic perspective, Ramah writes that both body and soul merit reward because both body and soul perform *mizvot*.²² Here, Ramah maintains a Platonic dualism while rejecting any limitation of the person to one of the parts.

Those who took the contrary position attacked Rambam from a number of angles. Even after Rambam reaffirmed his acceptance of *tehiyyat ha-metim*, his relegating the physical resurrection to a preparatory stage before the World to Come seemed to undermine the simplest reading of *Hazal's* tradition. Thus, Ramah describes the *guf ve-nefesh* position as "the simple interpretation of the *mishnayot* and the words of the Talmud, and the accepted tradition of all Israel."²³

Ramah also objected to the intellectualistic and naturalistic elements of Rambam's position. Rambam seems to make immortality dependent on understanding rather than righteousness. Moreover, once we explain the immortality of the soul as the result of the soul's nature, divine intervention to bring about the afterlife becomes superfluous.²⁴ Ramah sees the Greek view expressed by Rambam as antithetical to the Jewish tradition.

Ramban also criticizes Rambam's apparent view of punishments. Rambam explained the punishment of *karet* as the dissipation of the soul and the absence of existence.²⁵ If so, we seem to abandon the model of punishment after death that includes gradations for the severity of the offense. It seems difficult to accept the idea that the transgressor of one

sin involving *karet* ends up no different than a habitual violator. Ramban describes such an approach as a deviation from Jewish tradition, and attempts to explain that Rambam does not truly deny other punishments.

Until now, we have encountered two views on the nature of the afterlife. Rashba takes a third approach, as he interprets the eating of the Leviathan at the feast in the next world literally. Yet he too agrees that it is the spiritual dimension which is the significant component of the afterlife. People will then eat only in order to enable themselves to contemplate God. Rashba also suggests the possibility that the eating will be temporary before the individual moves on to an eventual existence without physical needs.²⁶

Although much more could be said about this aspect of the Maimonidean controversy, this brief survey should suffice for our purposes. We now turn our attention to the debate about *gilgulim*. Following this second survey, we shall see how the moderns can impact on both of these debates.

Gilgulim

The work of scholars such as Moshe Hallamish²⁷ and Ephraim Gottlieb²⁸ proves enormously helpful in organizing the competing arguments in the *gilgul* debate. Hallamish outlines the arguments of those who affirm *gilgulim*, while Gottlieb summarizes the reasons of those who deny it.²⁹ Before proceeding to present the two sides, some preliminary comments are in order.

There is a strong tendency to deny that an admired authority truly disagrees with one's position. At times one may even refuse to take an explicitly stated position at face value, arguing that the position was taken only for tactical purposes or claiming that the authority maintained that position only because he or she was missing a key piece of information. Both sides of the *gilgul* debate provide examples of this tactic. On the one hand, the *Shevil Emunah* refuses to recognize that R. Sa'adyah Gaon rejected the notion of *gilgulim*, despite his explicit statement to that effect. He argues that had R. Sa'adyah known the writings of the Zohar, he certainly would have conceded the existence of *gilgulim*.³⁰ On the other hand, Leon de Modena claims that Pythagoras, contrary to what historians think, did not truly believe in transmigration. He only affirmed it to encourage human brotherhood—since one's present enemy could have been one's friend or family member in a previous life.³¹

Such defensiveness does not always distort the truth, but as a matter of general policy, this approach should be treated with great suspicion. It lends itself to unfounded assertions and unnecessary apologetics. We therefore will proceed with the assumption that people actually mean what they write and write as they do in possession of full information.

A parallel problem emerges with regard to authorities who never explicitly deal with *gilgul*. When does an argument from silence bear cogency? For example, Rambam never explicitly mentions the notion of transmigration, even when discussing the problem of evil and the nature of the soul. This silence has led some scholars to conclude that he rejects the entire concept. However, R. Ḥayyim David Halevi sees Rambam's failure to explicitly deny *gilgulim* as proof that this belief was widely accepted.³² Although R. Halevi's view hardly fits a personality as independent as the Rambam and the other position seems based on firmer ground, we shall not include the Rambam in either camp and will restrict ourselves to those who explicitly take a stand.

One more point needs to be made about the nature of some of these arguments. Unlike some other areas of philosophy where the philosophic battleground revolves around the truth or falsehood of a given assertion, the *gilgul* debate at points focuses on the psychological needs of people. In other words, authorities did not attempt to prove the existence or non-existence of *gilgulim*. Rather, they debated whether the doctrine of *gilgulim* enhances or detracts from the nature of our religious existence.³³

Arguments for *Gilgulim*: When R. Levi ibn Ḥabib received a question about belief in *gilgulim*, he answered that we need the concept of transmigration to overcome the problem of *zaddik ve-ra lo*.³⁴ The oldest Jewish text that affirms belief in *gilgulim*, *Sefer ha-Bahir*, also relates this belief to the problem of evil.³⁵ Indeed, the historically strongest and most significant argument in favor of belief in *gilgulim* is that transmigration of souls helps deal with the problem of theodicy.³⁶ From biblical times to the present day, religious thinkers struggled to reconcile God's benevolence with the apparent injustice in our world. Why do the wicked prosper and the righteous suffer? *Gilgulim* help solve the problem by expanding the life being examined. Perhaps this righteous individual suffers as a result of transgressions from a previous existence.

The suffering of children represents perhaps the most difficult aspect of the problem of injustice. As children clearly are not responsible for any sin committed in their young lives, many theodacists found themselves stymied in trying to solve this problem. However, the believ-

er in *gilgulim* could apply the same theodicy for adults and children. God evens out the ledger from previous lifetimes in subsequent lives.

Ramban³⁷ and Rabbenu Bahya ben Asher³⁸ understood the concept of *gilgulim* as central to the book of Job, the biblical book dedicated to the theodicy question. There, Job's friends offer numerous explanations for his suffering. Initially, Bildad, Zofar and Elifaz speak and later Elihu; finally, God confronts Job. Of course, the reader must decipher which character states the correct response to Job's suffering. We assume that God knows the truth, but two literary factors lead us to conclude that Elihu is right as well. Job refutes the first three friends but does not respond to Elihu. Also, God castigates the three friends for not speaking truly to Job (Job 42:7), but does not fault Elihu at all. If the truth lies in Elihu's answer, we clearly must decipher that answer.

Few biblical verses elude easy comprehension in the way that the bulk of the book of Job does. With this difficulty in mind, let us see the key verses according to Ramban. Elihu says "Then he [a messenger of God] is gracious unto him [the sufferer] and says: deliver him from going down to the pit, I have found a ransom. His flesh shall be fresher than a child's; he shall return to the days of his youth" (Job 33:24-25).³⁹ Ramban plausibly understands "returning to youth" as an expression of the concept of *gilgul*. Further support for this idea emerges from Elihu's continuation of "Lo, all these things worketh God frequently for man. To bring back his soul from the pit, to be enlightened with the light of the living" (Job 33:29-30). Coming back from the pit may refer to a second lifetime with a new identity.

Ramban and Rabbenu Bahya share the same understanding of Job but they differ regarding the popularization of kabbalistic ideas. Ramban describes Elihu's answer as "one of the secrets of the Torah hidden from all except the deserving who received a tradition. Explaining it in writing is forbidden and hinting at it lacks purpose."⁴⁰ Thus, Ramban never explicitly explains the answer. Rabbenu Bahya, however, clearly says that Elihu refers to the notion of *gilgulim*.⁴¹ The debate about popularization emerges from the next argument in favor of *gilgulim* as well.

R. Shelomoh Alkabez adds talmudic support to *gilgulim* as the answer to the problem of injustice. One talmudic view (*Berakhot* 7a) offers a startling explanation for why some righteous people suffer while others do not: the former is *zaddik ben zaddik* while the latter is *zaddik ben rasha*. R. Alkabez explains that *ben rasha* refers not to a wicked parent but to the previous incarnation of the sufferer's soul. A righteous individual suffers if he is a *zaddik ben rasha* because of the iniquities of a previous lifetime.⁴²

A second argument for the proponents of *gilgulim* is that certain *mizvot* are better understood if we accept the existence of *gilgulim*. A classic example of such a *mizvah* is *yibbum*, the requirement that the brother of a deceased man who was both married and childless marry the widow. Ramban⁴³ and Rabbenu Bahya⁴⁴ explain that *yibbum* reflects our attempt to allow the soul of the departed to return to this world in its next *gilgul*. The child born from the living brother and the widow will be the deceased come back to life. Of course, one must accept the kabbalistic premise that it is somehow easier for *gilgul* to take place if the brother of the deceased is the father. In some way, the family connection enhances the possibilities for transmigration of souls.

R. Alkabez explains the mechanism involved. The spirit of the deceased somehow remains within the widow and this spirit emerges with the birth of a child. A family member connected to the deceased is best suited to drawing out this spirit. The kabbalists took this explanation seriously enough to question why it is not the dead husband's father who must perform *yibbum* as the connection between parent and child is stronger than that between siblings. Their solution maintains that two bodies of water share greater similarity than either body does to the spring from which it originates.⁴⁵

Once again, Ramban merely hints at the explanation while Rabbenu Bahya states it forthrightly. Both *rishonim* mention the identical biblical support for their exegesis. In a number of places, the Torah mentions *yibbum* as perpetuating the name of the deceased. The phrases employed are “*yakum al shem ahiv ha-met*” (Deut. 25:6) and “*hakem zera le-ahikha*” (Gen. 38:8). Rashbam claims that the simple reading of the text indicates that the baby born from the new union will bear the name of the deceased.⁴⁶ Ramban rejects this approach from a halakhic and historic perspective.⁴⁷ Halakhically, the Talmud explicitly rejects the view that the baby should bear the name of the deceased. Historically, Boaz and Ruth did not name their son Mahlon, and Yehudah and Tamar did not name their son Er or Onan.

Rejecting Rashbam's *peshat* approach may lead the reader to a more figurative explanation. As the baby emerges from a union effected by the desire to remember a deceased man, this baby will always be associated with that man and thereby perpetuate his name. Ramban and Rabbenu Bahya interpret “*yakum al shem ahiv ha-met*” as the actual return of the deceased brother in the baby. Not only the name of the deceased, but the deceased himself continues in the child.

Rabbenu Bahya points out that this approach helps to explain some

of the difficult symbolism of the *ḥalīzah* ceremony. When the brother and widow choose not to marry, the widow removes the brother's shoe and spits on it. According to the *gilgul* interpretation, the decision not to marry hinders the ability of the deceased to return to this world. Such a diminution of life calls for sadness and even mourning. Thus, as in the house of a mourner, the brother removes his shoe.⁴⁸

While Rabbenu Bahya's explanation of *ḥalīzah* is brilliant, it fails to prove his thesis about *yibbum* in general. One could take the figurative approach mentioned above and still accept the same *ḥalīzah* symbolism. Choosing not to perpetuate the memory of a person might also call for symbols of mourning. Regardless, the kabbalistic approach to *yibbum* reveals how *ta'amei ha-mizvot* can lead to belief in *gilgulim*. Abravanel, for example, chooses to argue at length in favor of *gilgulim* in his commentary on the section of the Torah that discusses *yibbum*.⁴⁶

Finally, many people work diligently in life without coming close to achieving their goals and aspirations. This state of affairs is a source of much frustration. Belief in *gilgulim* extends the amount of time a person has to arrive at a desired destination. If so, we have another argument on behalf of *gilgulim*. Coming back to this world, for example, enables the person who finished five *sedarim* of *Shas* to polish off that last *seder*.

R. Ḥayyim Vital's *Sha'ar ha-Gilgulim* emphasizes this element of belief in *gilgulim* from a kabbalistic perspective. According to R. Ḥayyim, a person must fulfill all six hundred and thirteen *mizvot* to achieve *devekut* with God. Therefore, people frequently come back to this world to complete a missing *mizvah*.⁵⁰ R. Ḥayyim also mentions the notion that each individual must study Torah from the perspectives of *peshat*, *derash*, *remez* and *sod*. People return to this world to learn Torah in the *derekh* they have not yet traveled.⁵¹ Although R. Ḥayyim's presentation is kabbalistic, I believe a non-mystical psychological truth lies at the heart of the argument. In particular, human beings feel the need for more time and opportunities to achieve fulfillment.

At this point, we have seen three arguments for belief in *gilgulim*. Moshe Hallamish presents two more categories of arguments, but the last two strike this author as far less central to the debate. He includes biblical exegesis as another reason to affirm *gilgulim*.⁵² While no one can deny that proponents of *gilgulim* employed verses such as "Reuven will live, he will not die" (Deut. 33:6) as proofs for their belief, none of the verses refers clearly to belief in *gilgulim*. These verses did not stand as independent grounds for affirming *gilgulim*. Rather, the proponents

arrived at this belief for other reasons and then searched for verses that hint at such a phenomenon.

Arguments Against Gilgulim: As we have mentioned, R. Sa'adyah Gaon explicitly rejects belief in *gilgulim*. Unfortunately, Rasag fails to clarify the basis of his objection. He explains why the arguments for this belief, such as the suffering of children and certain biblical verses, fail to convince him, but he does not state a specific objection to the belief itself. Other Jewish writers provide more explicit grounds for their rejections.

1) R. Ḥasdai Crescas raises a classic problem about transmigration. Those in their second reincarnation remember nothing of their previous lives. The few instances of *déjà vu* or child prodigies notwithstanding (and even those instances are not clearly cases of memory), R. Crescas is certainly correct that most people have no recollection of previous lifetimes. Crescas considers this point as rational grounds for rejecting *gilgulim*, but he does equivocate by stating that “*im kabbalah hi nekabbel*” (“if it is a received tradition, we will accept it”). By the fourteenth century, kabbalists had apparently gained sufficient influence for R. Crescas to consider adopting this belief as authoritative.⁵³

2) During the early fourteenth century stage of the Maimonidean controversy, debate centered on the value and danger of studying philosophy. Opponents banned the pursuit of philosophy until the age of twenty-five. R. Yedayah Bedershi defended philosophy, acclaiming its worth as saving people from erroneous beliefs. *Gilgulim* appears on this list of false beliefs.⁵⁴

R. Yedayah offers a fascinating psychological argument against belief in *gilgulim*. People may regard their current efforts as futile if they might still be punished as a result of previous failures. Alternatively, they might feel that their religious success in a previous life allows them to take a more laid back approach in their current religious lifestyle. In other words, the best setting for striving to achieve is one in which the only playing field is the here-and-now. A person begins his or her life without prior advantages or built-in handicaps, and everything hinges on present performance.

A comment of the *Ḥafez Ḥayyim*⁵⁵ contrasts sharply with R. Yedayah's critique. *Ḥafez Ḥayyim* explains that we read the book of Jonah on Yom Kippur because it conveys the idea that a person cannot escape his or her destiny. In the same way, a sinner should not relinquish religious commitments to concentrate on other pursuits, because such a sinner will be forced to return to this world until the sins are expiated. This Yom

Kippur reading instructs us that rather than go through numerous identities, it is prudent to get things right the first time.

According to R. Yedayah's argument, *Hafez Hayyim's* claim reveals precisely what is damaging about belief in *gilgulim*. If successful religious life is just a matter of time, why exhaust energy in the attempt to arrive at religious excellence? A slower approach will, some day, reach the same destination anyway.

This debate provides a prime example of our earlier comment about the nature of some *gilgul* arguments. The argument does not attempt to prove or disprove transmigration of the soul. Rather, the point in question is whether belief in *gilgulim* motivates immediate performance (*Hafez Hayyim*) or on the contrary leads a person to minimize the significance of his current religious life (R. Yedayah).

3) R. Yedayah also mentions a problem in connection with the Jewish fundamental belief in *tehiyyat ha-metim*. If a person has multiple lives, which person reappears at the time of the resurrection? R. Yedayah views belief in *gilgulim* and *tehiyyat ha-metim* as incompatible. Believers in *gilgulim* respond in a variety of ways. Abravanel argues that the initial manifestation of the soul reflects the most authentic version, as all the later versions merely fill in the missing blanks. Thus, it is that initial version which will be resurrected.⁵⁶ Others argue that it is the final manifestation, the end product, that will be resurrected. Some kabbalists claim that a spark of each version will somehow be present in the resurrected whole.⁵⁷

4) R. Yosef Albo places the *gilgul* debate in the context of the distinctions between Aristotle and Plato on the nature of the soul. Accepting Aristotle's view that the soul is the form of the body forecloses the possibility of *gilgulim*; after all, form lacks the independent existence necessary to leave one body and inhabit another. But, R. Albo identifies the Jewish position with Plato's conception of the soul as an independent entity. Jewish thought thus is compatible with belief in *gilgulim*. R. Albo, all the same, rejects *gilgulim* on other grounds.

R. Albo holds that there is a purpose to the soul entering the body as it thereby becomes a subject with free choice. Returning to the body, by contrast, fails to add a new dimension of existence and is therefore pointless. To be sure, kabbalists would easily refute the charge of pointlessness with their various reasons for *gilgulim*. Perhaps R. Albo argues here that God should not require more than one lifetime to realize His plan for each individual.⁵⁸

5) In a similar vein, Leon de Modena questions the need for *gilgulim*. Why can God not handle everything in one lifetime? If more

time is required, God can just as easily extend that individual's life. The argument here seems to revolve around the perfection of God's plan. From de Modena's perspective, working out the individual's destiny in one lifetime appears preferable to multiple lives.⁵⁹

6) de Modena adds another argument from the perspective of Jewish tradition. He points to the complete absence of the notion of *gilgulim* in *Tanakh* and *Hazal*. Surely this notion would appear somewhere in the literature if the rabbinic tradition endorsed it! Its complete absence serves as a powerful argument for the negative position.⁶⁰ Ramban would counter that the esoteric nature of kabbalistic ideas explains the lack of explicit sources.

We should clarify that the aggadic conservation of personalities bears no resemblance to *gilgulim*. The identification of Ivzan and Boaz (Judges 12:8, 10; see *Bava Batra* 91a) is like the identification of Dr. J. and Julius Erving. In other words, *Hazal* apply two names for the same person, not two personalities. In a similar vein, Eliyahu himself is Pinhas and not the *gilgul* of Pinhas in a new body. The Talmud's assumption of Eliyahu's priesthood (*Bava Mezi'a* 114b) proves this point, for the *gilgul* of Pinhas would not necessarily be a *kohen*.⁶¹ Only the complete identification of Pinhas with Eliyahu renders that *gemara* intelligible.

We have seen the various arguments among *rishonim* for and against *gilgulim*, as well as the medieval debate on the nature of the World to Come. Let us now turn to modern philosophy. The questions posed by modern philosophers impact upon both of the debates we have reviewed here.

Modern Philosophy

Philosophers raise a number of questions about disembodied existence, the type of existence that Rambam equated with *olam ha-ba*. They wonder about the nature of such a life. Could a disembodied being interact with other such beings? Would that life at all resemble life as we currently know it? Thomas Aquinas thought that a disembodied soul would only understand, consider and will.⁶²

Philosophers also raise the issue they refer to as individuation. Criteria for the distinctiveness of people in this world are spatio-temporal. In what would the separateness of disembodied beings consist?⁶³ Both these issues—the type of existence disembodied persons would lead, and the criteria for individuation—are significant, but I believe that the question of personal identity is more crucial. Furthermore,

unlike these other issues, the problem of personal identity affects both *gilgulim* and *tehiyyat ha-metim*. Therefore, in what follows I will focus solely on the personal identity issue.

Penelhum, Hick and Geach discuss the definition of personal identity as it applies to reincarnation and resurrection. They examine definitions of identity to determine whether they allow us to identify the reincarnated self or the resurrected self with the previous person. Four criteria of personal identity emerge from their analysis:

1) Continuity of the physical body. 2) Having the memories of doing or experiencing certain things, namely, those done or experienced by that person (John Locke's view).⁶⁴ 3) Shared personality dispositions. 4) A spiritual essence or substance that departs from the first body and enters the second. Philosophers often dispense with the fourth possibility quickly on the grounds that it flies in the face of human experience. Furthermore, like Locke, they point out that, in our everyday lives, we employ the first three criteria to identify people, but never the fourth. Certainly, we would not identify a friend in a new body, with different memories and a fresh personality, because we detect a spiritual essence or substance.

This last point requires elaboration as the many references in rabbinic literature to a soul departing one body only to enter a different body seem to refer precisely to a spiritual substance. I am arguing that our conception of personal identity rejects identification if the new life does not share some fundamental aspects of the old. Those rabbinic sources need not disagree as they may include memories or personality traits within the transient soul.

The third possibility also presents difficulties. Personality traits remain vague and difficult to define. Are we to define John Smith as someone with a 70 on the benevolence scale, a 30 on the courage scale and so on? Furthermore, can personality be transferred without keeping the same body and memories? Bernard Williams illustrates the impact of voices and facial features on personality in his analysis of a bodily transfer between a peasant and the emperor. He asks "How would the peasant's gruff blasphemies be uttered in the emperor's cultivated tones or the emperor's witticisms in the peasant's growl? . . . Could he be the same person, if he could not smile the characteristic smile of the emperor?"⁶⁵

Anthony Quinton counters that "a very large number of character traits seem to presume nothing about the age, sex, build, and general physical condition of their host."⁶⁶ Even so, as Sydney Shoemaker points out, personality may not survive without memory.⁶⁷ So much of charac-

ter is tied up with the memories of our experiences that one wonders whether a given personality would continue absent those memories. Some of Oliver Sacks's case studies reveal the powerful impact partial amnesia has on the personality.⁶⁸ A complete amnesia might make it impossible for the same personality to continue. Apparently, we must also rely on the first two criteria.

The memory criterion also must deal with serious questions. Faulty memories present a major problem. We do not claim that an amnesiac with total memory loss changes into a different person or that a deranged individual who remembers being Napoleon is actually Napoleon. Moreover, there are those who argue that the entire notion of memory defining personality is circular. How does the person remembering know that it was he or she who performed the particular act? There must be some other criteria that allow for that assumption of identity.

The preceding argument has led some scholars to maintain that bodily continuity represents the best approach to defining personal identity.⁶⁹ Yet Locke's puzzle cases seem to militate to the contrary. He writes of a prince and a cobbler who wake up one morning with the personality and memories of one in the other's body. Consider a person in the body of a prince who knows all the details of the cobbler's life, tells his jokes, employs his method of analysis and exhibits the same quality of compassion as the cobbler. Would we not identify such a man with the cobbler, though he wears the body of the prince?⁷⁰

Locke's puzzle case carries a strong intuitive appeal. Thus, the difficulties in defining criteria for personal identity appear long before we even mention the cases of reincarnation and resurrection. This could lead to a decision to abandon analysis of personal identity altogether. Alternatively, and with some qualifications, we can talk of more and less likely cases of identification.

We may require some intermediate position in which we employ more than one of the criteria. We could limit identification to cases where both physical and psychological criteria of identity exist. Indeed, much of modern thought moves away from the Platonic dualism of body and mind as separate entities. John Hick writes that "[t]he prevailing view of man among both contemporary scientists and western philosophers is that he is an indissoluble psycho-physical unity. . . . The concept of mind or soul is thus not of a ghost in the machine but of the more flexible and sophisticated ways in which human beings behave and have it in them to behave. On this view there is no room for the notion of soul in distinction from body. . . ."⁷¹

In an alternative model, we utilize a scale in which the ease of identification corresponds to how many of the three elements (bodily continuity, memory and personality) are present and to what degree. With such a scale in mind, we can return to the questions of resurrection and transmigration.

According to the believers in *gilgulim*, a person returns to the world in a different body with no memories of a previous life. Lacking the criteria of bodily continuity or memory, the only basis for identification of this person with his or her previous reincarnation is similar personality traits. As we have mentioned, such an identification faces the problem of vagueness and might not stand up without one of the other criteria of identity. We now can interpret R. Ḥasdai Crescas's critique in a new way. After all, as Abravanel shows, it is not that difficult for adherents of *gilgulim* to come up with some mechanism for the memory loss. Perhaps R. Ḥasdai's objection was not why does the person not remember his previous life, but rather that the new person cannot be identified with the old, in the absence of memory.

The future spiritual existence according to the Rambam's view fares better than *gilgulim*, but is not free of difficulties. While this view could add memory as another means of identification, it still lacks bodily continuity, the most philosophically sound means of identification. Physical resurrection, however, avoids this difficulty as the resurrected individual shares the same body and memories of the earlier existence.⁷² Thus, Rambam's opponents would have a new weapon in their arsenal in the debate about the afterlife. While the great philosophers of Rambam's time believed in spiritual afterlife, the philosophers of today incline toward the position of bodily resurrection.

This point breathes new life into one of the Ramah's arguments against the Rambam. Ramah contends that both body and soul deserve reward for their work in this world. His language reflects a dualistic perspective on the mind-body relationship; for him, there are two independent units, each deserving reward. The modern monistic approach would phrase the argument somewhat differently. Mind and body must receive reward not as two separate entities, but as an indissoluble unity that makes up a human being.

We also arrive at a deeper understanding of the issues implicit in the statement of R. Ovadiah Yosef with which we began. The critics accused R. Ovadiah of blaming the victims. R. Ovadiah may not have regarded his explanation as blaming the victims because he attributed their sins to previous lives and not to their current lives. However, that assump-

tion creates a sharp distinction between the earlier lives and the present life, rendering the entire approach questionable. If the previous life is not identified with the current life, the theodicy does not work. One who wants to maintain such a theodicy and yet avoid castigating those who suffered must maintain a difficult balance. On the one hand, the person in pain is the same person whose earlier transgressions caused the tragedy. On the other hand, this person does not remember the previous life and will not feel personally responsible for the problematic acts of a previous life. Such a balance will not prove easy to achieve.

Until now, the discussion has assumed that personal identity is crucial to any future existence. Derek Parfit's *Reasons and Persons*⁷³ calls that assumption into question. Due to the problems generated by various puzzle cases,⁷⁴ Parfit makes two revolutionary claims. First, he argues that personal identity is often indeterminate. Just as the question of whether a certain club still exists does not always admit of a yes-or-no answer, so too the question of whether a given person still exists at times has no answer. Parfit applies this thesis even to various stages of one lifetime and not only to reincarnation or resurrection. Second, Parfit maintains that personal identity does not really matter. What does matter is psychological continuity and connectedness.

To clarify: Just as I care about my children, I will care about future people who share psychological continuity and connectedness with me, regardless of whether those people are *identified* with me. If Parfit is correct, the prospect for *gilgulim* or a non-corporeal *olam ha-ba* brightens. Even if the reincarnated self cannot be identified with the former self, the former self will feel concern about the future fate of the reincarnated self.

However, Parfit's thesis appears incompatible with many concepts in traditional Judaism, including the notion of a World to Come. For example, the notion of *teshuvah* (repentance) hinges on my regretting my past deeds and accepting that I will do a better job in the future. Can such regret form about the deeds of someone else who is psychologically connected to me?⁷⁵ Applying the thesis to *olam ha-ba* is even more problematic. As we have seen, balancing the scales of justice reflects one of the central reasons for any type of future existence. Adopting Parfit's theory precludes the possibility of viewing reincarnation or a future world as opportunity for reward and punishment for one's past deeds. Rejecting Parfit leaves us needing to maintain personal identity, and with a strong preference for employing both bodily and psychological continuity as a means of preserving that identity.

A striking irony emerges from our analysis. Influenced by the medieval Aristotelian framework, Rambam adopted a non-corporeal view of the afterlife. Today, the arguments of non-Jewish philosophers lead to the opposite conclusion. The non-Jewish philosophers in fact support the more traditional position espoused by Ramban and Ramah. Arguments of Ramah and R. Ḥasdai Crescas that lacked force in the medieval context are invigorated by the problem of personal identity. From the case of Ramah, we see that sometimes the very people who reject outside influences in one period find their position bolstered by such influence in another period.

Notes

I thank Shalom Carmy, Anne Gordon, David Shatz and Joel Wolowelsky for their helpful comments.

1. John Hick, *Death and Eternal Life* (New York, 1976).
2. Terence Penelhum, *Survival and Disembodied Existence* (London, 1970).
3. Peter Geach, *God and the Soul* (London, 1969).
4. See the introduction by Antony Flew to *Body, Mind and Death* (New York, 1964). Another helpful compilation with a more encompassing introduction is Paul Edwards (ed.), *Immortality* (New York, 1997).
5. Plato, *Meno* 81b-e, 85b-86b in Flew, 39 - 41; *Phaedo* 74e - 76e, in Flew, 47 - 50.
6. *Phaedo* 65a-68b, in Flew, 42-46.
7. Aristotle, *De Anima* 2:1, in Flew, 76-79.
8. In Flew, 78.
9. 1:4, 3:4, in Flew, 74-76, 80-81.
10. *Hilkhot Teshuvah*, 8.
11. R. Mosheh ben Maimon, *Hakdamot le-Peirush ha-Mishnah*, ed. M. Rabinowitz (Jerusalem, 1961), 109-33.
12. *Iggerot ha-Rambam*, ed. Yizḥak Shilat, vol. 1 (Jerusalem, 1987), 315-74.
13. *Hilkhot Teshuvah* 8:2.
14. *Ibid.*
15. See Rabad's gloss on *Hilkhot Teshuvah* 8:2.
16. *Sefer Emunot ve-Deot, ma'amar* 7.
17. R. Mosheh ben Naḥman, *Sha'ar ha-Gemul*, in *Kitvei ha-Ramban*, ed. C. Chavel (Jerusalem, 1963), vol. 2, 283-311.
18. R. Meir ha-Levi Abulafia, *Yad Ramah* commentary to *Sanhedrin* 90b. On Ramah's overall worldview, see Bernard Septimus, *Hispano-Jewish Culture in Transition: The Career and Controversies of Ramah* (Cambridge, 1982).
19. Ramban, *Sha'ar ha-Gemul*, 304; Sa'adyah Gaon, *Emunot ve-Deot*, 7:6.
20. Shilat, 344-45.
21. Chavel, 305.
22. Ramah, 159 in the Solinika 1798 edition.

23. Ibid., 158.
24. Ibid., 160.
25. *Hilkhot Teshuvah* 8:1, 5.
26. Leon Aryeh Feldman, "Perush ha-Aggadot la-Rashba le-Massekhet Bava Batra u-Teshuvat ha-Rashba le-Talmido, R. David ben Zavdi," *Bar Ilan Annual* 7/8 (1970): 138-61, esp. 140-44.
27. Moshe Hallamish, *Mavo la-Kabbalah* (no publishing information given), ch. 6.
28. Ephraim Gottlieb, "Vikuaḥ al ha-Gilgul be-Kandiyah ba-Meah ha-Ḥamesh Esreh" in *Mehkarim be-Sifrut ha-Kabbalah* ed. J. Hacker (Tel Aviv, 1976), 370-96.
29. Also see Gershom Scholem, *Pirkei Yesod be-Sifrut ha-Kabbalah u-Semaleha* (Jerusalem, 1977); David Ruderman, *Kabbalah, Magic and Science: The Cultural Universe of a Sixteenth Century Jewish Physician* (Cambridge, 1988), 121-131; Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi, *From Spanish Court to Italian Ghetto* (New York, 1971), 252-59.
30. Commentary on *Emunot ve-Deot*, 6, 8.
31. Leon de Modena, *Ben David*, in *Leket Ketavim Yehudah Aryeh mi-Modena*, ed. Penina Naveh (Jerusalem, 1968), 194-95.
32. Responsa *Aseh Lekha Rav*, 4:67.
33. R. Kook sometimes evaluated philosophical doctrines based on their effect on personal piety. See Lawrence J. Kaplan, "Rav Kook: The Jewish Philosophical Tradition," in *Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook and Jewish Spirituality*, ed. Lawrence J. Kaplan and David Shatz (New York, 1995), 41-77 and Shalom Carmy, "Dialectic, Doubters and a Self-Erasing Letter: Rav Kook and the Ethics of Belief," in the same volume, 205-36.
34. Responsa *Ralbah* 8.
35. *Sefer ha-Bahir* 195.
36. For the prevalence of this argument among early medieval writers, see Leon Nemoy, "Biblical Quasi Evidence for the Transmigration of Souls," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 59(1940):101.
37. *Sha'ar ha-Gemul*, in Chavel, 275-79.
38. *Kad ha-Kemah*, ed. C. Chavel (Jerusalem, 1969), s.v. *hashgahah*, 150-55.
39. All translations of Job are taken from *The Jerusalem Bible* (Jerusalem, 1983).
40. *Ramah*, 279.
41. *Kad ha-Kemah*, 150-51.
42. See S. Alkabez's commentary on Ruth, *Shoresh Yishai*, 78a-79b (Jerusalem, 1979). See also Bracha Sack's unpublished doctoral dissertation *The Mystical Theology of Solomon Alkabez* (Brandeis University, 1977), 180-83.
43. Ramban, commentary on Gen. 38:8.
44. R. Bahya, commentary on Deut. 25:6,9.
45. *Shoresh Yishai*, 79b.
46. R. Shmuel ben Meir, commentary on Deut. 25:6.
47. Ramban, commentary on Deut. 25:6.
48. R. Bahya, commentary on Deut. 25:9.
49. Don Isaac Abravanel, *Commentary on Deuteronomy* (Heb.) (Jerusalem, 1984), 228-34.
50. R. Hayyim Vital, *Sha'ar ha-Gilgulim, hakdamah* 8.
51. Ibid., *hakdamah*, 15.
52. Hallamish, 225-30.
53. R. Ḥasdai Crescas, *Or Hashem, ma'amar* 4, *derash* 7.

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54. R. Yedayah Bedershi, “*Iggeret Hitnazzelut* in Responsa *Rashba* 1:418. The reference is found on p. 165 of the Bnei Brak 1958 edition.
 55. R. Yisrael Meir Kagan, *Mishnah Berurah, Sha’ar ha-Ziyyun* 622:6.
 56. Abravanel, *Commentary on Deuteronomy*, 233.
 57. All three opinions appear in R. Baḥya’s commentary on Deut. 22:1.
 58. R. Yosef Albo, *Sefer ha-Ikkarim*, 4:29.
 59. *Ben David*, 197.
 60. *Ben David*, 194.
 61. Dr. Harris Goldstein pointed out this proof to me.
 62. See Penelhum, *Survival and Disembodied Existence*, 19-53. The Aquinas reference is cited in Edwards, *Immortality*, 96.
 63. See Edwards, *Immortality*, 49-51. I do not mean to imply that these issues were never raised in the Middle Ages. I am merely pointing out which issues have been developed in the modern period with great depth.
 64. John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, book 2, ch. 27. Locke analyzes various possible criteria mentioned in the article.
 65. Bernard Williams, *Problems of the Self* (Cambridge, 1973), 12.
 66. Anthony Quinton, “The Soul” in *The Journal of Philosophy* 59 (1962): 399.
 67. Sydney Shoemaker and Richard Swinburne, *Personal Identity* (Oxford, 1984), 87.
 68. Oliver Sacks, *The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat* (New York, 1985), 23-42, 108-15.
 69. See, however, George Mavrodes, “The Life Everlasting and the Bodily Criterion Of Identity,” in *Contemporary Philosophy of Religion*, ed. Steven M. Cahn and David Shatz (Oxford, 1982), 199-210. Mavrodes ingeniously shows that physical criteria for continued identity have serious problems too.
 70. Locke, *Essay*, 2:27:15.
 71. Hick, *Death and Eternal Life*, 278.
 72. Some philosophers question how we would know that the resurrected person is the continuation of the old self and not a replica of the old self. For a response, see Hick, 288.
 73. Derek Parfit, *Reasons and Persons* (Oxford, 1984), 199-347.
 74. Some philosophers challenge the relevance of Parfit’s science-fiction type puzzle cases to our notion of personal identity employed for human life as we currently know it.
 75. For a related critique, see Robert Merrihew Adams, “Should Ethics be More Impersonal?” in *Reading Parfit*, ed. Jonathan Dancy (Blackwell, 1997), 263-73. Adams also argues that extended personal projects are undermined by Parfit’s approach.