

# Jewish Laws of Speech: Toward Multicultural Rhetoric

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*Traditionally the study of rhetoric has been based on and delimited by Greek thought. This paper argues that this excludes multicultural conceptualizations of rhetoric and limits our understanding of symbol systems. Instead it is argued that the definition and scope of rhetoric must be reevaluated in light of competing multicultural framings of discourse. Jewish rhetoric, unlike Greek rhetoric, sets forth an ethical as opposed to utilitarian approach to communication. This paper lays out a Jewish rhetoric as found in ancient texts, examines the implications of such an alternative conception of rhetoric, argues that these laws are a comprehensive philosophy and as such constitute a rhetorical theory, and proposes that this and other multicultural conceptions of rhetoric be included in modern curricula.*

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“**W**hat, if anything, might we put at risk by taking other rhetorical traditions seriously?” (Garrett, 1994, p. 11). This probing question asked by Garrett in the course of a self-proclaimed polemic for the study of Chinese rhetoric strikes at the heart of the continued dominance of Greek rhetoric as the center, origin, and delimiter of contemporary rhetorical studies. Despite the growing importance and focus on multicultural communication in other areas of our discipline, and the academy in general (e.g., Samovar and Porter, 1991), most rhetorical theory curricula still begin with Corax and focus on the development of rhetorical theory as defined by the Greeks and developed in European and American philosophy. This is unfortunate because a multicultural orientation to rhetorical theory can inform our understanding of symbolic communication systems.

Typically, the study of rhetorical theory is taught as beginning with Corax in 465 B.C.E. The innovation of the first written rhetorical theory is believed to have been spurred when a change in government led to a series of disputes about land ownership. Golden, Berquist, and Coleman, typical of communication textbooks,

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write about the innovation this way, “Corax realized that if a claimant could establish a more plausible case than his opponent, he would win title to the disputed property. With this insight the rhetoric of probability was born” (1992, p. 5). Later Aristotle wrote *Rhetoric* and defined it as “the faculty of observing in a given case the available means of persuasion” (Aristotle, 1954, p. 24). He thus codified the limits, goals, and methods of rhetoric. The result has been a delimitation of rhetoric *as influence* that has continued into the contemporary period. As Okabe (1992) wrote, “Rhetoric, in the Western sense of the word, is concerned with persuasion pursued at public forums. The prototype of the American speaker consciously uses symbols to create an understanding and to form, strengthen, or change an attitude on the part of his or her listeners” (p. 452).

Jewish rhetorical theory is among the non-Western views of rhetoric that is not organized around nor limited to the principles of Aristotle’s *Rhetoric* and is excluded from contemporary study. One reason for this omission, besides ethnocentrism, is that few communication scholars are familiar with Jewish rhetoric, and even among those who are, there is a distinct lack of consensus as to what, if anything, constitutes a Jewish rhetoric (examples of the range of approaches can be found in Berkowitz, 1994; Edelman and Edelman, 1994; Rabinowitz, 1985; Zulick, 1992). This study examines what is prescriptive for speech according to ancient Jewish texts and argues that contained in these texts is a comprehensive understanding of and instruction for how to use symbolic systems. Jews in observant communities have long lived by and known about these laws of speech and understood them to be a coherent system. The implications for inclusion of such a body of theory into the canon<sup>1</sup> are important because they necessitate a redefinition of the very scope and meaning of rhetoric. Following an outline of the major elements of Jewish rhetoric, which is described here in some detail since it appears nowhere else in the communication literature, is a discussion of the implications of broadening the notion of rhetoric and an argument for inclusion of Jewish and other multicultural conceptions of, and approaches to, rhetoric in contemporary curricula.

The data used in this analysis come from the Tanach, which is the primary source of Jewish thought and teaching. The Tanach is composed of the Torah (i.e., the five books of Moshe), the Writings, and the Prophets. In the Christian tradition the Torah is commonly referred to as the Old Testament, or the Bible. The Tanach contains the founding documents of the Jewish people and the core of Jewish law. Although it is impossible to situate these books in precise historical context, it is possible to place these works in rough historical perspective. According to Jewish tradition the oldest sections of the Torah were transcribed around 1220 B.C.E. (Telushkin, 1991). Many contemporary scholars disagree with this dating, and although their speculations as to the age of the text are quite divergent and many believe different segments of the text were written by different people in different eras, most agree that the sections cited below could not have been written later than about 400 B.C.E. (Allen, 1971). Of course some of the selections were written many centuries before this.

The Jewish laws and traditions of discourse appear scattered throughout the Torah as well as in Jewish commentaries in both the written and oral traditions.

<sup>1</sup> By canon I mean among the books/topics typically employed.

Nowhere were they compiled in a single work until 1873 when Rabbi Yisroel Meir Kagan wrote *Chofetz Chayim*. “The title ‘Chofetz Chayim’ derives from the verse ‘Who is the man who desired life (chofetz chayim) and loves days that he may see the good? Guard your tongue from evil and your lips from speaking deceit (Tehillim 34:13–14)’” (Pliskin, 1975, p. 3). In fact Kagan (often referred to as the Chofetz Chayim) believed that the Jewish laws of speech were so important that it was the Jews’ failure to keep the law that resulted in the Jewish exile (Pliskin, p. 8). The *Chofetz Chayim* is not available in English, however, *Guard Your Tongue* by Rabbi Zelig Pliskin is an adaptation of the Hebrew for English speakers.

In preparing this paper I extracted the references to Tanach from *Guard Your Tongue* and derived a list of commonly used words in these passages. I then conducted a computer-based search of various forms of the following words employed in the Tanach (Soncino, 1990): slander, curse, backbiting, talebearer, gossip, lying, flattering, tongue, speech, lip, persuade, convince, and word. I extracted the verses that were prescriptive for speech and inductively developed the categories presented below.

These ancient verses are explained using traditional Jewish methods, that is, the analysis of historical and contemporary biblical commentators. Although these commentators wrote long after the events in the Tanach were believed to have been transcribed, and thus interpretations may have changed through time, they have been included as the most accurate source of elaboration on the source material. Jewish tradition, like American and British common law, is based on precedent and has tended to change very slowly. Moreover, the laws and tenets described below are decidedly distinct from other ancient and contemporary rhetorics thus adding credibility to the argument that Jewish rhetoric represents a distinct (and mostly uncorrupted through time) approach to speech.

Despite the age of the origin of the ideas, Jewish rhetoric remains a cohesive and vibrant theory very much alive and practiced in orthodox communities. Classes, lectures, cassettes, and books are all readily available, and it is not uncommon to hear weekly commentary on the nature and power of speech or informal references to the laws of speech. Such knowledge of Jewish laws of speech is mostly restricted to observant Jewish communities. Secular communities tend not to follow the law in general and are unlikely to be aware of Jewish laws of speech. The aspects of Jewish rhetoric discussed in this paper are all components of modern Jewish rhetorical theory, but while modern theory is considerably more developed, detailed, and comprehensive this study is limited to the aspects of that theory that are explicitly found in ancient texts. All subsequent translations of biblical verses from the Tanach, unless otherwise noted, are from *The Holy Scriptures* edited by Harold Fisch (1992).

## A Jewish Theory of Speech

Jewish rhetorical theory is based in the notion that speech is extremely powerful with the ability to both create and destroy. In fact, according to Jewish tradition the universe was made by an act of speech. The first book of the Torah reads,

In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth. And the earth was without form and void; and darkness was on the face of the deep. And a wind from God

moved over the surface of the waters. And God *said* [emphasis added], Let there be light: and there was light. (Bereshit 1:1–3)

This passage is indicative of the very foundations of a Jewish theory of speech. The universe was created with words and as such words are powerful and should be treated with respect. Boman (1960) cites other passages that reveal a similar philosophy of powerful words. For example, in Yirmeyaho (23:29) God says, “Is not my word like a fire? . . . and like a hammer that breaks the rocks in pieces?” (See also Tehillim 33:6.) An equivalent understanding of speech, but of its destructive powers, is demonstrated in the following contemporary Hasidic tale.

A man went through his community slandering the rabbi. One day, feeling remorseful, he begged the rabbi for forgiveness, and indicated that he was willing to undergo any penance to make amends. The rabbi told him to take several feather pillows, cut them open, and scatter the feathers to the winds. The man did so, and returned to notify the rabbi that he fulfilled his request. He was then told, “Now go and gather all the feathers.” The man protested. “But that is impossible.” “Of course it is.” “And though you may sincerely regret the evil you have done and truly desire to correct it, it is as impossible to repair the damage done by your words as it will be to recover the feathers.” (Telushkin, 1991, p. 522)

This Hasidic tale is one of the most commonly told stories regarding Jewish law on speech. It highlights the immense importance Jewish tradition puts on the spoken word and the highly ethical approach this tradition takes toward discourse. The power of words as understood by Jewish philosophy is informed by the Hebrew language itself. Boman (1960) pointed out that the Hebrew word for “word” is *davar*, but *davar* also means “thing” and “deed.” Thus, the language itself blurs the distinction between the word, object, and action.

If words can create worlds and destroy people, then they must be treated with respect and are subject to comprehensive laws regarding their use. Words are powerful and dangerous and as such Jewish culture puts a strong emphasis on the study of speech and has developed detailed laws concerning when, how, and why to use speech. This philosophy and these laws represent a comprehensive philosophy as well as a recipe for speech and as such constitute a rhetorical theory.

The dominant theme or overarching principle that drives Jewish rhetoric is the notion of damaging speech. Judaism considers damage done by speech to be no different from physical damage. In fact, it is considered a greater crime since damage done by the tongue cannot be repaired. According to the Talmud, “The calumniator is worse than a murderer, since he destroys a man’s reputation, which is more precious than his life” (Hertz, 1970, p. 501). Jewish rhetorical theory predicts severe consequences for one who engages in damaging speech against another. These consequences are generally described as destruction for the speaker as well as the listener. Among some ultra-Orthodox Jews there exists a belief that guarding against the evil tongue may determine who will enter “Gan Eden” in the world to come. This is alluded to in proverbs like, “He who guards his mouth and his tongue keeps his soul from troubles” (Mishle 21:23). Jewish rhetoric can be examined by looking at the types of damaging speech that are prohibited and their accompanying consequences as well as the positive commandments to prevent or minimize damaging speech.

## Prohibitions

### *Ona'at Devarim (Fraudulent or False Speech)*

*Lying.* Probably the most prominent type of damaging speech taken up in Jewish rhetoric is any kind of falsehood. The prohibition on false speech is quite explicit: “Thou shalt not raise a false report. . .” (Shemot 23:1). This passage represents one of the original 613 commandments given by God to Moshe for the Jewish people to obey (Pliskin, 1975). Similarly, Mishle (6:16) clearly identifies falsehood as condemnable. “There are six things which the Lord hates . . . a lying tongue.” “Other verses condemning falsehood include Shemot (23:7), Vayyiqra (5:21–24), (19:11); Devarim (19:15), (19:16), (19:18); Mishle (12:19), (13:5), (14:09), (19:09), (25:18), (26:24), (26:26). Jewish scholars have traditionally interpreted these verses to prohibit any act of speech that is false and damaging (Hertz, 1970). Some of these verses deal with the general prohibition while others discuss specific prohibitions, such as lying in court or with regard to money owed. Others contrast the strength and power of truth. When the verses on lying are considered collectively, lying is prohibited in all circumstances—in important judicial matters of life and death, as well as in casual conversation.

Lying is a severe offense under the Jewish code and is considered tantamount to idol worship (one of the worst offenses in Jewish law) (Cohen, 1950). Several negative consequences are associated with lying. For example, Mishle (11:11) attributes strife and contention to deception: “By the blessing of the upright a city is exalted: but it is overthrown by the mouth of the wicked.” Jones (1961) wrote that in ancient Israel such acts of deception were considered criminal and punishable through public trial and judgment. Moreover, the liar herself is believed to suffer as well. As Hertz (1970) wrote in reference to Vayyiqra (5:23–24), “The liar is an outcast from the Divine fellowship. Men too punish him, for he is not believed even when he speaks the truth” (p. 499). Thus, punishment is meted out by God but also by people who punish the liar by not believing what she says. It is important to note that Jewish rhetoric sees the listener as playing an important role in the communication process. Judges have a responsibility not to *listen* to false testimony. Similarly, it is prohibited for one to listen to casual lies (Pearl, 1970).

No similar condemnations of lying appear in Aristotle’s *Rhetoric*. While the topic of truthfulness is discussed it is brought up in the context of its utility. While Plato (1952) was concerned with truth he believed it resided within the process of dialectic and not rhetoric. Some modern introductory texts do discuss the ethics of persuasion including recommendations against lying, but these texts often treat the subject in a cursory manner, relegating it to a single chapter or list of unethical behaviors still within the context of influence and effective speaking (e.g., Samovar & Mills, 1995; Seiler, 1988). The great majority of modern rhetorical analyses, criticisms, and how-to publications do not cover deception (e.g., Detz, 1992; Foss, 1989; Hart, 1990; Reid, 1988).

*Flattery.* There are several explicit references to flattery in the Tanach. In each case flattery is associated with wickedness or deceit and is therefore condemned (e.g., Tehillim 5:10). In contrast to Sophistic notions that see flattery as a persuasive tool, Jewish rhetoric considers it dangerous and prohibits it. Jewish rhetoric warns against

using flattery, predicting bad results for the flattered. For example, according to Mishle (26:28), “A lying tongue hates its victims; and a flattering mouth works ruin.” One reason flattery is considered detrimental is because it prevents self-improvement (Cohen, 1950). Jewish rhetoric also predicts bad consequences for the flatterer: “A man who flatters his neighbor spreads a net for his feet” (Mishle 29:5). Moreover flattery is considered less effective than straight talk. “He who rebukes a man shall find more favor afterwards than he who flatters with the tongue” (Mishle 28:23). Additional references to the prohibitions on flattery include the following: Yeshayahu (33:14); Yehezqel (12:24); Tehillim (12:3), (12:4), (36:3), (78:36); Mishle (20:19); Iyyov (32:21), (32:21); Daniyyel (11:21), (11:32), (11:34); Shemot (23:7).

There are also inexplicit verses from Mishle that have been understood to be prohibitions on flattery. “Burning lips and a wicked heart are like an earthenware dish covered with silver dross” (Mishle 26:23; see also Mishle 26:25). According to Jones (1961) the “burning lips” referred to in this verse come from a root meaning “to set ablaze.” The verse is a warning against affection that is presented more *warmly* than felt in reality. The verse Bemidbar (35:33), “You shall not pollute the land in which you are,” has been understood in Jewish culture to prohibit (among other things) the flattery of a wrongdoer. As Pliskin (1975) wrote about this verse,

If you know that Reuven dislikes someone, the correct thing to do is admonish Reuven for his hatred. By speaking lashon hara to Reuven about his enemy in order to find favor in his eyes, you violate this prohibition. Thus, flattery that takes the form of degrading another is considered an especially serious offense and even has its own name (chanifus). (Pliskin, p. 19)

*Slander (Motze Sheim Ra)*. As might be expected, it is also prohibited to tell lies specifically about another person to damage them. Jewish rhetoric warns against committing slanderous acts. For example, “Whoever secretly slanders his neighbor, him I will cut off” (Tehillim 101:5). The law predicts the outcome of slander to be enmity and abandonment from God and the community. Moreover, the slanderer is considered morally depraved, as in the following verse (Cohen, 1950): “He who hides hatred uses lying lips, and he that utters a slander, is a fool” (Mishle 10:18). Other verses on slander can be found in Mishle (11:09), (16:27); Vayyiqra (19:16); Bemidbar (14:36); Shemu’el II (19:28); Yirmeyahu (6:28), (9:3); and Tehillim (15:3), (31:14), (50:20), (101:5), (140:12).

### ***Lashon Hara (Damaging Speech that Is True)***

Jewish law also prohibits damaging speech that is *true* (called lashon hara). Lashon hara is prohibited even if it is said in jest (Pliskin, 1975). One source for the prohibition on speech that is true and also damaging comes from Bemidbar, Chapter 12. In this story Miryam and Aharon speak against Moshe’s wife calling her a foreigner or black (a true observation). God is outraged by this and Miryam is struck with Zara’at (leprosy). Leprosy was believed to be a punishment for damaging speech. This story is invoked elsewhere in the Tanach as a reminder of its importance (e.g., Devarim 24:8–9). Lashon hara is prohibited even if one would believe that she would say it in front of the person, in jest, with oneself included, with no harm

intended, or about the dead (Pliskin). Hertz (1970) noted that the law prohibiting lashon hara is so important and difficult that traditional Jews pray every day, “God, guard my tongue from evil and my lips from speaking guile” (p. 501). Other references interpreted to be prohibitions on specific types of lashon hara include Shemot (20:12), (22:21); Vayyiqra (19:32).

*Gossip.* Gossip is one type of true speech that is explicitly prohibited. In Vayyiqra (19:16) we find, “Thou shalt not go up and down as a talebearer among thy people.” The Hebrew word for talebearer is rachil. Rashi says the word rachil stems from the word rokhel which means a tradesperson. Thus, the prohibition is on people who carry tales, secrets, or gossip from place to place like merchants (Pearl, 1970). Maimonides noted that this prohibition also applies to reports that are true and told *without malice* (Hertz, 1970).

One reason for the prohibition on gossip is clear from Mishle (26:20), “Where no wood is, there the fire goes out; so where there is no talebearer, the quarrel ceases.” Other inexplicit reference traditionally understood to proscribe lashon hara include Vayyiqra (19:12), “Thou shalt not defraud thy neighbor.” Similarly, “cursed be he who smites his neighbor secretly” (Devarim 27:24) is also understood to be an inexplicit prohibition on gossip. Pliskin (1975) wrote about these verses, “If you act in a friendly manner towards someone in his presence but speak against him behind his back, you violate this prohibition” (p. 16). There is an interesting exception to the rules prohibiting gossip. It is commonly taught in the contemporary Jewish community that inquiries about another person as well as a truthful answer are allowed if they serve a practical purpose such as a job reference. Despite this contemporary belief and teaching, I have not found a biblical reference that corresponds to this tradition. Other references to the prohibitions on gossip include Yehezqel (36:3); Devarim (24:8–9), (27:24); Mishle (11:13), (16:28), (18:8), (20:1), (25:09), (26:22); Shemot (22:21); and Vayyiqra (19:32).

*Cursing.* Cursing is considered an element of damaging speech and is also prohibited. Indicative of the belief in the power of words found throughout Jewish culture, expressing a hope that harm befalls someone is prohibited. This prohibition is found in Shemot 22:27. “Thou shalt not revile the judges, nor curse the ruler of thy people.” Although this specifically prohibits cursing rulers as does Qohelet 10:20, the prohibition is considered to apply to all people.

Unlike modern American jurisprudence, in which virtually anything may be said about public figures, for Jewish law this prohibition applies to both political and spiritual leaders as well as friends and members of the community (Cohen, 1950). For example, it is written in Vayyiqra (19:14), “Thou shalt not curse the deaf, nor put a stumbling block before the blind.” Hertz (1970) argued that the prohibition against cursing the deaf is interpreted to mean anyone who cannot defend her own character. He also interprets the “deaf” and “blind” generically to refer to people of misfortune, inexperience, or moral weakness. Similarly, Nachmanides wrote that since it is bad to curse the deaf it is even worse to curse those who can hear and feel the insult (Cohen, 1950). Some of the prohibitions on cursing refer to explicit categories of people. For example, one may not curse one’s parents (Shemot 21:17; Vayyiqra 20:9; Devarim 27:16; Mishle 20:20), the rich (Qohelet 10:20), or God (Vayyiqra 24:15). These verses thus prohibit cursing of both the strong and the weak.

One practice among observant Ashkenazic Jews is to say in moments of frustration, “Zei Gezunt,” which means “be well.” A custom of blessing has evolved to prevent cursing in moments of anger (Pliskin, 1988). It is also interesting to note that despite these prohibitions Edelman and Edelman (1994) argue that the curse is a prominent feature of Jewish rhetorical history. Their work on the speeches of Moshe in Devarim (as well as the speeches of Jeremiah) indicates that the curse was a powerful and prominent rhetorical device. The fact that cursing was prohibited according to law actually lends credence to the claim that it was a common practice, since there would be no reason to ban that which did not occur.

### ***Blasphemy (Chilul Hashem)***

Jews are forbidden from speaking the four-lettered proper name of God because no word can capture the awesome limitless power of the creator. In response most Jews refer to God by one of the sanctioned names such as Hashem, which literally means “the name.” However, even to speak one of the sanctioned descriptive names for God is taboo if the name is invoked in a careless, capricious, or false context. One of the first laws of speech mentioned in the Torah is considered one of the Ten Commandments and is a prohibition on blasphemy. “Thou shalt not take the name of the Lord thy God in vain; for the Lord will not hold him guiltless that takes his name in vain” (Shemot 20:7). Other sources of this prohibition include, “And you shall not swear by my name falsely, neither shalt thou profane the name of thy God: I am the Lord” (Vayyiqra 19:12).

Rashi argued that Shemot (20:7) makes it clear that the prohibition includes any name of God. Rashi says the phrasing “my name” refers to the tetragrammaton (proper name of God), while “the name” of God refers to any name. Other verses on this prohibition include: Vayyiqra (24:13–16) and Vayyiqra (22:32). In the former, Rashi argues that the death penalty was only appropriate in cases where the blasphemer used the tetragrammaton and not when a substitute name was used (Cohen, 1950). These prohibitions on the use of God’s name are indicative of the importance Jewish tradition puts on speech. From the first biblical references it is clear that words and names have a power and a force, which should not be taken lightly. The evocation of a name, person, or thing can imply a power over that which is evoked.

### ***Parsimony***

One of the most surprising negative commandments is the restricting of speech itself. One dominant theme in Proverbs is that people should speak seldom. Unlike Platonic rhetoric which promotes debate through dialectic, Jewish rhetoric promotes parsimony in speech and warns against debate. Underlying this approach is an idea fundamental to Judaism that speech is powerful and that dangerous consequences can result from speaking. Cohen (1950, p. 61) notes that rabbinic opinion on this theme includes the following explanation of the dangers of speech:

The holy one, Blessed be he, said to the tongue, all the limbs of man are erect but you are horizontal; they are all outside the body but you are inside. More than that,

I have surrounded you with two walls, one of bone (the teeth) and the other of flesh (the lips).

Such a distrust of speech can also be found in the following proverbs: “In the multitude of words sin is not lacking: but he who restrains his lips is wise” (Mishle 10:19); “A prudent man conceals knowledge: but the heart of fools proclaims his foolishness” (Mishle 12:23). According to one commentary, “For every second that a person remains silent, he will merit reward of a magnitude that is beyond comprehension of even malochim (celestial beings)” (Pliskin, 1975, p. 187). It is important to note that while holding one’s word is valued, modern commentators underscore the importance of speaking out in the name of injustice. Other references to parsimony in speech include Mishle (14:23), (17:14), (17:27), (17:28), (29:11). Some of these dicta refer explicitly to the importance of not expressing anger, while others promote the idea that the wise hold their speech.

## Requirements

### *Promises*

Although the prohibitions are much better developed than are the positive mandates of speech, they do exist. If and when a person does speak there are positive commandments that instruct how it should be done. One requirement of speaking is keeping one’s word or promises to God. Such a commandment is demonstrated in Bemidbar 30:3. “If a man vow a vow to the Lord, or swear an oath to bind his soul with a bond; he shall not break his word, he shall do according to all that proceeds out of his mouth.” According to Hertz (1970), the rabbis note that it is easy to make a vow in sickness or danger and to forget it when the crisis has passed, but this passage emphasizes that whatever is promised to God must be fulfilled. No one is obligated to make a vow, in fact Jewish tradition puts a high value on silence, but once it is made one is obligated to follow through (Hertz). Other references include Bemidbar (30:4–11) and Devarim (23:22–24).

### *Discuss the Law*

While the bulk of Jewish rhetorical theory concerns the importance of limits on speech, one type of speech is explicitly promoted, discussion about the laws:

And these words, which I command thee this day, shall be in thy heart: and thou shalt teach them diligently to thy children, and shalt talk of them when thou sittest in thy house, and when thou walkest by the way, and when thou liest down, and when thou risest up. (Devarim 6:6–7)

This is an explicit commandment to talk about the law. It is one of the few laws that specifies specific content about which should be spoken. This is also the law that makes it obligatory for parents to teach Torah to their children (Cohen, 1950). Sforno says, “Memory is best preserved by constant verbal repetition, hence the precept that one should talk of the divine commandments” (Cohen, 1950, p. 1022).

## **Rebuke**

Jewish law also encourages rebuking neighbors. A rebuke is called for when Jewish laws have been broken and even when one anticipates that a law will be broken. For example, “Thou shalt not hate thy brother in thy heart: Thou shalt certainly rebuke thy neighbor, and not suffer sin on his account” (Vayyiqra 19:17). Rashi believed that this passage should be taken with the preceding Vayyiqra (19:16) such that no criticism shames the neighbor in public (Pearl, 1970). The rebuke must be respectful and not embarrassing. Shaming a neighbor in public is considered *lashon hara* and is a violation serious enough to warrant exclusion from “*olam haba*” (the world to come) (Pliskin, 1975). It is considered especially important to rebuke a neighbor for telling *lashon hara* (Pliskin). Moreover, Talmudic interpretations have argued that the rebuke should be worded in a way that it will be heard.

## **Delivery**

While the concepts of invention and delivery are central to the Greek canon of rhetoric, these topics emerge less predominantly in Jewish rhetoric. When they are mentioned, the dicta are clearly driven by concerns about damaging speech. Jewish law reflects a general attitude that persuasion and learning are enhanced with polite, well-composed, and pleasant appeals instead of agitating ones. Underlying these tenets are the beliefs that common courtesy and graciousness build relationships and are more effective in overcoming stubborn opposition. The following proverbs are good examples of edicts on delivery: “A soft answer turns away wrath: but grievous words stir up anger” (Mishle 15:1); “The wise in heart shall be called prudent: and the sweetness of the lips increases learning” (Mishle 16:21). According to Cohen (1950) “soft” in verse 15:1 means pacifying; “grievous” means producing pain. Allen (1971) elaborates that these techniques were recommended because “conciliatory responses lessen tension and make for reasonable dialogue. Polemical speech is inflammatory and divisive” (p. 49). Cohen interprets the “sweetness of the lips” in 16:21 to mean that answers should be delicately worded and spoken in pleasant tones which find acceptance. Allen writes that most commentaries interpret the line as referring to the persuasiveness of pleasant speech. Other references to pleasant delivery are found in Mishle (16:24), (25:11), (25:15); and Qohelet (9:17).

## **Invention**

There is no category of speech dedicated to invention in Jewish rhetoric as there is in the Greek, yet there are dicta that focus on composition. In general, Jewish rhetoric suggests thought before speaking. “The heart of the righteous ponders how to answer: but the mouth of the wicked pours out evil things” (Mishle 15:28); “He who considers his words shall find good: and he who trusts in the Lord shall be happy” (Mishle 16:20). Mishle (15:28) is understood to refer specifically to the dangers of religious fervor, but the other passages are interpreted as more generic

reminders to think before speaking. Other verses include Mishle (20:25) and Iyyov (18:2).

## Discussion

Jewish rhetoric insists that we keep our promises to God, speak sweetly and softly, teach the laws of the culture, be honest and truthful, offer corrections for behavior, and listen and think before speaking. Meanwhile, it prohibits flattery, lying, cursing, arguing, slandering, whispering, gossiping, or bearing false witness. These laws specifically govern both what should be said and what should not be said. The Tanach, which is a manual for living, covers in its contents the “how to’s” of speech communication with two predominant themes. The first is the portrayal of speech as powerful, serious, and deserving of respect. The second is the focus on ethical community living as the goal of speech. The processes for delivery and content choice are all focused on promoting social harmony, getting along with and respecting one another. It is also interesting to note that there is not separation between public and private speech. These laws apply to all kinds of communication. This is a rhetoric that is dominated by, is built around, and instructs in moral communication.

Like Jewish rhetoric, Greek rhetoric explains what to say and how to say it. But the goals and methods of these different systems are striking. Where one aims at ethical community living and social harmony, the other aims at individual influence and power. Where one code respects and is fearful of the power of speech, the other uses it as a tool. Where one makes no distinction between public and private speech, the other emphasizes the former. Yet both represent different rhetorical systems.

These differences suggest a reevaluation of the answer to the question, “What is rhetoric?” Jewish rhetoric is by no means the faculty of systematically understanding persuasion. However, it is a comprehensive understanding of a symbol system, its methods, goals, and effects. If we take this as a starting place for understanding diverse rhetorics, it helps us to create new inclusive understandings of rhetoric and to review traditional (Greek) rhetoric in a different light.

This approach suggests that the historical understanding of rhetoric as influence may have been indicative of the sociocultural environment that gave birth to it. Greek rhetoric was born in a context of conflict, polemic, and debate, and reflects the values of such a context: the importance of individual influence over others, manipulation, power, and persuasion. Jewish rhetoric was born in the context of a small, seminomadic group of people dedicated to the principles of ethical monotheism. It reflects the values of that context: morality, harmony, and community.

Thus Corax’s innovation in a historical and multicultural context appears to represent not so much the innovation of the first understanding of speech, but one of many systemic understandings of speech. In this light, the historical significance of Greek rhetoric may be less a story of rhetorical genesis than a story of one rhetoric focused on influence that happens to have been quite complete, powerful, and enduring. Thus, the study of Jewish rhetoric in particular, and multicultural rhetoric in general, could help create a definition of rhetoric that is neither time nor context

bound. Such an orientation would suggest a greater level of abstraction that encompasses multiple philosophical, cultural, and historical approaches to understanding communication systematically.

Currently, many scholars are pursuing various cultural approaches to rhetoric, among them Chinese (e.g., Garrett, 1994; Kirkpatrick, 1995; Lu 1993–1994); African American (e.g., Asante, 1993; Blake, 1997; Jackson, 1995; Sullivan, 1993); Arabic (e.g., Anderson, 1989–1990); Spanish (e.g., Abbott, 1993); and Japanese (e.g., Okabe, 1990, 1992). Many of these authors have discovered or derived innovative approaches to rhetoric that are distinct from the traditions derived from the Greek classics. Many of these authors, like Rigsby (1993) who documents the absence of publications on African American rhetoric, argue that there is innovation and enlightenment to be gained by a more culturally inclusive approach to rhetorical scholarship.

It is impossible at this point to say exactly how a culturally inclusive definition of rhetoric would look. Although such a definition would have to take into account not only the persuasion and logocentric rhetoric of the Greek classics, but also the morally, ethically driven Jewish rhetoric, the historically centered and contextually driven rhetoric of the Saudis (Anderson, 1989–1990), the rhetoric of emancipation found in black churches in Alabama during the civil rights movement, which included singing and praying (Rigsby, 1993), as well as other historical and multi-cultural perspectives. One such working definition of rhetorical theory might be a “systematic understanding of the goals, methods for making use, and effects of symbolic systems.” Such a definition would be consistent with Brummett’s (1984) conception of rhetoric. He writes that rhetorical theory is a “recipe” (p. 103) for rhetorical transactions—a logic to help guide one’s choices in assembling messages. What is more, he says, rhetorical theory can “prepare people for acting in, and even *making* the world” (p. 103). It is possible to see that all kinds of culturally specific viewpoints of rhetorical theory would fit into these definitions of rhetoric.

Such an orientation toward rhetoric would reap all of the benefits that abandoning ethnocentric orientations offers to any discipline. Instead of excluding non-Western cultures from the field, important questions might be raised, such as are there any consistencies in cross-cultural formulations of systematic understandings of discourse? If so, what? If not, what does this say about contemporary theories that repudiate the legitimacy of universal theories in favor of local language-based understandings of the world?

Finally, there may be real-world implications for the cross-cultural study of rhetoric. For example, in terms of the Jewish rhetoric presented in this paper, to the degree this theory is indicative of contemporary norms of conduct for Jewish people, the tenets described here could be used as a tool to understand Jewish communication in the international arena, in domestic discourse, and in intimate interaction. Applying this ancient theory to contemporary Jewish culture raises interesting questions that suggest future possible research on the degree to which the ancient dicta and contemporary practices are consistent.

Applying Jewish rhetoric as a model by which to judge, measure, or understand other cultures and modes of discourse also raises interesting possibilities. For example, how do the speeches of contemporary American politicians measure up against the Jewish criteria for good speech? What does this tell us about our politicians, our

society, or how communication operates in the United States? These questions are not even raised in the context of a discipline that assumes argument and influence as a norm, and the answers to any of these questions may help us understand how to live in and understand our world. Of course I do not mean to suggest that if Jewish rhetoric became a standard part of the canon this would radically alter the dominant mode of contemporary, commercial, and influence-driven discourse. However, it is not beyond some possibility that standard inclusion of such ethically driven rhetoric in curricula would have some effect, even if understood as an ethical standard that society in general or rhetoricians in particular choose to ignore.

We return now to Garrett's (1994) probing question with which we began and add her revealing answer. "What, if anything, might we put at risk by taking other rhetorical traditions seriously? I believe that what would be threatened are any lingering vestiges of Romantic Hellenism among rhetoricians" (p. 11). She argues that the persistent notion that Greek rhetoric is seminal, "because the Greeks are the founders of **our tradition**," begs the question of "who is this 'we'?" (p. 12). Once the justification for the study and focus on Greek rhetoric is revealed in this light, which Garrett labels the "origin myth" but might just as simply be called ethnocentrism, there opens a space for multicultural notions of rhetoric. If theories are generally thought to describe, explain, predict, and present propositions about regularities in the world, this is precisely what Jewish rhetoric does. It describes the different types of speech (e.g., truthful and false). It predicts benefits from certain styles of delivery (softly spoken words, for example) and presents a systematic view of how the world is composed (e.g., of wise and foolish). Such an orientation to rhetoric gives a decidedly unique perspective to understanding discourse—an ancient perspective from which modern society could benefit.

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