

Allegorical Interpretation in Hasidic Teaching

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The tendency to interpret the Torah allegorically as a parable of the human soul reflects the primary aspiration of Hasidic teaching to find dimensions of personal relevance encoded in the biblical text. Following a historical survey of allegorical readings in Jewish and non-Jewish hermeneutical traditions ranging from rabbinic literature, Philo and Hellenistic culture, medieval biblical interpretation, and Kabbalah, this essay focuses on the innovative aspects of allegory in Hasidic teaching, especially as formulated in the readings in Ger Hasidism offered by R. Judah Leib Alter, in his work *Sefat Emet*. Two central issues in evaluating the role of allegorical readings emerge: the motivations behind choosing the allegorical mode of interpretation and, in light of those motivations, the frequency in which this mode has been employed through the ages. The Hasidic masters, influenced by kabbalistic teaching, yet re-directing the vector of inquiry from “Above” to “below”, i.e., to the realm of human psychology, adopted allegorical reading as a fundamental interpretative tool that could be applied equally to all aspects of the biblical text, including its halachic elements. A case in point is the new understanding of the idea of redemption formulated in Hasidic teaching, in contrast both to kabbalistic and to Shabbatian views, and the significance of that idea on the national level and in the human spiritual realm. The unprecedentedly widespread use of allegorical readings in Hasidic teaching, and the artistry in which they are integrated by the Hasidic masters are presented as noteworthy innovations intrinsic to Hasidic hermeneutics.