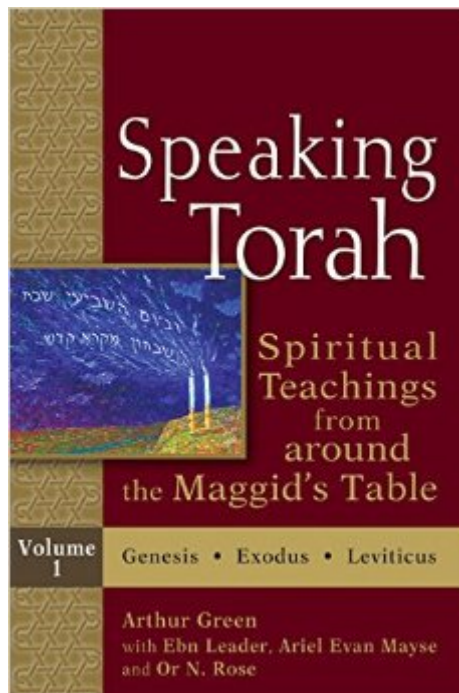


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# Speaking Torah, : Spiritual Teachings From Around The Maggid's Table, Vol. 1



## Synopsis

The most powerful Hasidic teachings made accessible •from some of the world's preeminent authorities on Jewish thought and spirituality."The teachings of Torah, from beginning to end, are read here as a path toward liberation, a way of uplifting your soul and allowing it to journey homeward, back to its Source in the oneness of all being. Or, even better, to discover that oneness right here, in a loving but transformative embrace of both world and self."•from "To the Reader"•While Hasidic tales have become widely known to modern audiences, the profound spiritual teachings that stand at the very heart of Hasidism have remained a closed book for all except scholars. This fascinating selection•presented in two volumes following the weekly Torah reading and the holiday cycle, and featured in English and Hebrew•makes the teachings accessible in an extraordinary way. Volume 1 covers Genesis, Exodus and Leviticus, and includes a history of early Hasidism and a summary of central religious teachings of the Maggid's school. Volume 2 covers Numbers and Deuteronomy and the holiday cycle, and includes brief biographies of the Hasidic figures. Each teaching is presented with a fresh translation and contemporary commentary that builds a bridge between the eighteenth and twenty-first centuries. And each teaching concludes with a dynamic round-table discussion between distinguished Jewish scholar Arthur Green and his closest students•the editors of this volume. They highlight the wisdom that is most meaningful for them, thus serving as a contemporary circle's reflections on the original mystical circle of master and disciples who created these teachings. Volume 1 of a 2-volume set

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

This two volume series collects comments and commentaries, often mystical, from over forty Chassidic rabbis who lived during the first three generations of the Chasidic Movement, from 1740 to 1815. All the rabbis were influenced by The Maggid (preacher), Rabbi Dov Baer, of Mezritch (1704-1772). The second volume contains a short bio on each of them. Four to six comments, many of them originally delivered orally and transcribed later, are given for each of the fifty-four biblical portions and each is explained by the author and his three colleagues - Ebn Leader, Ariel Evan Mayse, and Or N. Rose - at the end of each essay to show the relevance of the statements today. Each of the fifty-four portions is followed by a discussion by Rabbi Green and his colleagues on an aspect of the Chassidic rabbis' views on the biblical portion. The rabbis' comments are short and are translated into English in the front of the volumes, and then repeated in Hebrew at the back of each book. The first volume is introduced with two articles, a five-page "To the Reader" and a seventy-five-page "Introduction," that reveal the early history of the Chassidic Movement, how and why it began in the early seventeenth century and changed radically after 1815. I will comment upon these eighty pages in this review and speak about the Chassidic rabbis' articles in my review of the second volume. Green tells readers that while people generally think that the Chassidic Movement began with Israel Ba'al Shem Tov, who died in 1760, it was really the Ba'al Shem Tov's successor the Maggid who started the movement and passed it on to his circle of disciples whose views are presented in his two books. Little is known about Israel and much of what is known are actually legends, many of which were also told of other wonder-workers, including non-Jews. He was not the first and only Ba'al Shem Tov, literally, one with a good name, but indicating a person with magical power, a kind of Shaman, who could heal the sick, cause women to be pregnant, and the like. A legend states that he didn't want his teachings to be written, but after his death, books were composed allegedly reporting what he said and did. Israel lived during a period when many Jews felt alienated from the views of Jewish rabbinical leaders, their ascetic path to piety, their withdrawal from life, and their insistence that Talmud study is the single marker of a pious Jew. They considered the rabbis' use of an extreme form of casuistry known as pilpul, elaborate argumentation over the Talmud text for its own sake or as a display of one's brilliance, the height of hubris and ridiculous, and that it excluded the vast majority of Jews from being considered true Jews. These feelings began before Israel's birth. The early Chassidic Movement was a rebellion against this cold isolationist Judaism. It began as a movement that stressed simplicity and the joy of life, but after 1815 it changed its beliefs and practices. Green describes the beginning as well as the three rounds of extensive anti-Chassidic polemical literature of 1772-1800. This anti-Chassidic rebellion was not

prompted by the mysticism, the non-rationalism of Chassidim, for those who fought them were also mystics. But the opponents disliked the Chassidic view of Talmud study, their preference for stories of miraculous events, and that the Chassidim abandoned many Jewish practices. The Maggid taught "God issues a decree, but the tzaddik may nullify it." The tzaddik, literally "holy man," later called the Rebbe, a perversion of rabbi, became the leaders of the various groups of Chassidim. The charismatic figures who were extolled with exaggerated claims claimed the magical powers of the ba'al shems, but no longer used their name. Their opponents considered the creation of Rebbes sacrilege. Among the innovations that Chassidim adopted, which their opponents opposed, were the use of the Sephardic rather than Ashkenazic version of the liturgy, changing the practice of sharpening knives for ritual slaughter, also based on the Sephardic practice, violating the set time for prayer and praying instead when the spirit moved them, and interrupting their prayers with wordless outcries and melodies. Rabbi Ephraim of Sudylkow, the grandson of Israel Ba'al Shem Tov (c. 1740-1800), expressed the view of the early Chassidim in his *Degel Mahaneh Efraim*. He wrote "The wholeness of the Written Torah is...dependent upon the Oral Torah.... This is true of each generation and its interpreters. They (the new interpretations) make the Torah complete. Torah is interpreted in each generation according to what that generation needs. God enlightens the eyes of each generation's sages (to interpret) his holy Torah in accord with the soul root of that generation. One who denies this is like one who denies Torah, God forbid." Ephraim saw this teaching in the Torah. "Tradition notes that these words, 'diligently sought' (darosh darash) are the midpoint in a letter count of the Torah." This gives people interpretive license. This Torah midpoint highlights that the written text of Torah exists with an allowable oral interpretation for each generation. After 1815 both groups changed: Chassidim began to study Talmud and the opponents developed their own Rebbes and treated them as the Chassidim had treated their tzaddik. The changes were caused by the birth of enlightenment. During the first fifteen years of the nineteenth century the armies of Napoleon marched across Europe and brought the fresh breath of enlightenment. The *haskalah*, the movement of Jewish enlightenment that had begun in the 1780s grew. By 1815, the key Chassidic leaders, those who had some connection with the Maggid, were dead. Both rabbis and Chassidim saw great dangers in the enlightenment, confronting their way of life and their worldviews. They joined forces to combat the threat. In so doing, rabbinical Judaism adopted many Chassidic practices they had previously denounced, such as wonder-working rabbis upon whom Jews were told to rely and adorning services with song. The Chassidim, in turn, begun as an anti-Talmud study group devoted to innovating Judaism, became a "force of the past" with its outdated clothing from eighteenth century Poland. "History had betrayed the Ba'al Shem Tov. His Judaism of serving God

in joy, raising up sparks from every encounter in life, and finding divine presence everywhere took on an increasingly harsh and judging countenance as it struggled against an enemy it could never defeat."

I'm a tremendous enthusiast for the work of Rabbi Arthur Green, so it is really no surprise that I found his *Speaking Torah: Spiritual Teachings from Around the Maggid's Table* a deeply informative and engaging book. For years Rabbi Green has been a leader in the so-called Neo-Chasidic movement. Deeply engaged in Chasidic texts, this group of rabbis and writers find the spiritual teachings of Chasidism informative, but downplay their firm commitment to halakah, religious law, and the social organization of their lives. Green and others are trying to capture the original commitment of Chasidism, which was designed to innovate and stir Jews to reaching higher spiritual levels by radically reinterpreting Jewish teachings and life. So for Green and his co-editors, the spiritual in the subtitle is a very operative term. They take elements of Chasidic teaching where Torah portions are given "spiritual" rather than strictly physical interpretations. Really, it is fascinating to watch the interpretative work that Green lays out for us. It is part allegory, part metaphor, a strong element of Hebrew wordplay (which is pointed out in the text) and a dose of religious creativity. After every chapter there is a short explanatory paragraph laying out the salient points of the passage. After each major section, Green and his editors break out and discuss the text, sharing their sometimes conflicting opinions. This adds yet another layer to the book: modern scholars of the Torah are taking nineteenth century Chasidic texts meant to be applied to real life and applying them to our time. This book is an excellent way to navigate the difficult realm of early Chasidic literature. If you can't read Hebrew and catch the wordplay, a book like this (in two volumes) is essential to understanding what is going on. And what is going on? Simply put, that God is everywhere, that his Torah is everything, and we are all connected. If we understand the Torah correctly, if we obey not just its physical demands but also its spiritual meaning, this door opens up for us. Of course this sounds easy. Getting to this understanding and living with it is the challenge.

The introduction was excellent in terms of an educational tool and an inspirational one. The weekly notes on the Sedrah of the week was especially interesting in that you receive several different scholars' views in one book.

This is a wonderful overview of the Torah portions .. I have the 2nd book on my Kindle. Very enjoyable

I expected way to much. The commentaries are underwhelming and sort of trite.

Not a great read but interesting in places

Lessons Learned and Lessons Used

It has Unique and rare sources, and has the texts in the original language. I like the final peer dialogues.

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