

It usually comes as no great surprise to encounter Hebrew words which have become part of the English language. In almost all such instances the word in question will be part of the vocabulary of the Hebrew Bible which is of course a foundation document of Western civilization, revered and studied by Christians as well as by Jews.

An exceptional case is that of the English word "hosanna" which is defined in English dictionaries as "an exclamation of praise, acclamation or adoration." Underlying the English form is the Hebrew "hosha' na," which expresses a request for salvation. This precise form of the expression is not actually found anywhere in the Bible, nor does its meaning fit the dictionaries' associations with praise or acclamation.

Most readers will of course recognize the word from its use in the daily processions that are an important part of the daily services during the Sukkot holiday. Waving our *lulavim* we circle the synagogue reciting prayers with the repeated litany of "Hosha' na," "God save us!" as we beseech God for bounteous and rain-filled year and for a speedy national redemption. On the seventh day, known as "the Great Hoshana" (*Hoshana' Rabba*) the ceremony is performed repeatedly and with great solemnity. The "Hosha' na" formula originated as the Aramaic rendering of the Hebrew "Hoshi'a na" in the Hallel (Psalms 118:25). The Talmud reports that in colloquial Aramaic the word became synonymous with willow branches, on account of their use in the special processions of Hoshana Rabbah, in accordance with ancient traditional practice.

The rituals described above, though central to Jewish observance, are not prescribed explicitly in the Torah, which speaks only in general terms of taking the "four species" and rejoicing before God seven days (Leviticus 23:40). How then did they become part of the English language?

The answer to this question is to be sought in Christian scriptures. The New Testament writers describe how Jesus' last entry to Jerusalem was accompanied by enthusiastic crowds shouting "Hosanna!" in expectation of the Messiah. Some versions add that the greeters were carrying palm fronds. Possibly it was precisely because the literal rendering did not fit the narrative context, where it expresses triumph rather than beseeching, that the Greek writers of the New Testament intentionally left the expression untranslated--a circumstance which made possible its eventual acceptance into English. Those of us who are familiar with rabbinic midrash will however recall that the taking of the lulav is indeed described there (following the Greek convention) as a gesture of victory, as the Jewish people emerges triumphant from its judgment on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur.

There are several ironies and difficulties in the New Testament's description of the incident. The account seems to suppose that it took place on or around Sukkot, although the events are generally supposed to have occurred on Passover. Furthermore, we have seen that the *Hoshanna* ritual is a typical example of Jewish Oral Tradition, and not part of the Written Torah. This is precisely the kind of observance that Jesus himself would probably have rejected as an unacceptably human creation. And yet the symbolism of the procession came to occupy a central place in Christian belief and practice (It is of course the source for the feast of Palm Sunday).

The episode is one of many in Christian scriptures which are more likely to be appreciated by Jews than by the average Christian. Not only does it present vivid testimony to an ancient Jewish practice, but the text of the adulatory song captures the rhythms of the "Hoshanna" hymns which we still recite (The *hoshanna* poems are among the oldest and most moving examples of Hebrew liturgical poetry, and inspired the efforts of many of our foremost synagogal poets). The story also contains several clever "midrashic" expansions on the verses of the Hallel which would have been sung by Jews on the festival, then as today.

Anyone unfamiliar with the living practices of Jewish congregations would necessarily miss the point of the passage.