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Editor: Omri Eilat; translated and edited from the Hebrew original by Joel D. Parker

### Life, Death, and Beyond:

### The Belief in Reincarnation and the Phenomenon of *Notq* in the Druze Community

Maha Natoor<sup>1</sup>

Various cultures and traditions hold an array of views, often contradictory, regarding the finality of death. Some see death as the end of human existence, while others perceive death as a transition to a new chapter, a new life.<sup>2</sup> Hinduism, Buddhism,<sup>3</sup> streams of Judaism,<sup>4</sup> and the Druze have belief in reincarnation. According to these religions and traditions, the soul has a defined role in the world, whether through a belief in karma,<sup>5</sup> improving the soul,<sup>6</sup> or divine justice.<sup>7</sup> This article deals with the belief in reincarnation among the Druze with an emphasis on its centrality and provides further details of its characteristics and implications for individuals and the collective.

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<sup>1</sup> Dr. Maha Natoor is a Pediatric Occupational Therapist with Clalit Health Services. She completed her doctorate at the University of Haifa in 2021 in the Faculty of Education with Prof. Avihu Shoshana as her advisor. Her doctoral research dealt with the therapeutic and narrative elements of the belief in reincarnation among the Druze community in Israel. She is currently a post doctorate fellow in the Department of Anthropology at the University of Haifa under the guidance of Dr. Carol Kidron. Her research combines the fields of psychology, ethno-psychology, minority-therapists, and culturally-sensitive therapy.

<sup>2</sup> I. Stevenson, *Children who remember previous lives* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1987).

<sup>3</sup> J. Head and S. L. Cranston, *Reincarnation in world thought* (New York: Julian Press, 1967).

<sup>4</sup> D. Levin, *The secrets of reincarnation in Kabbalah and transpersonal psychology: the teachings of the mind, the teachings of reincarnation, the teachings of karma and the correction of the soul* [Hebrew] (Tel Aviv-Yafo: Gavanim Publishing, 2016).

<sup>5</sup> C. M. Bache, *Lifecycles: Reincarnation and the web of life* (New-York: Paragon House, 1991).

<sup>6</sup> S. P. Berg, *Reincarnations* [Hebrew] (Jerusalem: Institute for the Study of Kabbalah, 1986).

<sup>7</sup> S. N. Makarim, *The Druze faith* (New-York: Caravan Books, 1974).

The article begins with a short description of the belief in reincarnation among the Druze and will then explain the phenomenon of *notq* – remembering and talking about a previous life.

This article, which relies on interviews with Druze in Israel, emphasizes that the *notq* is an accepted socio-cultural script that embodies the Druze identity and constitutes a mechanism that contributes to the preservation and definition of its boundaries.

### **Belief in Reincarnation in the Druze Community**

The Druze prefer to call themselves *mawahidun* (unifiers) and their religion is called *din al-tawhid* (religion of the oneness [of God]) meaning that the oneness of God is a constitutive belief. The Druze religion is secret, only known to the religious Druze,<sup>8</sup> and it does not allow newcomers or converts.<sup>9</sup> These characteristics are expressed through religious commands, such as ‘safeguarding and helping one another’ (*hafaz al-Ikhwān*),<sup>10</sup> and marriage outside the community is forbidden. The belief in reincarnation is held by a majority of the Druze,<sup>11</sup> both religious and secular, and it constitutes a central layer of the Druze identity for individuals and the community.

According to Druze belief, the number of souls is fixed. At the moment of death, the soul migrates to the body of a newborn and begins a new life preserving gender and transferring to a human entity.<sup>12</sup> The Druze also believe that they continue to be born as Druze.<sup>13</sup> The principle behind this belief for the Druze is divine justice; through reincarnation one gets the opportunity to experience different life situations.<sup>14</sup> This principle creates a sense of equality and brotherhood among the members of the community.<sup>15</sup>

### **The Notq Phenomenon among the Druze**

*Notq* in the context of reincarnation means “to narrate.” This meaning is unique to the Druze community and refers to remembering and talking about the previous life. As such, the *notq*

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<sup>8</sup> S. Saleh, “Principles of the Druze faith” in N. Dana (ed.), *The Druze* [Hebrew] (Ramat Gan: Bar-Ilan University, 1998).

<sup>9</sup> S. Fallah, *The Druze in the Middle East* [Hebrew] (Jerusalem: Ministry of Defense, 2000).

<sup>10</sup> N. Dana, *The Druze* [Hebrew] (Ramat Gan: Bar-Ilan University, 1998); S. N. Makarim, *The Druze faith* (New-York: Caravan Books, 1974).

<sup>11</sup> R. Littlewood, “Social institutions and psychological explanations: Druze reincarnation as a therapeutic resource,” *British Journal of Medical Psychology*, 74, 213-222, 2001.

<sup>12</sup> N. Zahr al-Din, *Life after Death: Fact or Fiction?* [Arabic] (Lebanon: Riad Al Rayes Books and Publishing, 2008).

<sup>13</sup> A. Bennett, “Reincarnation, sect unity, and identity among the Druze,” *Ethnology*, 45, 87-104, 2006.

<sup>14</sup> Al-Dhibyani, *Reincarnation* [Arabic] (Lebanon: Byblos Press, 1967).

<sup>15</sup> S. Natour and A. Hasson, *The Druze* (Israel: Asia Publications, 2001).

can be thought of as a cultural idiom that is not understood outside the Druze cultural-religious context.<sup>16</sup> It should be noted that the idea that the soul is capable of recalling the previous incarnation is not based on the religious text and it is not known when and how it became a popular belief.<sup>17</sup>

Notq usually occurs among children aged two to five<sup>18</sup> and for most relates to a tragic or sudden death in the previous life.<sup>19</sup> For children who experience notq usually there is a recollection of names and events that are not related to the present life.<sup>20</sup> Sometimes, they display knowledge or exceptional talent in areas that they were not exposed to before.<sup>21</sup> Responses by those close to the child vary and range from listening and encouraging the child to speak and even helping to find the family of the previous incarnation to ignoring or silencing the child.<sup>22</sup> Occasionally, stories of notq involve conflicts and complexities, such as the fear of parents in the present incarnation that their child will live in two worlds,<sup>23</sup> or the rejection of the child's story by the family of the previous incarnation.<sup>24</sup> This phenomenon is not unique to the Druze, and examples occur in other cultures and have been studied in such places as Sri Lanka, India, Brazil, and Alaska.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> M. Nator and A. Shoshana, "[Between the clinical and the social: the belief in reincarnation among the Druze in Israel](#)," In Eisikovits R. and Shoshana, A. (Eds.). *Mifgash: Journal of Social-Educational Work* [Hebrew], no. 53 (2021): 43–64.

<sup>17</sup> R. Halabi and G. Horenczyk, "Reincarnation beliefs among Israeli Druze and the construction of a hard-primordial identity," *Death Studies*, 44(1), 1-10, 2019.

<sup>18</sup> M. Dwairy, "The psychosocial function of reincarnation among Druze in Israel," *Culture, Medicine and Psychiatry*, 30, 29-53, 2006.

<sup>19</sup> R. Littlewood, "Social institutions and psychological explanations: Druze reincarnation as a therapeutic resource," *British Journal of Medical Psychology*, 74, 213-222, 2001.

<sup>20</sup> E. Haraldsson, "Cases of the reincarnation type and the mind–brain relationship," pp. 215-231 in *Exploring Frontiers of the Mind-Brain Relationship* (New-York: Springer, 2012).

<sup>21</sup> N. Araida, *Ways for the education system to work with Druze children who experience the "al-Notq" phenomenon - a previous incarnation memory*, Seminar Thesis is submitted for an M.ED degree, [Hebrew] (Oranim College, the Department of Education and Teaching of Students in Exclusion, 2015).

<sup>22</sup> N. Araida, *Ways for the education system...*; M. Dwairy, "The psychosocial function of reincarnation among Druze in Israel," *Culture, Medicine and Psychiatry*, 30, 29-53, 2006.

<sup>23</sup> L. Nigst, "'Entering a gigantic maze': The ambivalent presence of previous-life memories in Druze discourse," *Social Compass*, 66(2), 273-288, 2019.

<sup>24</sup> G. Fartacek, "Ethnographic Insights: Narratives Dealing with Previous Life Memories Among the Druze," pp. 15-71 in G. Fartacek ed., *Druze Reincarnation Narratives- Previous Life Memories, Discourses, and the Construction of Identities* (New York: Peter Lang, 2021).

<sup>25</sup> E. Haraldsson, "Cases of the reincarnation type and the mind–brain relationship" pp. 215-231 in *Exploring Frontiers of the Mind-Brain Relationship* (New-York: Springer, 2012); I. Stevenson, *Twenty cases suggestive of reincarnation* (University of Virginia Press, 1980).

## Notq as a Socio-Cultural Narrative

Defined as remembering and talking about the previous incarnation, notq can be thought of as a story, or narrative. From the various examples in the literature documenting notq stories, it can be seen that this narrative does not remain within the confines of personal, private experience, but is considered a narrative in which there are a number of participants. As such it becomes a socio-cultural narrative, sometimes even before it becomes a personal narrative.

The construction of a notq narrative can include several elements: first, the child who provides clues through behavior or speech. In response to this, the immediate family, in most cases the parents, defines these patterns as notq, joined by the extended family, neighbors and other people from the community.

Notq's stories soon become a collective narrative in terms of the partners in its development. Such a narrative serves various socio-cultural objectives.<sup>26</sup> Scholars note, for example, increased social cohesion,<sup>27</sup> defining the collective identity, strengthening belief,<sup>28</sup> preservation of socio-religious laws and norms such as the prohibition of marrying outside the community and the prohibition of accepting converts<sup>29</sup> as well as solving the mysteries of death.<sup>30</sup> Two types of notq stories will be discussed below, solved and open stories.

## Reincarnation, Notq, and their Psychological and Social Influence

Studies that have examined the belief in reincarnation among the Druze in general or the notq in particular note both psychological and social influences. Belief in reincarnation has implications for social practices stemming from the marginal importance of the body, such as the absence of tombstones and rituals of visiting the grave.<sup>31</sup> At the psychological level it has relevance

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<sup>26</sup> A. Bennett, "Reincarnation, sect unity, and identity among the Druze," *Ethnology*, 45, 87-104, 2006; R. Littlewood, "Social institutions and psychological explanations: Druze reincarnation as a therapeutic resource," *British Journal of Medical Psychology*, 74, 213-222, 2001.

<sup>27</sup> A. Bennett, "Reincarnation, sect unity, and identity among the Druze," *Ethnology*, 45, 87-104, 2006.

<sup>28</sup> R. Farage, *Reincarnation: An in-depth analysis of the subject of reincarnation in the various cultures and religions, with an emphasis on test cases in the Druze community* [Hebrew] (Maalot Tarshiha: Books and Computers, 2006).

<sup>29</sup> A. Bennett, "Reincarnation, sect unity, and identity among the Druze," *Ethnology*, 45, 87-104, 2006.

<sup>30</sup> N. Araida, *Ways for the education system to work with Druze children who experience the "al-Notq" phenomenon - a previous incarnation memory*, Seminar Thesis is submitted for an M.ED degree, [Hebrew] (Oranim College, the Department of Education and Teaching of Students in Exclusion, 2015).

<sup>31</sup> R. Farage, *Reincarnation: An in-depth analysis of the subject of reincarnation in the various cultures and religions, with an emphasis on test cases in the Druze community* [Hebrew] (Maalot Tarshiha: Books and Computers, 2006).

to several social and personal elements including coping with grief and loss,<sup>32</sup> helping parents deal with their children's distress, and offers a socio-religious based explanation for children's difficulties.<sup>33</sup>

Along with these influences, which might encourage the perpetuation of notq, the literature has pointed out that there are also conflicts related to the belief in reincarnation and the notq phenomenon. Bennett<sup>34</sup> in her study based on field work in Syria outlined the complexity regarding the belief in reincarnation out of concern that it goes against the image of 'modernity', as well as the fear of rejection by the non-Druze majority as a result of this belief. Other studies draw attention to the difficulty that the family of the deceased experiences when faced with a person claiming to be the incarnation of the lost loved one,<sup>35</sup> which is expressed by searching for proof of the notq story, and a conflict in dealing with differences in age, appearance, and identity.<sup>36</sup> Moreover, it is not only the family of the deceased that experiences difficulty, scholars highlight that the family of the present incarnation also has to deal with issues, such as a 'living between two worlds', and the fear of losing the child to the family of the previous incarnation.<sup>37</sup>

### **Notq: Life between two worlds?**

The person who experiences notq is one who holds at least two stories. In these stories the person lives, grows up and develops in his<sup>38</sup> present life, but at the same time relates the story of another self, who lived in a different era and had a different identity and social circles. In this

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<sup>32</sup> R. Littlewood, "Social institutions and psychological explanations: Druze reincarnation as a therapeutic resource," *British Journal of Medical Psychology*, 74, 213-222, 2001; E. Somer, C. Klein-Sela, and K. Or-Chen, "Beliefs in reincarnation and the power of fate and their association with emotional outcomes among bereaved parents of fallen soldiers" *Journal of Loss and Trauma*, No. 16, 459-475, 2011.

<sup>33</sup> M. Dwairy, "The psychosocial function of reincarnation among Druze in Israel," *Culture, Medicine and Psychiatry*, 30, 29-53, 2006.

<sup>34</sup> A. Bennett, "Reincarnation, sect unity, and identity among the Druze," *Ethnology*, 45, 87-104, 2006.

<sup>35</sup> N. Araida, *Ways for the education system to work with Druze children who experience the "al-Notq" phenomenon - a previous incarnation memory*, Seminar Thesis is submitted for an M.ED degree, [Hebrew] (Oranim College, the Department of Education and Teaching of Students in Exclusion, 2015).

<sup>36</sup> G. Fartacek, "Ethnographic Insights: Narratives Dealing with Previous Life Memories Among the Druze," pp. 15-71 in G. Fartacek ed., *Druze Reincarnation Narratives- Previous Life Memories, Discourses, and the Construction of Identities* (New York: Peter Lang, 2021).

<sup>37</sup> N. Araida, *Ways for the education system to work with Druze children who experience the "al-Notq" phenomenon - a previous incarnation memory*, Seminar Thesis is submitted for an M.ED degree, [Hebrew] (Oranim College, the Department of Education and Teaching of Students in Exclusion, 2015); L. Nigst, "'Entering a gigantic maze': The ambivalent presence of previous-life memories in Druze discourse," *Social Compass*, 66(2), 273-288, 2019.

<sup>38</sup> This article is written in masculine language but addresses both genders.

sense, individuals hold two stories about themselves, as depicted in the description by Stemman<sup>39</sup> of a picture taken in Lebanon showing an elderly Druze man with a young Druze girl aged 11 sitting beside him. This youth who looks like his granddaughter, was the incarnation of his wife who was killed by a bullet in 1984 – she was a teacher and mother of five children. Would it be possible to conclude that this girl lives with two life stories and two self-definitions? Do these two stories continue to exist within her even as the memory of the current life slowly elevates the memories of the previous incarnation? Furthermore, how does the Druze culture enable its people to hold two life stories at the same time?

In order to answer these and other questions a phenomenological study was conducted and included interviews with participants from the Druze community in Israel.<sup>40</sup> The interviews took place during 2018 mainly in the Galilee and the Carmel regions. We interviewed adults (over the age of 18) who had experienced notq and categorized their stories as either: solved notq stories, where the person determined who they were in the previous incarnation and it was often possible to contact the previous family; or open notq, stories in which the *nateq/a* (the male or female person who experienced notq) has a notq story but their identity could not be determined and the story remains open. The findings of the study revealed that the notq cases constitute an available cultural script for the Druze and are considered as accepted stories. These stories arise on different social occasions and allow the members of the community to feel closeness and belonging.

The person who experiences notq, mainly in the solved stories, becomes a symbolic type,<sup>41</sup> and his story becomes part of the collective narrative that serves the aims of the group.<sup>42</sup> Solved stories have a typical biography or ‘life career’: the story usually begins with remembering and talking about the previous incarnation in childhood, which is often accompanied by distress and a desire to meet the family of the previous incarnation; relief after meeting the previous life family; and fading memories. Adulthood is primarily characterized by focusing on the present while maintaining social ties and attending significant events such as weddings and funerals.

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<sup>39</sup> R. Stemman, *The big book of reincarnation: Examining the evidence that we have all lived before*, excerpt from Chapter 20: “Best Evidence for Rebirth,” 1-2, (San-Antonio: Hierophant Publishing, 2012).

<sup>40</sup> M. Nator and A. Shoshana, “[Between the clinical and the social: the belief in reincarnation among the Druze in Israel](#),” in Eisikovits R. and Shoshana, A. (Eds.), *Mifgash: Journal of Social-Educational Work*, no. 53 (2021): 43–64. [Hebrew].

<sup>41</sup> R. Grathoff, *The structure of social inconsistencies* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1970).

<sup>42</sup> M. Nator and A. Shoshana, “The Phenomenology of ‘Solved’ Reincarnation Stories among Druze in Israel: Private Self, Symbolic Type and Daily Life,” *Culture, Medicine, and Psychiatry*, 1-18, 2021.

The open stories include memories of the previous life during childhood but since the nateq was unable to identify and meet his previous family, these stories are fraught with questions about the previous incarnation. At the same time, they are not stories that cause distress or harm to personal well-being since they still conform to the master narrative<sup>43</sup> of the Druze belief in reincarnation which holds that souls continue to reborn within the community, preserving gender and human form. This conformity allows the person and society to accept the “open” story without expecting or having to close it in order to live with it in peace. This story is woven into the identity of the Nateq and strengthens his belonging to the Druze community.

In conclusion, belief in reincarnation is thought among the majority of the Druze to be an undisputed fact and a basic part of life. The notq phenomenon, which is linked to this belief, is a dynamic component of cohesion in the Druze community that defines a collective and personal identity by weaving private narratives into a social narrative. The findings presented in this article deal with the Druze community in Israel. It is important for future studies to examine these questions and findings among Druze in other countries, both in the Middle East and among Druze living in the diaspora.

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<sup>43</sup> P. L. Hammack and E. E. Toolis, “Putting the social into personal identity: The master narrative as root metaphor for psychological and developmental science,” *Human Development*, 58(6), 350-364, 2015.