

Diversifying the Teaching of the History of Rhetoric Series:

Classical and Medieval Jewish Rhetoric

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Themes and Context of Jewish Rhetoric

In a 2012 book entitled *Jews and Words* by Israeli novelist Amos Oz and historian Fania Oz-Salzberger, the writers note that Jews have spent centuries building palaces—palaces of words. Sometimes these words are the words of tradition: the *Tanakh*, or Hebrew bible; the Mishnah and Talmud, extensive legal debates and their commentaries; codes of law like Maimonides's *Mishneh Torah* or the *Shulchan Aruch*; philosophy books, like HaLevi's *Kuzari*, Saadya Gaon's *Doctrines and Beliefs*, or Maimonides's *Guide for the Perplexed*. Often these works *explain* the words of tradition, as is the case for those of Rabbi Shlomo Yitzhaki, the great medieval Torah and Talmud commentator known as Rashi, or the medieval grammarian Ibn Ezra, famous for sorting out linguistic difficulties in biblical Hebrew. The commentary tradition of Jewish religious texts is as old as the canonization of the Tanakh itself; Aramaic commentaries called



Ibn Ezra Reading the Stars

targumim elucidated the bible since the time of its final canonization in antiquity. In the eighteenth century, the Hasidic movement in Eastern Europe popularized new forms of writing, including *sipurim*, moral stories emphasizing the piety of everyday Jews, and *maamarim*, spoken discourses on Hasidic thought delivered verbally and then published in writing. *Mussar*, or ethical literature, ranges from the medieval period onward, but enjoyed a renaissance beginning in the eighteenth century. Various liberal movements, such as the Reform, Conservative, and Reconstructionist movements, have published treatises and essays advocating for religious change since the nineteenth century.

Writing in these classic religious genres has continued apace in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries: Rabbi Joseph Dov Soloveitchik penned numerous essays and works of philosophy, Rabbi Moshe Feinstein's published rulings on Jewish law take the form of *igrot*, or formal letters, Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson gave numerous public lectures called *sichot*, which have been transcribed and published in multi-volume sets, and many rabbis have continued the tradition of publishing commentaries on legal texts, such as Rabbi Ovadia Yosef in his *Halikhot*

Olam or his *Anaf Etz Avot*, a commentary on the Mishnah tractate Pirkei Avot. And this inventory covers only religious literature in Hebrew and Aramaic, which, to continue Oz and Oz-Salzberger's metaphor, might well represent the main hall of the palace, but is hardly consonant with the palace itself.

It is also the case that Jewish rhetoric—religious or not—can be found in Jewish languages. Yiddish and Ladino (Judeo-Spanish), for example, boast early modern folktales, novels and poetry, newspapers, and religious instruction. Modern Hebrew, which began proliferating in the late nineteenth century, developed in isolated circles before becoming the language of choice among Jews in Ottoman Palestine and, subsequently, the official language of the State of Israel, expanding the canon of Jewish rhetoric to all the genres of rhetoric that exist in any other national culture. It's also the case that rhetoric about Judaism or about Jewish communal politics or the Jewish community has been a common feature of every Jewish diaspora from Iran to Western Europe to Latin America and the United States in English and German, Arabic and Farsi, French and Spanish, Russian and countless others. Jewish publications talking about issues affecting the Jewish community or communities in which Jews live can be found all over the world and Jews have contributed to the literary cultures of their diaspora communities at least since the time of Philo.

Bibliography for Classical and Medieval Jewish Rhetoric

Below, I provide topical bibliographies of primary sources for classical and medieval Jewish rhetoric followed by a list of secondary scholarship on Jewish rhetoric. While these lists are certainly not exhaustive, they will hopefully provide a foundation for scholars hoping to incorporate Jewish rhetoric in the classroom or in their research.

1. Classical Jewish Rhetoric

Below are some editions of the *Tanakh* (the traditional term for the Hebrew bible, based on the acronym TNKh, which indicates the Torah (five books of Moses), the *Nevi'im* (prophetic literature), and the *Ketuvim* (writings)). In addition to scholarly and religious editions of the *Tanakh*, I have also included scholarly and religious editions of the Mishnah, the first written collection of Jewish oral law begun in 300 C.E., and the Babylonian and Jerusalem Talmuds, a commentary on the Mishnah which spans centuries and began at least around 500 C.E. Where possible, both academic and religious editions are included. Online editions are included below. Many of these texts are available, with varying degrees of English translation, at Sefaria.org.

Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia, ed. Karl Elliger and Willhelm Rudolph. German Bible Society, 1997.

JPS Hebrew-English TANAKH. Jewish Publication Society, 2001.

Koren Talmud Bavli. Koren, 2012-2019. [42 volumes, English translation and extensive notes by Adin Steinsaltz]

Koren Talmud Yerushalmi. Koren, n.d. [10 volumes]

Koren Tanakh HaMa'alot. Koren Publishers Jerusalem, 2001.

The Mishnah: A New Translation, ed. Jacob Neusner. Yale University Press, 1991.

Mishnayot Kehati, ed. Pinchas Kehati. Feldheim, 2001. [21 volumes, English translation available]

Philo. *Philo: In Ten Volumes*, trans. F.H. Colson, George Herbert Whitaker, and Ralph Marcus. Harvard University Press, 1991.

The Schocken Bible, trans. Everett Fox. Schocken, 2000. [multi-volume]

2. Medieval Jewish Rhetoric

Medieval Jewish rhetoric comprises the writings of philosophers, legalists, and sages from the ninth century until the end of the middle ages. Most of the Jewish writing of this period came from Jews in Arabic-speaking lands. Especially in the early part of the period, an estimated 90 percent of the world's Jews lived under Islamic rule and spoke Arabic—or Judeo-Arabic—as their colloquial language. As a result, scholarship abounded in Islamic Neoplatonism, judicial philosophies, grammar, and poetry.

Bahya ibn Paquda. *The Book of Direction to the Duties of the Heart*, trans. Menachem Mansoor. Routledge, 1973.

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Saadia Gaon. *The Book of Beliefs and Opinions*, trans. Samuel Rosenblatt. Yale, 1989.
With the exception of the Messer Leon work, all of these texts appear in Hebrew at Sepharia.org.

3. Secondary Literature on Classical and Medieval Jewish Rhetoric

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