

Meet Our Communications Committee Member: An Interview with Alexander Slotkin

by Eliza Gellis

Read our new interview with **Alexander Slotkin**, member of Klal Rhetorica's Advisory Board and Communications Committee. Alexander is a fifth-year PhD candidate in Writing & Rhetoric at the University of Florida. A scholar specializing in cultural rhetorics, Alexander's current research interprets Jewish cemeteries as rhetorical assemblages.



***Q:** As a 5th-year PhD candidate, you're probably in the thick of writing and editing your dissertation. Can you tell us a little about your dissertation project and how it advances the study of Jewish rhetorics?*

“Absolutely! My dissertation, tentatively titled *Waking the Jinn: Cultural Memories, Writings, and Assemblages*, explores how tombstone writers represent their loved ones by borrowing, repurposing, and transforming common textual materials (e.g., expressions and icons) in a process characterized as ‘assemblage.’ The project advances Jewish rhetorics by helping document and preserve Iraqi Jewish rhetorical

customs.

“Issues of documentation and preservation are critical to expanding Jewish rhetorics. So, at a time when [the Iraqi Jewish culture is increasingly at risk of disappearing](#), I decided to use my dissertation to help document our presence and history. Over 150,000 Iraqi Jews were separated from their ancestral land for the first time since 586 BCE following anti-Jewish pogroms in the 1940s and 50s; today, only *three* Iraqi Jews still live in Iraq. The Iraqi Jewish cemetery I am studying is an important space for building community during this diaspora. I therefore work to reveal and preserve our knowledge in this place by tracing the circulation and transformation of Jewish writing practices.

“Although my grandmother didn’t marry an Iraqi Jew, I grew up following her religious and cultural customs. I choose to continue these traditions because they are the backbone of my Jewish identity. Hence, this project not only documents a sliver of contemporary Iraqi Jewish life, but also synthesizes theories of writing with the Iraqi Jewish folk stories about jinn (genies) that fascinated me as a child. My grandmother and many members of the Iraqi Jewish community firmly believed in jinn. Now, I’m using those stories to attune readers to different rhetorical ways of making meaning.”

Q: How were you introduced to Jewish rhetorics? What caught your interest and inspired you to pursue this line of research?

“Great question! My introduction to Jewish rhetorics was accidental, but it nonetheless shaped my identity as a scholar.

“I was pursuing my master’s degree in English and needed to write a term paper on an archive of my choice. So, I started searching online for anything that caught my interest. I eventually decided to write my paper on something having to do with the University of Michigan’s digital archive of [The American Jewess](#), a nineteenth century magazine written—as the name suggests—for Jewish women. That was when my professor and advisor suggested that I check out Michael Bernard-Donals and Janice W. Fernheimer’s book, [Jewish Rhetorics: History, Theory Practice](#).

“Before reading their work, I didn’t know that Jewish rhetorics was a ‘thing.’ In fact, I had never thought to connect my Jewish identity to my scholarship; no one ever asked me to talk about my own culture. Reading Jewish rhetorical scholarship for that paper helped me learn more about myself, which in turn motivated me to bring my whole self into that paper.

“That paper ended up becoming my first academic article, ["The Woman Who Talks": A Qualitative Case Study in Feminist Jewish Rhetorics](#) (published in *Rhetoric Review*). Since then, I found myself bringing Jewish rhetorics to bear on other conversations in writing, rhetoric, and technical communication. I continue pursuing this line of research because I want to honor my community’s history, experiences, and knowledge in my scholarship. I also want to demonstrate to newer scholars that your cultural identity doesn’t need to be (and probably shouldn’t be) separate from your work.”

Q: What does having a group for “all things Jewish rhetorics” mean to you at this point in your life and career?

“Having a *klal* or community for ‘all things Jewish rhetorics’ as a relatively new scholar is empowering, because it offers me and others a space to honor our Jewish identities. Everyone in the group does different research; your work on rhetorical encounters with the divine in the Torah, for example, is different than my work. But by connecting over our shared interest in

Jewish rhetorics, we widen our understanding of what makes rhetoric Jewish and Judaism rhetorical. It's hard to think of a better way to honor our Jewish identities."

Q: Do you have any advice, suggestions, or examples for instructors looking to incorporate Jewish rhetorics into their courses in some way?

"I'd first recommend carefully situating Jewish rhetorics in conversations about the everyday rhetoric and writing practices of different cultural communities. In other words, frame Jewish rhetorics as [a specific form of cultural rhetorics](#).

"Secondly, be sure to assign texts that *explicitly* discuss Jewish rhetorics. It's not enough to assign something that happens to be written by a Jewish scholar. We need to prompt our students to ask some variation of, 'What makes rhetoric Jewish? And what's rhetorical about the Jewish tradition?' A great place to start would be Janice W. Fernheimer's 2010 article, '[Talmidat Rhetoricae: Drashing Up Models and Methods for Jewish Rhetorical Studies](#).' She does a fantastic job historicizing Jewish rhetorics in the field of rhetoric and composition studies and carving out this subfield at its joints."

Q: You serve on the Communications Committee for Klal Rhetorica's Advisory Board. Can you tell us what you enjoy about being involved with the group and what you hope to see Klal Rhetorica achieve in the future?

"I really enjoy being in a community with like-minded scholars; it can be nice to chat with folks who share your cultural and religious traditions. But what I've enjoyed most is having the opportunity to learn about and from the cool work other members are doing. Much of what our members have published has influenced my own scholarship, something I talked about in [my presentation for Klal Rhetorica's sponsored panel at Rhetoric Society of America 2022](#). In short, this group has expanded my Jewish and scholarly community.

"I'd like to see Klal Rhetorica continue to grow and broaden its influence in the field of rhetoric and composition. Growing this group will draw greater attention to Jewish rhetorics, as well as the contributions of diverse Jewish communities to the wider study of writing and rhetoric. Community outreach is essential to doing just that. We are always welcoming of new members!"

Q: Jewish rhetorics is still a germinal area of study in many ways. Looking to the future, what are your aspirations for the field of Jewish rhetorics as it relates broadly to rhetorical studies and/or Jewish studies? What do you hope the field of Jewish rhetorics will look like, and what do you hope it will have accomplished?

"Jewish rhetorics is made up of a rich body of scholarly literature. But because the field is germinal, newer scholars have the exciting opportunity to really imagine and shape its future.

“As a cultural rhetorics scholar, I’d like to see a continued focus on the relationship between people, places, histories, and experiences. Specifically, I want to see this field bridge more gaps between people and widen our understanding of Jewishness. I want to see more conversations that include voices from Jewish communities that have been historically marginalized by their European counterparts. It’s well-documented that Black, Latinx, and Arab Jews haven’t always been considered or treated like Jews because of their intersectional identities (my family included). It’s important for Jewish rhetorics to include *all* Jewish voices so that we can continue preserving the traditions our ancestors fought so hard to practice.”