On the first day, you shall take the product of hadar trees, branches of palm trees, boughs of leafy trees and willows of the brook..." (Vayikra 23:40)

It is interesting to note that despite the Biblical origin of the commandment, we don’t use the words found in the verse. Let’s look at how the words have changed.

The verse says we should “take” the Four Species, using the verb קַח. However, the blessing we say is קָנַן, using the verb קָנָה. Why did the Rabbis change the verb?

The linguist Yechezkel Kutscher offers the following answer (which he heard from a high school student of his, who we now know as the famous Rabbi Mordechai Breuer): while in Biblical Hebrew קָנַן meant “to take,” by the time the Rabbis coined the blessing, the verb meant only “to buy.” And the halacha is that one need not buy the lulav – it can come from hefker (i.e. have no previous owner) or be received as a gift. So קָנַן was substituted, which only meant “taking.”

The first species mentioned is כֶּפֶס הַדָּר – “branches of palm trees.” We refer to the palm branch with the post-biblical word לָלֵל. In Rabbinic Hebrew, lulav can also mean the more general “shoots, sprouts,” and derives from the root לָלֵל as in Yoma 81b, where it says “the grapevine shoots [ lulavim ] sprouted [ livlevu ].” The root לָלֵל is parallel to the Biblical זְנָב, both meaning “to blossom.”² Both of these roots are related to words meaning “to shine, to burn” ( זָנָב ) since the blossoming of a plant radiates like the shine of a fire.

The second species listed is כֶּפֶס הַרְבָּה – “branches of leafy trees.” We refer to the palm branch with the post-biblical word לָלֵל. The word הֲדַס is a Biblical word, appearing in the books of Yeshayahu, Zechariah, and Nechemiah. The verse in Nechemiah is interesting because it mentions both etz avot and hadas. Ezra tells the people to study the Torah, and the people find the laws of Sukkot. They then order that throughout the Land everyone must go out to the mountains and bring leafy branches of olive trees, pine trees, myrtles [hadas], palms and [other] leafy trees [etz avot] to make booths, as it is written” (Nechemiah 8:15).

The Rabbis³ say that these are referring to two different kinds of myrtle branches. The hadas mentioned in this verse is referring to a “wild” type of myrtle, which is appropriate for the roof of the sukkah, and the etz avot is our hadas, which is used for the Four Species.

The fourth species mentioned is the “willows of the brook” – נְטִילַת לוּלָב. The Talmud (Sukkah 33b) says while the verse is referring to willows that grow by the brook, any willow branches are acceptable for fulfilling the commandment. The word appears five times in the Bible, always in the plural form – aravim. The singular arava first appears in the Mishnah, which also refers to the plural as aravot (as we do today). Why not the Biblical aravim?

This may be part of a trend where words that appeared in Biblical Hebrew with the suffix -im, have the suffix -ot in Rabbinic Hebrew.

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1. In the Jerusalem Talmud, Gittin 12a, the word turungi itself is used for etrog.
2. See Bereshit 40:10 and Targum Onkelos on that verse.
3. See Sukkah 12a and 32b.

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