

Rabbis and Classical Rhetoric
*Sophistic Education and Oratory
in the Talmud and Midrash*

Training in rhetoric – the art of persuasion – formed the basis of education in the Roman Empire. The classical intellectual world centered on the debate between philosophers, who boasted knowledge of objective reality, and sophists, who could debate both sides of any issue and who attracted large audiences and paying students. The roles of the Talmudic rabbis as public orators, teachers, and jurists parallel those of Roman rhetors. Rabbinic literature adopted and adapted various aspects of the classical rhetorical tradition, as is demonstrated in the Talmudic penchant for arguing both sides of hypothetical cases, the midrashic hermeneutical methods, and the structure of synagogue sermons. At the same time, the rabbis also resisted the extreme epistemological relativism of the sophists, as is evident in their restraint on theoretical argumentation, their depiction of rabbinic and divine court procedure, and their commitment to the biblical prophetic tradition. Richard Hidary demonstrates how the rabbis succeeded in navigating a novel path between Platonic truth and rhetorical relativism.

Richard Hidary received a PhD from New York University and is Associate Professor of Judaic Studies at Yeshiva University where he teaches courses in Second Temple Jewish history, Dead Sea Scrolls, and rabbinic literature in its cultural context. He is the author of *Dispute for the Sake of Heaven: Legal Pluralism in the Talmud* (2010) and his articles appear in *AJS Review*, *Conversations*, *Dead Sea Discoveries*, *Diné Israel*, *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, *Encyclopedia of the Bible and Its Reception*, *The Jewish Review of Books*, *Jewish Studies*, *an Internet Journal*, and *Okimta*. He has been a fellow at Cardozo Law School's Center for Jewish Law and Contemporary Civilisation, an affiliate scholar at the Tikvah Center and a Starr fellow at Harvard University's Center for Jewish Studies.

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*To my parents,
David and Aimée Hidary*

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Preface and Acknowledgments

The idea for this book began during my dissertation research while I was analyzing a section of Talmud Yerushalmi that follows the structure of a typical five paragraph essay of an introduction, three proofs, and a conclusion. I traced the origins of this form back to Aristotle's *On Rhetoric*. Fascinated by the connection between rabbinic literature and classical rhetoric, I found more and more examples of classical rhetorical arrangement and reasoning in rabbinic literature and came to appreciate how pervasively Talmudic dialectics flourished within a broader intellectual culture that educated its students to argue both sides of every question – *disputare in utramque partem*.

In many ways, the themes of this book develop those in my first book, *Dispute for the Sake of Heaven: Legal Pluralism in the Talmud*. That project focused on how legal controversies in the Talmud translated into pluralism of halakhic practice. This work analyzes the educational and oratorical settings that developed those controversies in the first place and the philosophical and religious worldview that promoted dispute of opposing opinions. I've always been intrigued at how equally intelligent people can make compelling cases for opposing positions and how that impacts our comprehension of truth, interpretation, and the possibility for mutual understanding. Although the Talmud is an authoritative compendium of religious law and lore, it does not demand acceptance of a monistic authoritarian dogma but rather involves one's critical sensibilities to make reasoned arguments, derive proofs, compare traditions, reject some opinions, reinterpret others and leave the debate open for a new generation to continue adding further insight. While I wrote this as a strictly historical academic work, I nevertheless hope that the rabbinic paradigm of multiple divine truths can serve as a model for contemporary communities to help us avoid falling into extremes of relativism or absolutism and inspire us to appreciate diversity while also holding fast to our convictions.

x *Preface and Acknowledgments*

I would like to express my deep gratitude to Michal Bar-Asher Siegal, Christine Hayes, Keith Povey, Hakham Isaac Sassoon, and Shayna Zamkanei, each of whom reviewed the entire manuscript of this book and provided detailed and extremely helpful comments. I am especially indebted to Lew Bateman for his early enthusiasm for this project and for shepherding it during the years of its development. I would like also to thank many others whose insights and assistance along the way have been invaluable, including: Ronald Benun, Yaakov Elman, Steven Fine, Alexander Haberman, Robert Penella, Rabbi Moshe Shamah, Ralph Sutton, Meira Wolkenfeld, Miriam Zami, my students at Yeshiva University, and the participants at the various AJS, RSA, SBL, and other conference sessions at which I presented this material while writing was in progress.

I dedicate this book to my parents who have always encouraged and supported me in my intellectual pursuits and professional goals. Through their wisdom and example, they have taught me the value of being simultaneously tolerant and discerning of different people's viewpoints. Their commitment to family, community, honesty, and integrity are my guideposts and I feel truly blessed to be their son. Together with my wife Esther, I hope to pass on these values to my own children, David, Ronnie, Aimée, and Zachary.

Translations and Abbreviations

Translations of biblical verses follow the *New Jewish Publication Society Tanakh* (NJPS).

References to rabbinic texts follow the editions included in *Bar Ilan's Judaic Library Version 22* (Monsey, N.Y.: Torah Educational Software, 2014). Quotations of rabbinic texts derive from critical editions and manuscripts as noted for each citation. Unless otherwise noted, all translations of rabbinic texts are my own. The following abbreviations are used followed by the tractate name:

- M. = Mishnah
- T. = Tosefta
- Y. = Talmud Yerushalmi
- B. = Talmud Bavli