

“And The Soul They Have Made”: Genesis 12:5 and its Re-Incarnations in Jewish Law and Theology

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Abstract

The practices and beliefs surrounding conversion to Judaism (*Giur*) have developed for more than two millennia, from a vague idea of joining an ethnic-religious group to a structured process with defined stages, procedures and practices. Even though the process can be seen to be an entirely halachic (Jewish legal) issue, it has many meta-halachic factors: social, psychological and esoteric. Another concept that developed in parallel with the *Giur*, with an interlaced development, is that of the soul. Beliefs about the soul-concept accompanied Judaism for a long time; sometimes as a part of the “Esoteric”, other times as a psychological method or as a construct that can explain or enable other beliefs or observations. As both soul-beliefs and *Giur* practices developed in parallel, they were molded sometimes in an isolated manner and sometimes in relation to each other. Both can be seen developing from initial signs in the Jewish Bible during the time of the Mishna and Talmud, and later in the complex soul mechanics and functions of converts in the Kabbalah. This development of soul-beliefs and of conversion concepts is reflected in the Jewish tradition’s usage of a much quoted verse from Genesis. This verse is the fifth verse from the twelfth chapter or, according to the traditional Jewish division of the text, one of the first verses in the weekly Torah portion (Parasha) of *Lech Lecha*. This verse is a part of the text which sets the stage for the character of Abram — later to be called Abraham. The text briefly states that, while in a place called Haran, Abram accumulated wealth and people. The verse includes the Hebrew phrase “וְאֵת הַנְּפֹשׁ אֲשֶׁר עָשׂוּ בְּהָרָן”. This phrase can be read as “the people (or slaves) they have accumulated” and also as “the soul(s) they have made”. The verse is quoted again and again in Jewish sources across the ages while assuming its latter reading. This seemingly straightforward verse will be interpreted and re-interpreted to match the developing ideas of the era of the interpreter in connection with conversion and soul. By following the way various scholars, rabbis and kabbalists use this verse, I plan to follow the Jewish path which links soul transmigration and conversion.