

L-Ḥayyim

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There is a popular custom to raise a glass of an alcoholic beverage and say *L-Ḥayyim* at various special occasions. In this article, we will trace the origin and development of this practice.

Early Sources

Using a version of the form *L-Ḥayyim* as a blessing is already found in 1 Samuel 25:6, as part of the greeting David sent to Nabal, *L-ḥai* (לְחַיִּי).¹ Although commentators have different explanations as to the exact meaning of this salutation, the common theme is that of a blessed life for Nabal and his family.² However, there is no biblical example of this blessing being connected with drinking wine.

Saying *L-Ḥayyim* in the context of drinking wine is found in *Tanḥuma* (*Pekudei* 2). There we are told how the Sanhedrin cross-examined witnesses. “At the time they examined the witnesses concerning a sin an individual had committed the Sanhedrin and all the Israelites would go out into the public square. They brought there the individual who had been charged with the offense which required stoning or one of the four death penalties that were imposed by the *beit din*. Two or three of the most distinguished leaders of the community would come forth and would ques-

¹ In the verse it is not clear if the greeting phrase is just *L-ḥai* or a phrase *ko l-ḥai* (כֹּה לְחַיִּי), as the section reads: “And David sent ten young men, and David said unto the young men: ‘Get you up to Carmel, and go to Nabal, and greet him in my name; and thus ye shall say (כֹּה): ‘To life (לְחַיִּי)! Peace be both unto thee, and peace be to thy house, and peace be unto all that thou hast’” (1 Samuel 25:5–6). The term כֹּה may be the introduction to the greeting, as in this JPS English translation, or part of the greeting itself.

² See Yehuda Kiel, *Da’at Mikra, Shmuel* vol. 1 (Jerusalem: Mossad HaRav Kook, 1981), p. 252.

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tion the witness. After they returned from the cross-examination, a member of the Sanhedrin would say to them: ‘*savri maranan* (gentlemen, what do you think).’ They would announce whether he was to live (לחיים) or to die. If he were to be sentenced to stoning, they would bring a pleasant-tasting but potent wine, and give it to him to drink so that he would not suffer pain from the stoning.” Later on, this midrash describes a practice to say *L-Hayyim* at *Kiddush* and *Havdalab*. “Similarly, when the representative of the community held the *Kiddush* or *Havdalab* cup in his hand he would say: ‘*savri maranan*,’ and the congregation would respond: ‘*L-Hayyim*’; that is to say, ‘May this cup be for the living.’”

This is the earliest explanation for the custom, to say *L-Hayyim* to distinguish this cup from the cup associated with death. It is the standard explanation brought in the classic works that explain Jewish customs such as *Sefer Ta’amei ha-Minbagim u-Mekorei ha-Dinim*,³ *Otzar Kol Minhagei Yeshurun*⁴ and *Otzar Dinim u-Minbagim*.⁵

In *Tanbuma* it is the assembled congregation who says *L-Hayyim* rather than the person drinking. The idea that the person drinking says *L-Hayyim* is found in TB *Shabbat* 67b in a discussion of what things may be considered unlawful due to being categorized as superstitions (“the ways of the Amorite”). There we find: “(One who says while drinking:) ‘Wine and life to the mouth of the Sages,’ this does not fall into the category of the ways of the Amorite. There was an incident with Rabbi Akiva who made a banquet for his son, and over each and every cup he brought he said: ‘Wine and life to the mouth of the Sages (המרא והיי לפום רבנו), life and wine to the mouth of the Sages and to the mouth of their students.’”⁶ The Jerusalem Talmud (*Berakhot* 6:8) records another version of what R. Akiva did in a discussion of the special blessing of *ha-tov v-ha-meitiv* on wine.⁷ “There was an incident with Rabbi Akiva who made a banquet for Shimon his son, and over each and every barrel that was opened he would bless and say: ‘Good wine to the life of the Sages (המרא טבא להיי רבנו) and their students.’” Another version is found in *Tosefta Shabbat* 8:3, “There was an incident with Rabbi Akiva who made a banquet for his son, and over each

³ Avraham Sperling, *Sefer Ta’amei ha-Minbagim u-Mekorei ha-Dinim* (Jerusalem: Shai Lamora, 1999), p. 137.

⁴ A. Hershovitz, *Otzar Kol Minhagei Yeshurun* (St. Louis, MO, 1918), *siman* 28:1, p. 66.

⁵ J.D. Eisenstein, *Otzar Dinim u-Minbagim* (New York, 1917), p. 192.

⁶ Regarding the transposing of life and wine in this blessing, see Maharsha and *Iyun Ya’akov* here. Many interpretations are found in the literature regarding this switch.

⁷ On the differences between the two Rabbi Akiva stories, see *Yefeh Einayim* to *Shabbat* 67b.

and every barrel that was opened he would say ‘Wine to the life of the Sages (חמרא לחיי רבננא) and the life of their students.’”

Tanḥuma talks about *L-Ḥayyim* as a response to *savri*, which is the prevalent Sephardic custom of having *L-Ḥayyim* as a response said by those hearing the blessing over wine, rather than something said by those drinking themselves. However, the R. Akiva stories do not mention *savri* and so indicate that *L-Ḥayyim* functions as an independent blessing said by the person pouring or drinking the wine, similar to the prevalent Ashkenazic custom.⁸

No explicit reason is given in the Talmud for R. Akiva’s blessing. R. Ḥayyim David Azulay (Ḥida, 1724–1806) gives two explanations.⁹ His primary explanation, that he considers the simple meaning, is based on *Tanḥuma* (*Pekudei* 2) that due to the connection between wine and the death penalty noted there, when someone is making *Kiddush* or *Havdalah* on wine, people say *L-Ḥayyim*, and so too at the occasion of R. Akiva’s banquet.¹⁰

These are the earliest examples in Jewish literature of saying a version of *L-Ḥayyim* over wine. R. Shmuel Avigdor Tosfa’a (1806–1866) in his *Minḥat Bikkurim* on the *Tosefta* explicitly states that what R. Akiva did was just like the current practice to say “To your life (לחייכון)” when drinking wine.

Dangerous Wine

Among the *risbonim* we find other reasons to say *L-Ḥayyim*, beyond the idea of distinguishing the wine from the wine drunk by a person sentenced to death. These are all based on the idea that there is danger inherent in drinking wine, thus necessitating saying *L-Ḥayyim* to offset potential harm.

Sefer ha-Pardes brings that R. Yitzḥak b. Yehudah (11th century), one of Rashi’s teachers, explained that the reason people say *savri* before *Kiddush* is “since wine brought a curse to the world in the time of Noah, who got drunk from it and a curse went forth on Canaan” the person about to drink announces “understand (*savri*) that I am planning to drink something that brought a curse to the world.” When the people respond *L-Ḥayyim*, they are saying “the drinking should be for you for life and not

⁸ See Menachem Mendel Landa, *Siddur Tzḥuta d-Avraham*, vol. 1 (Tel-Aviv: Grafika, 1958), p. 455.

⁹ Ḥayyim David Azulay, *Petaḥ Einayim* (Livorno, 1790), 43a.

¹⁰ He also gives a second reason that it may be that R. Akiva was referring specifically to TB *Nedarim* 49a where we find that rabbis are weak and sickly and he was saying that they should drink wine for their health.

for any harm.”¹¹ This explanation is also brought by R. Eliezer b. Yoel (Ra’aviah, c.1140–1220).¹²

The commentary of the *Ba’alei ha-Tosafot* to Lev. 10:9 states that it is customary that when someone is saying a blessing over wine in public and says *savri maranan*, the congregation responds *L-Hayyim* because Adam got drunk on the wine from his marriage blessings (ברכת נישואין) and therefore sinned and was cursed with mortality. *Tosafot* then references what R. Akiva did at his son’s banquet, implying that it is for the same reason. Abudraham gives this explanation as well, based on the idea that the forbidden fruit which brought death to the world was grapes (TB *Berakhot* 40a, *Bereishit Rabbah* 15:17).¹³ This same idea appears in *Tikkunei Zohar* (*tikkun* 24), where it is written that one must say *savri maranan* and the others answer *l-haye* (לחיי) “in order to be connected to the Tree of Life and not the Tree of Death.”¹⁴

Tosafot brings many other negative associations of wine, ending with the teaching in TB *Sanhedrin* 70a based on Proverbs 31:6, “Give strong drink to him that is ready to perish, and wine to the bitter in soul,” that wine was created to comfort mourners. TB *Ketubbot* 8b reports the multi-

¹¹ Chaim Ehrenreich, ed., *Sefer ha-Pardes* (Budapest, 1924), pp. 186–187. Also brought in *Shibbolei ha-Leket, seder Berakhot, siman* 140. Note that halachic reasons are brought in both works for saying *savri* as well, before R. Yitzhak’s explanation. See also *Tosafot Berakhot* 43a *hoil*. For an overview of halachic and other reasons, see Aron Maged, *Beit Abaron* vol. 13 (New York: Balshon, 1978), *siman* 90, pp. 605–607; Yehuda Ben David, *Shevet m-Yehudah* (Jerusalem: 2018), vol. 1, *siman* 42, note 181, pp. 366–367. The Noah explanation is brought in *Bah, Oraḥ Hayyim* 174:9 in the name of R. Menahem of Mirzburg (Mahari Metz, often misquoted as Mahari Mintz, 14th century, see *Hiddushei u-Biurei Maharshal to Tur, Oraḥ Hayyim* 192).

¹² David Devilsky, ed., *Sefer Ra’aviah* vol. 2 (Bnei Brak, 2005), *Pesachim, siman* 511. He also mentions in *Berakhot, siman* 120 that *L-Hayyim* is said because wine “brings a curse to the world,” but he does not specify there what the curse is.

¹³ Shlomo Wertheimer, ed., *Abudraham ha-Shalem* (Jerusalem, 1963), p. 151.

¹⁴ Although some sources indicate that the forbidden fruit itself was grapes and that Havaḥ crushed it into wine for Adam (*Bereishit Rabbah* 19:5), from the language of *Tosafot* here it appears that they are not following that approach, as they state that Adam got drunk and then sinned, so the drinking itself was not the sin of eating the forbidden fruit. See also TB *Sanhedrin* 70b, *Bamidbar Rabbah* 10:4. However, *Tikkunei Zohar* explicitly states that this explanation is connected to the idea that grapes were the forbidden fruit. Sperling, *Sefer Ta’amei ha-Minbagim u-Mekorei ha-Dinim*, p. 137 note *alef* understands that *Tosafot* here is following that approach as well.

ple cups of wine that were drunk at the home of the mourner as a component of comforting. Based on that, *L-Ḥayyim* expresses the desire not to drink in the context of mourning, but rather in that of life.¹⁵

The four major negative associations of wine, the wine drunk by those about to receive capital punishment (*Tanḥuma*), the sin of Adam (*Tosafot*), the curse of Noah (*Sefer ha-Pardes*)¹⁶ and the association with mourning are the standard explanations¹⁷ brought for saying *L-Ḥayyim* in most discussions of this topic.¹⁸

There are various customs regarding whether more words are added to the *L-Ḥayyim* statement, such as להיים טובים ולשלום,¹⁹ and whether a handshake is involved as well.²⁰ The custom of the Bulgarian rabbi, R.

¹⁵ See *Bab, Oraḥ Ḥayyim* 174:9 who brings this idea in the name of Maharshal. It is found in *Ḥiddushei u-Biurei Maharshal to Tur, Oraḥ Ḥayyim* 182. It is also found in the *Etz Yosef* commentary to *Tanḥuma* by Ḥanokh Zundel ben Joseph (d. 1867).

¹⁶ These three are mentioned by Aaron b. Yaakov ha-Cohen, *Orḥot Ḥayyim* (Jerusalem, 1956), p. 73, *hilkhot birkat ha-mazon* 20.

¹⁷ For more mystical and *gematria*-based explanations, see R. Ḥayyim Palagi, *Kaf ha-Ḥayyim, Oraḥ Ḥayyim* 167:108.

¹⁸ It is because of this that the Munkacs Rebbe, R. Chaim Elazar Spira (1868–1937) brings in the name of his father, R. Zvi Hirsch Spira, that it is inappropriate to say *L-Ḥayyim* at the Shabbat daytime *Kiddush*, as it implies that protection from harm is needed, whereas fulfilling a *mitzvah* that needs wine itself provides protection. Since people do not customarily say *L-Ḥayyim* at the Friday night *Kiddush* and only in the daytime, it implies that the daytime *Kiddush* is less of a *mitzvah*. He notes that although R. Akiva said *L-Ḥayyim* over wine at a *mitzvah* meal, since there is no particular *mitzvah* to drink wine at such a meal, saying *L-Ḥayyim* for protection was warranted, but it should not be said at *Kiddush* where the *mitzvah* is to use wine. He understands *Tikkunei Zohar* as only referring to wine drunk not in the context of *Kiddush*, although that entire *tikkun* is in fact talking about *Kiddush*. He goes on to say that “there is no greater degradation of the daytime *Kiddush*” than “yelling to each other *arf, arf* (הב, הב), *L-Ḥayyim, L-Ḥayyim*, like in a bar.” Chaim Elazar Spira, *Nimukei Oraḥ Ḥayyim* (Brooklyn, New York: Emes Publishing Institute, 2004), pp. 195–196, *siman* 289, note 2. Still, *Tanḥuma* did explicitly talk about *Kiddush* and *Havdalah* when discussing saying *savri* and *L-Ḥayyim*, and this is the normative practice.

¹⁹ See Yissachar Tamar, *Alei Tamar, Yerushalmi, Zera'im* vol. 1 (Givatayim, Israel: Atir, 1979), *Berakhot* 6:8, 229–230; Gavriel Zinner, *Nitei Gavriel, Hilkhot Nesuin* vol. 2 (Jerusalem: Shemesh, 1998), 80:24, p. 147; Simḥa Rabinowitz, *Piskei Teshuvot* (Jerusalem, 2002) volume 2, 174:15, 518–519.

²⁰ Zinner, *Nitei Gavriel, Hilkhot Nesuin* vol. 2, 80:23, p. 147. The handshake is an ancient and well-known “symbol of amity.” Raymond Firth, *Symbols: Public and Private* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1973), p. 137.

Astruc b. David ibn Sangi (1570–1643),²¹ reported by his student R. Hayyim Benvenisti (1603–1673) in his book *Shayarei Knesset ha-Gedolah*, was to say בשמחתכם (“in your happiness”) instead of *L-Hayyim*.²² Thus, we see an idea to simply add a positive statement to counter the negative associations of wine, and it does not have to be *L-Hayyim* or even a variation of the word “*hayyim*” per se.

***L-Hayyim* on Liquor**

In all of these sources the reason for *L-Hayyim* is wine specific. Because of that, it is not customary for people to say *savri* over other alcoholic drinks, which as we saw was considered the first part that would generate the *L-Hayyim* response.²³ Still, nowadays it is common to say *L-Hayyim* over liquor as well. In Hassidic literature, explanations for this can be found revolving around *gematria* and word play.²⁴

Many sources add that beyond the specific incidents with Adam and Noah, the more general reason for saying *L-Hayyim* is “since wine causes drunkenness and much harm occurs due to drunkenness... he says *savri maranan* that this cup should be for life and not cause matters of death.”²⁵ R. Sinai Sapir in his *Olat Hodesh* writes that R. Akiva’s blessing became the source to say *L-Hayyim* not only when drinking wine, but any drink that is considered the “wine of the land” (המר מדינה).²⁶ Similarly, *Otzar Kol Minbagei Yeshurun* explains that nowadays liquor functions in place of wine

²¹ On this figure, see Matt Goldish, *Jewish Questions: Responsa on Sephardic Life in the Early Modern Period* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008), p. lxi; Moshe Amar, *Sefer She'eilot u-Teshuvot R. Astruc b. David ibn Sangi* (Ramat Gan: Bar Ilan University Press, 1982).

²² *Shayarei Knesset ha-Gedolah, Orah Hayyim* 174:2.

²³ See *Bab, Orah Hayyim* 174:9 who brings a quote from R. Menachem of Mirzburg (Mahari Metz, 14th century) that *savri* is not said over beer, and presumably not *L-Hayyim* either, as he connects the two. See also *Ateret Zekeinim* on *Orah Hayyim* 190:1, who says that there are reasons not to say *savri* on anything other than wine, but only gives the reason of R. Menachem of Mirzburg that wine caused a curse in the time of Noah. See also Elazar Gimán, *Sifran shel Tzaddikim* (Lublin: 1928), 1:8, p. 9, where it is reported that the Baal Shem Tov said not to say *L-Hayyim* over beer, but no explicit reason is given.

²⁴ Sperling, *Sefer Ta'amei ha-Minbagim u-Mekorei ha-Dinim*, p. 496.

²⁵ *Shayarei Knesset ha-Gedolah, Orah Hayyim, Beit Yosef* 167:4. Similarly in *Shibbolei ha-Leket, seder Berakhot, siman* 140 and *Tanya Rabbati, siman* 24.

²⁶ Sinai Sapir, *Olat Hodesh* (Warsaw, 1847), Iyar, *drush* 2, p. 199.

so we say *L-Ḥayyim* on liquor as well.²⁷ This seems to be the simple explanation of the custom; it started with wine and spread to other alcoholic drinks. We saw that wine was associated with certain negative outcomes, and these concerns apply equally to liquor, if not more so, so *L-Ḥayyim* would be appropriate for liquor as well.

Poison

The earliest versions of *Tanḥuma* add a few words when discussing the practice to say *L-Ḥayyim* at *Kiddush* and *Havdalab*.²⁸ “Similarly, when the representative of the community held the *Kiddush* or *Havdalab* cup in his hand and he was scared of poison that there may be in the cup (והוא ירא) (מסם המות שלא יהא בכוס), he would say: *savri maranan* and the congregation would respond: *L-Ḥayyim*...”²⁹ In some current editions of *Tanḥuma* these words are either left out entirely or included in parentheses or brackets.³⁰

Why would anyone be scared that their *Kiddush* cup was poisoned? There are a number of ways to understand this unusual concern.

It is possible to understand that the reference is not to actual poison, but to the “pleasant-tasting but potent wine” given to those about to be stoned so that their pain is lessened.³¹ Although in *Tanḥuma* no substance is added to the wine to make it potent, we do find the idea of adding an ingredient to the wine in TB *Sanhedrin* 43a. There we find the statement of Rav Ḥisda, “The court gives one who is being led out to be killed a grain of frankincense in a cup of wine in order to confuse his mind, as it is stated: “Give strong drink to him that is ready to perish, and wine to

²⁷ A. Hershovitz, *Otzar Kol Minhagei Yeshurun* (St. Louis, MO, 1918), *siman* 28:1, p. 65.

²⁸ Constantinople 1522, Venice 1545 (the Bomberg edition), Mantua 1563, Prague 1613. This is the version of *Midrash Tanḥuma* also known as *Tanḥuma C* or the “printed *Tanḥuma*,” as distinct from the Buber *Tanḥuma*. This *Tanḥuma* is understood to date from the Geonic period. See Anat Raizel, *Introduction to the Midrashic Literature* (Alon Shvut, Israel: Tevunot-Michlelet Herzog, 2011), pp. 234–237.

²⁹ This is the version quoted by Ḥida in his discussion of the topic. Ḥayyim David Azulay, *Petaḥ Einayim* (Livorno, 1790), 43a.

³⁰ These words do not appear in Samuel Berman, *Midrash Tanḥuma-Yelammedenu: An English Translation of Genesis and Exodus* (Hoboken, New Jersey: KTAV, 1996), as he translated based on the Vienna 1863 edition, see p. x, note 2.

³¹ Avraham Orenstein, *Encyclopedia l-Taarei Kavod b-Yisrael* vol. 3 (Tel Aviv: Netzaḥ, 1963), p. 1662. This would also be indicated by the fact that the *Kiddush* section in *Tanḥuma* opens with the word וכן (and similarly), indicating a connection to the previous passage about the cup given to the person about to be put to death. See Shmuel Pesach Bagamilsky, “B-Inyan Amirat Savri Maranan,” *Kovetz Hearot ha-Temimim v-Anshei Shlomeinu* (Morristown, New Jersey), vol. 3 (1988), p. 17.

the bitter in soul” (Proverbs 31:6).³² It is possible to understand that the term “poison” in *Tanḥuma*, literally “drug of death” (סם המות), is referring to the potent wine or the frankincense given to the person sentenced to death. This basic approach is brought by R. Zedekiah ben Abraham Anav (1210–c. 1280) in his *Sibbolei ha-Leket* in the name of his brother, R. Binjamin, who heard it from his teacher, R. Yitzḥak.³³

Not only was the cup a cup of death, the frankincense added to it was dangerous on its own, a fact known in the ancient world. The 1st century Greek physician Pedanius Dioscorides describes frankincense as “a good medicine, but if drunk by a healthy person brings on madness and, if too much is taken, produces fatal results.”³⁴ Thus, it would not be strange for frankincense to be termed a “drug of death.” Still, it would be an unusual thing for a person to actually be worried about, particularly considering that no trial took place and whatever the case capital punishment was extremely rare (Mishnah, *Makkot* 1:10).

Another approach is to understand the poisoned cup in a more metaphorical sense as something denoting harm and suffering. Maharal in his comments to the R. Akiva episode in TB *Shabbat* 67b gives numerous examples of verses in Tanakh where a cup of wine is used metaphorically to refer to destruction or calamity. Most explicitly, Psalms 60:5 uses the terminology of drinking “bitter/poisoned wine” (יין הרעלה) to describe being subjected to hardships. In this understanding, there is no actual poison in the cup, but more of a general concern that there may be a tragic outcome of the drinking, figuratively termed a cup poisoned with the drug of death.³⁵ This would make the statement in *Tanḥuma* in line with the approach we saw of the *risbonim*, that *L-Hayyim* comes to offset the dangers associated with wine, here symbolically termed poison.

Toasts in the Ancient World

Drinking to good health is a practice found in many cultures around the world. A popular explanation for this is that this was originally done in order to “assure guests that the wine they were about to consume was not

³² Regarding the psychoactive properties of frankincense, see Arieh Moussaieff, et al., “Incensole acetate, an incense component, elicits psychoactivity by activating TRPV3 channels in the brain,” *FASEB Journal*, 2008 Aug; 22(8): 3024–3034.

³³ *Sibbolei ha-Leket, seder Berakhot siman* 140.

³⁴ John M. Riddle, *Dioscorides on Pharmacy and Medicine* (Austin, Texas: University of Texas Press, 1985), p. 66.

³⁵ S. Z. Ehrenreich, ed., *Iggeret ha-Tiyul* (Jerusalem, 1957), p. 97.

poisoned.”³⁶ However, historians have not found evidence of this assertion.³⁷

Drinking, and drinking to health in particular, is attested to as a major component in the ancient Greek *symposium*, a banquet that took place after the meal.³⁸ The *symposium* had an elaborate introductory procedure which included numerous cups of wine dedicated to pagan gods.³⁹ First of these was the *metaniptris*, a cup of undiluted wine “offered to perform a libation to a Good Daemon (most probably an apotropaic name for the dangerous aspect of Dionysus, god of wine).” There was also a cup to honor Hygieia, the goddess of health. Later there was “a triple libation of mixed wine honoring Zeus the Olympian (or another Olympian god), some hero or heroes, and finally Zeus the Savior.” This was followed later by “a choral song most often addressed to Apollo in his capacity as a healer or savior of mortals.”⁴⁰ These basic practices were adopted by the Romans as well,⁴¹ and were found in many cultures in the ancient world.⁴²

Note that all of these introductory rites “have something in common, namely an apotropaic character, as if insuring the diners against the dangers inherent in the symposium. This menace is usually understood pragmatically as resulting from the subsequent excessive consumption of wine—the kingdom of Dionysus is a dangerous realm indeed, in which the help of Hygieia becomes truly indispensable.”⁴³ The final cup to Zeus the Savior had the particular intention to serve as “as a token of gratitude for the safe outcome of the feast and perhaps had the added connotation

³⁶ Charles Panati, *Extraordinary Origins of Everyday Things* (New York: Harper and Row, 1987), p. 91.

³⁷ Micah Issitt, Carlyn Main, *Hidden Religion: The Greatest Mysteries and Symbols of the World's Religious Beliefs* (Santa Barbara, California: ABC-CLIO, 2014), p. 7.

³⁸ Fiona Hobden, *The Symposium in Ancient Greek Society and Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 105–107.

³⁹ For examples of these dedication toasts, see S. Douglas Olson, trans., Athenaeus, *The Learned Banqueters* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, Loeb Classical Library, 2009), Book 11, p. 367.

⁴⁰ Marek Wecowski, *The Rise of the Greek Aristocratic Banquet* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), pp. 38–39.

⁴¹ Everett Ferguson, *Backgrounds of Early Christianity* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2003), p. 106.

⁴² For example, the Norse custom where “a toast was first drunk to Odin for victory, then toasts to Njord and Frey for bountiful harvest and peace.” Kimberley Christine Patton, *Religion of the Gods: Ritual, Paradox, and Reflexivity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), p. 222.

⁴³ Wecowski, *Rise of the Greek Aristocratic Banquet*, p. 39.

of averting danger in the future.”⁴⁴ Beyond this, there was a pagan concern that the gods would be angered by the joy and happiness expressed by the mortals at the banquet, and so must be placated.⁴⁵ These ancient toasts were intended as “a dedication to a superior power whose benevolent aid the banqueters desired.”⁴⁶

We can now better understand why TB *Shabbat* 67b must specifically state that “(One who says while drinking:) ‘Wine and life to the mouth of the Sages,’ this does not fall into the category of the ways of the Amorite.” There the Talmud previously notes that “One who says: ‘My fortune be fortunate [*gad gaddi*] and be not weary by day or by night,’ contains an element of the ways of the Amorite. Rabbi Yehudah says: *gad* is nothing other than a term of idolatry, as it is stated: “And you that forsake the Lord, that forget My holy mountain, that prepare a table for Gad, and that offer mingled wine in full measure unto Meni” (Isaiah 65:11).” Similarly, saying ‘Let my barrels be strengthened [*donu danei*],’ that contains an element of the ways of the Amorite. Rabbi Yehudah says: *dan* is nothing other than a term of idol worship, as it is stated: “They that swear by the sin of Samaria and say: As your god Dan lives” (Amos 8:14).” Rashi explains that in both instances R. Yehudah explains that these incantations go beyond the “ways of the Amorite” and are actually real idolatry, as the terms *gad* and *dan* here are the names of pagan gods. In the other view, these words in the incantation do not refer to the names of pagan gods. In any event, we see that there was a fine line between superstitious incantations and actual idolatry.

In the context of this discussion, being that in the ancient world it was customary to drink to the pagan god of wine and goddess of health to insure that no harm would come from wine, it was important for the Talmud to explicitly state that wishing someone health or life while drinking wine and not referring to any pagan god or superstitious, apotropaic practice is considered appropriate.

We now have an additional insight to the halachic discussion regarding whether it is appropriate for the one drinking to say *L-Hayyim* before the blessing is said or only after drinking a bit after the blessing, since it may be considered inappropriate to wish people *L-Hayyim* before thanking God for the wine.⁴⁷ Being that among pagans the toast was actually

⁴⁴ Delight Tolles, *The Banquet-Libations of the Greeks* (Ann Arbor, Michigan: Edwards Brothers, 1943), p. 96.

⁴⁵ Wecowski, *Rise of the Greek Aristocratic Banquet*, p. 40.

⁴⁶ Tolles, *Banquet-Libations of the Greeks*, p. 78.

⁴⁷ See *Eliyab Rabbah*, *Orah Hayyim* 174:17; *Pri Megadim*, *Mishbetzot Zahav*, *Orah Hayyim* 174:11. Also J.D. Eisenstein, *Otzar Dinim u-Minbagim* (New York, 1917), p. 192.

an aspect of worship through libation, its function was similar to the *berakhab* Jews recite. Placing the *L-Ḥayyim* after the blessing and after some wine was drunk would further distance it from the ancient Greek and Roman practice.

The Jewish Toast

We have seen from numerous early sources that Jews were concerned about potential negative outcomes from drinking wine. R. Shmuel Eidels (Maharsha, 1555–1631) explicitly states that the purpose of R. Akiva’s blessing was that the Sages “will not come to be in danger (שלא יבואו לידי סכנה)” from the drinking of wine. A similar idea is found in *Matteh Moshe* (1591), by R. Moshe ben Avraham of Przemyśl. He writes that by saying *savri* the one saying the blessing is telling all assembled to be part of one group, and when they say *L-Ḥayyim* they are declaring their intention that the drinking of wine should not have destructive results. It was important first to establish that they are all part of the group because “the merit of the many is great” and helps protect from any negative outcome from the wine drinking.⁴⁸

This also explains Rashi’s comment to the R. Akiva story that his declaration of *L-Ḥayyim* is not considered superstitious because it is “just a blessing” (ברכה בעלמא). In other words, it has no particular apotropaic intent. Although the *L-Ḥayyim* was said in order for the wine not to have a destructive effect, this was accomplished not in a supernatural or superstitious manner. R. Isaiah Horowitz (1558–1630) in his *Shnei Luhot ha-Brit* similarly explains that R. Akiva made the *L-Ḥayyim* statement to remind the Sages that their intention drinking wine should be for the words of Torah that would thereby come from their mouths, and not for other more mundane purposes.⁴⁹

While both ancient Greeks and Jews recognized the danger inherent in drinking wine, the Greeks reached out to pagan gods for protection, while Jews, exemplified by the practice of R. Akiva, protected themselves by reminding those present that the wine should only be used for positive purposes, without need of or recourse to supernatural protection. ❧

⁴⁸ Moshe ben Avraham of Przemyśl, *Matteh Moshe* (Frankfurt, 1719), *Amud ha-Avodah* part 2, *siman* 349.

⁴⁹ *Shnei Luhot ha-Brit*, *Sbaar ha-Otiot*, *Kedushat ha-Akhalah*, *Emek Berakhab* 3:10.