Go Up and Barbecue!

Aliyah

One of the miracles of the State of Israel is the immigration of millions of Jews from around the world to their ancestral homeland. We call this immigration “aliyah,” from the root עלי, “to go up, ascend.”

This concept was first used in the Torah in describing travel from Egypt to Israel, later to describe the return of Jews from Babylon to Israel, and today all immigration to Israel is known as aliya. When a person is called for a reading of the Torah, it is also called an aliya because they go “up” to the platform where the Torah is read – the bimah (which is unrelated to the similar-sounding word bamah, which meant “high place” in Biblical Hebrew, and “stage” in Modern Hebrew. Bimah entered Hebrew from Greek.)

The root progressed through a number of meanings, each giving us familiar words in Hebrew. From “going up” it took on the sense of “sprang up, shot forth” – which provided the Hebrew word for “leaf” – aleh, עלים.

The next sense is more metaphorical – “to rise, surpass, excel.” This may be familiar from the Eshe Chatayil song, originally from Proverbs, where the woman of valor is praised, “Many women have excelled, but you surpassed them (alit) all” – וברות גוות תرضى ויהי בת אשתoger על כלות (Proverbs 31:29).

This sense is used commonly today in the word melu爸, מעלה – “excellent.”

And in post-biblical Hebrew, we find a newer meaning – “was reckoned, counted in, considered.” This is a development from the previous meaning since something that excelled would be counted in and considered. And because the price of something is how it is reckoned or considered, we get to the meaning “to cost.” So when we ask how much an item costs, we say, “Kama ze oleh?” And while the cost of living here might be expensive at times, the value is – priceless!

Mangal

One of the most widespread symbols of Yom HaAtzmaut, perhaps even competing with the flag, is the mangal, מַנְגָּל – Israel’s barbecue. What is a mangal – and where does the word come from?

The word comes from Turkish, where they still call a portable stove a mangal. In Ottoman Turkey, the mangal was primarily used for heat, and cooking over it was a secondary function. Other regions under Ottoman rule also borrowed the word, and so we find in other regional languages that mangal means “charcoal.” In modern Hebrew, mangal came to mean almost exclusively a stove for grilling and now refers also to the barbecuing event itself.

Where did the Turks get this word from? According to an article by Amnon Shapiro of the Hebrew Language Academy, the Turks borrowed it from the Arabic word mankal (מַנְקָל) – also meaning stoves. The Arabic word comes from a root meaning “transport, transmit.” And this reflects the portable nature of the mangal.

That same Arabic root is the source of the Hebrew word nagla, נגל – which originally meant “load” (as in donkey-load) and took on the meaning “round” or “trip” in Modern Israeli slang. Another word deriving from the same root is the game mancala.

This game involves transferring stones around a board.

A biblical Hebrew word that may be cognate with this Arabic root is the word makel, מקלל – meaning “staff” or “walking stick” (it appears far less frequently than the words mateh, מתכ, and shevet, שבט, of similar meaning). The etymology of the word is unclear, and scholars offer many theories. One of them is that it is related to the Arabic root we’ve been discussing. One theory claims this because the stick was used to move animals from place to place, as in Numbers 22:27: רכז את נזירות, “and he struck the donkey with his stick.”

Perhaps another verse that could show a connection would be Genesis 32:11, where Jacob says “with my staff I passed over this Jordan” – עם במקלו, ובמקלו.

Even though we’ve shown the long journey that mangal took to enter modern Hebrew, there are those that point out a connection to the haftarah read on Yom HaAtzmaut. It begins with this verse: מַעֲלֵנוּ אֶת הָאָתוֹן בָּמַקֵּל, ולֶאֱבוֹתֵינוּ אֶת הָאָתוֹן בָּמַקֵּל (Jeremiah 4:3).

As anyone who has seen Israelis attending to a mangal can attest, standing and waving hands is a central part of the ceremony!