

COMMON WORDS AND EXPRESSIONS FOUND IN JEWISH WRITINGS

In the English translation of the Jewish Talmud there are very many words and expressions that are not translated into English. In writing for a Jewish audience the translators and the editors assumed that their readers were familiar with such words. Such untranslated words and expressions are also found in other Jewish religious writings.

These words are mostly transliterated Hebrew words, though some are of Aramaic, Yiddish and even Arabic origin. An unfamiliarity with the meaning of such esoteric words and expressions obviously limits a person's ability to do research in the Talmud and other religious works of Jewish origin. For example, what would words like "sakhir, iztaba, niddah, piggul, mazranut", etc. in the Talmud mean to you?

In recent years I have repeatedly searched through the Talmud and other Jewish reference works for specific information, and it has been inconvenient and time-consuming to repeatedly have to go to other reference works in order to establish the precise meanings of words and expressions used in the contexts I was researching. I felt it would have been ideal if I could have had an alphabetical list of all the untranslated Hebrew and Aramaic and Yiddish terms that one is likely to encounter in such research through various Jewish religious writings.

I have now compiled such a list.

1) By its very nature such a list can never be termed to be "complete", since the inclusion or exclusion of specific words and expressions is a somewhat subjective matter, depending on which Jewish works one chooses to examine, and to what extent and thoroughness one examines such works. It is almost impossible to compile a list of ALL the non-English words that appear throughout the whole Talmud, since many sections are still not readily available in English.

2) If you come across any words or expressions that you feel should be included in this list here, please send an email to the webmaster, with the relevant information, at the following email address:
webmaster@franknelte.net

3) While the words and expressions in this list have been collected from various sources, the definitions I have presented here are almost all drawn from either the ENCYCLOPAEDIA JUDAICA or from the TALMUD.

4) Because of the differences between the Hebrew alphabet and our alphabet, it is common to find two or even three different spelling forms for certain transliterated Hebrew words. Here is a quotation from the Encyclopaedia Judaica, from the article "HEBREW GRAMMAR", from the sub-section "Writing and Spelling" in this regard.

"The various systems used to transliterate Hebrew into Roman script generally reflect two different approaches. The first transliterates the Hebrew alphabet into graphemes of the particular language in accordance with the spelling conventions of that language. This gives rise to a plethora of conventions according to the languages concerned. The other system attempts to transliterate Hebrew so that the letters and vowels will be perfectly or nearly perfectly represented." (Encyclopaedia Judaica)

The result is that there are different spelling forms for very many of the transliterated Hebrew words used in the Old Testament Scriptures.

A simple example illustrates this point: the Hebrew word for “equinoxes and solstices, and the four seasons that start on those four specific days” is mostly rendered as “tekufah” and as “tekufot”, but occasionally you may also find this word rendered as “tequfah” and as “tequfot”. A large number of the Hebrew names found in the Old Testament have two and even three different spelling forms in the English King James Translation.

So likewise, for some of the words I have presented here in this list you may well find alternate spelling forms.

5) I have also tried to keep the explanations for terms brief and to the point. I have presented just enough information to enable someone doing research in the Talmud, or in similar works, to be able to continue reading with understanding, after encountering any of these words or expressions.

6) One further point should be highlighted. Many people would be inclined to assume that “Hebrew is Hebrew is Hebrew”, i.e. the meanings of Hebrew words should be clear-cut and unambiguous. And they might not realize that in many cases there is a considerable difference between “BIBLICAL HEBREW” on the one hand and “POST-BIBLICAL HEBREW” on the other hand, not to mention “MODERN HEBREW”. While the actual Hebrew words stayed the same, THE MEANINGS attached to many words were changed from the meanings attached to those same words in the Bible.

All languages that are in daily use change over a period of time. The only languages that do not change are “dead languages”, i.e. languages that are not spoken on a daily basis by any group of people as their primary means of communication. A simple example of how languages change is immediately apparent when we look at the word “cool” in English. An English author 50 and more years ago would have had a different meaning in mind for this word, when compared to the meaning that most young people today would immediately think of.

Now changes in meanings come about in **two ways**: on the one hand, there is the gradual and unplanned change in the meaning attached to a word. That is what I would call “**a natural progression**”. Secondly, there is the deliberate change in the meaning of a word which is motivated by a desire to avoid having to deal with the original meaning. That is what I would call “**a manipulated process aimed at achieving a specific goal**”. This process of changing the meaning of a word commonly stems from either a religious motivation or from something that involves an issue of morality in some way. These are the main two areas in this second process where some people seek to change the meaning of words.

The change in the meaning attached to the word “cool” is an example of a natural progression that proceeded without any particular motivation being involved. The change in the meaning attached to the word “gay” is an example of the manipulated process. It was motivated by a desire to want to see a different meaning attached to the word “gay”. So this particular change in meaning was pursued very aggressively and methodically.

We should be aware of the distinction between these two completely different processes involved when some words change their meanings in popular usage. With the examples I present below we are not looking at “a natural progression” in the meaning attached to a word. No, with those examples we are looking at very deliberate and calculated attempts to force a new meaning onto an established word, in order to justify a completely different explanation for a biblical statement, one that is at odds with the obvious explanation if the meaning of the word in question is not changed.

So be aware that some changed meanings occurred without any guidance, while others are the result of very deliberate attempts to force a different meaning on a word. Both these processes are represented in the lists of words presented in this directory.

The collection of words and expressions in the list below comes from both, the Bible (i.e. Biblical Hebrew) and also from the Talmud (i.e. Post-Biblical Hebrew), as well as from additional works.

So we should keep the following in mind:

The period of the “tannaim” went from about 20 - 200 A.D. This was the period when the Mishnah, which Judah ha-Nasi edited around 200 A.D., was written. This was followed by the period when the Talmud was compiled (roughly 200 - 500 A.D.). These men were aware of the correct meanings of Hebrew words used in the text of the Old Testament, but they nevertheless in many cases decided to ASSIGN NEW MEANINGS TO KNOWN WORDS, the Hebrew equivalent of assigning a totally new meaning to the word “gay” in English.

The consequence of this is that it is not always enough to look up in a dictionary of Biblical Hebrew the meaning of a transliterated Hebrew word you might come across in the Mishnah or in the Talmud. In the context in which that word appears in the Talmud it might in fact have a totally different meaning from the one you might find in your Hebrew dictionary. And that is because the “tannaim” and the “rabbis” simply decided to attach a new meaning to that specific word.

Here are some examples of this particular process:

The Hebrew word “MINHAG”.

This word is used only twice in the Old Testament, both occurrences being in the same verse. That is 2 Kings 9:20, and it is twice correctly translated as “driving”, including in the Jewish Translation (JPS).

However, the people who wrote the Mishnah and the Talmud decided to give this word “minhag” the meaning of “USAGE” and “CUSTOMS”. This you would not find in your “Biblical Hebrew” dictionary.

The word “MISHNAH” is derived from the Hebrew verb “SHANAH”.

This Hebrew verb means “to repeat”. It is used 22 times in the Old Testament, and in the KJV it is translated 7 times as “change”, 3 times as “second time”, 3 times as “again”, 1 time as “doubled”, 1 time as “repeat”, etc. The meaning of this word is quite well-known.

However, under the influence of the Aramaic word “TANNA” it received the meaning of “TO LEARN,” and it was applied specifically to studying the Oral Law, essentially a matter of memorizing. So again you would not find this meaning for “shanah” in your “Biblical Hebrew” dictionary.

The Hebrew word “MITZVAH”.

This Hebrew word means commandment, precept, law, etc. It is used 181 times in the Old Testament, and in the KJV it is correctly translated 173 times as “commandments”, 4 times as “precept”, 2 times as “commanded”, 1 time as “law”, and 1 time as “ordinances”. The meaning of this word in the Bible is also quite clear.

However, in the Talmud this word was given the meaning of “A GOOD DEED”, a meritorious act AS DISTINCT FROM A POSITIVE COMMANDMENT. The rabbis for instance declared it “a mitzvah to hearken to the words of the sages”, in this way elevating THEIR OWN WORDS to the level of “a mitzvah”. So again, when you do research in the Talmud and come across the word “mitzvah” and then check this word in your Biblical Hebrew dictionary, you might be misled to think that a real biblical commandment is being spoken about, when in actual fact it refers to nothing more than “a good deed”.

The Hebrew word “MOHAR”.

This word means “dowry”. In the Bible it refers to the money a man paid the father of the woman he married. Exodus 22:16-17 and Hosea 3:2 spell this out quite clearly.

However, in the Talmud “mohar” usually refers to “the property a wife brings to her husband at marriage”, and not something that is paid to the father of the woman. So the flow of financial benefits is now reversed from the biblical meaning of this word.

There are many other instances where the talmudic writers have very deliberately attached a meaning to a Hebrew word which is different from the meaning that same word has in the text of the Old Testament. The reason was always to find support for a teaching that is otherwise unsupported in the Old Testament. We ought to be aware of how and why some words changed their meaning.

Please select a letter of the alphabet from the menu to start your search.