

A TOAST TO LIFE

L'CHAYYIM!

On January first in America, it is customary to make a toast to the new year. This custom is religiously observed by most Americans almost to the point of fanaticism. It occurs to me that a toast made in a mood of sober reflection would not be altogether remiss on the Jewish New Year. While it may seem odd to you, at first, I invite you to consider with me the religious implications of rendering a toast. Now, we all know that different nationality groups have different ways of rendering a toast. In Russia, they say "Nastrovyah". In Sweden the toast is "Skoal". In France, they say "A Votre Sante". In Italy, they say "Salute". In Hebrew, the toast is "L'chayyim". (#1) There would not seem to be much difference between these toast. Generally, they have to do with a salute to friendship or to health. The meaning of the Hebrew toast seems to be spelled out in the great Broadway show, "Fiddler on the Roof". A major song in the show and a major scene is called "L'chayyim, To Life". You will all recall the scene: Tevye, the father of the bride to be, celebrates the engagement of his daughter by getting "shicker" (drunk) at the village pub. In the midst of his revelry, Tevye glories in the happiness that seems to be a side gift of being alive. The scene suggests that the non-Jew also can participate in the spirit of "L'chayyim". After Tevye sings his verse, the Russians present in the pub begin to dance, and prejudice melts as the two groups, who have no contact in their daily lives, suddenly become one in rejoicing.

The young people of today, in their turning to the joys of nature, seem to understand the spirit of "L'chayyim" very well. The eighteenth century Hasidim, who turned from the boredom of excessive book learning to the rediscovery of the joy of walking in the forest, no doubt, introduced a new vitality to the toast "To Life". The psalmist expressed the same sentiment in his religious poetry. "The whole earth is filled with God's glory", the psalmist declared. "Every living thing praises God", the psalmist wrote. He implies that we praise God simply by enjoying the gift of life. We who are less talented with words than the psalmist can express something of this same exhilaration through the toast, "L'chayyim".

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#1. These are not intended to be scholarly renditions of the various toasts. They "sound" like this to us.

Jews have always affirmed the simple joy of being alive. Perhaps, this had something to do with the constant peril in which they lived through the centuries. To the pogrom-stricken Jew of Eastern Europe, mere survival had its miraculous aspects. In spite of life's cruelties, Jews have striven always to affirm the goodness of life. The psalmist prayed upon awakening in the morning, "This is the day which the Lord hath made, let me be glad and rejoice in it". Someone once asked me, "Rabbi, do you pray often, and what prayers do you say?". Well, let me confess that my daily prayers are not voluminous, but I say, at least, one brief prayer each day in the early morning; "Zeh hayom asher ahsah Adhonai, n'gilah v'nism'chah bah; This is the day which the Lord hath made, let us be glad and rejoice in it". This day, any day, with all of its labors and sorrows, still has the potential for change and good. This prayer from the Psalms is but another way of saying "L'chayyim!" It is my toast in the morning, said silently over orange juice.

Tevye said his toast in a pub where everyone says a toast of some kind, but the Jewish toast, "L'chayyim", comes in other kinds of places and situations. According to our tradition, it is a mitzvah, it is praiseworthy, after a funeral, when one returns to the home of the mourner, to take a drink and to say, "L'chayyim, To Life". This is not quite the occasion for celebration, is it?" But it is a religious act to affirm the goodness of life when one's heart is breaking with sorrow. For the sensitive Jew, the toast after the funeral is a way of saying that in spite of life's blows, one must go on courageously. The inference of this little custom is that there will be better times because there is God, and God did not build the world so that it would contain only sorrow. To say "L'chayyim" in the mourning situation is to attest that the life force is greater than the death force. You can see that the Jewish toast said meaningfully in this kind of situation is akin to prayer.

There are other religious occasions when the Hebrew toast is indicated. At the circumcision ceremony, the male child is named and officially admitted to the covenant Abraham made with God. On this occasion, it is customary to make the toast and to add, "K'shem sheh-nichnas l'brit, ken yikahnes l'torah, l'chupah, u'l'ma'sim tovim; Just as this child has been entered into the covenant, so may he enter the study of the ethical law (l'torah), so may he enter into the joys of marriage (l'chupah), and so may he live a life filled with good deeds (ma'ah'sim tovim)". Here the child is no more than a few days old, and, already, he is projected as a student of the torah, as a responsible married man, and as a just and charitable citizen. "L'chayyim", in this situation, means a great deal more than it meant in Tevye's pub.

"L'chayyim Tovim"!

Now, perhaps, you suspect that I am not really taking you on a drinking bout but on a serious intellectual journey. You are right. Any learned Jew knows that L'chayyim is simply the first word in the Hebrew toast. The full toast is "L'chayyim tovim y'l'shalom". This means much more than "To Life". It means, freely translated, "To the good life, and to peace". The word "tovim", usually translated to mean "good", means basically, "that which is approved by God". That is to say, the good life in the Jewish culture does not mean "La Dolce Vita". The "good life" is that which is defined by our Torah and by our ethical tradition. To toast "L'chayyim Tovim", then, is to mean something far different from just "L'chayyim". Anyone from any other group, like the Russians in "Fiddler on the Roof", can join in the abbreviated Hebrew toast, but once we add "tovim" to "chayyim", we are turning the toast from its universalistic meanings to a specific and more demanding Jewish content. A Jewish toast, then, is more than a toast; it is a commitment to a specific way of life. Philip Roth would say that a Jewish toast is a trap.

There was a time, when Jews lived in accordance with Talmudic Law, that our distinctive way of life seemed to be very clear. Today, when we are citizens of the world, as well as Jews, it becomes increasingly easy for Jews not to act like Jews. I have teen-agers, as many of you do, and when they come to me and ask me how they should act in this world where licentiousness seems to be encouraged and where experimentation is the vogue, I say to them, "Remember that you are a Jew. Remember to enjoy life, but live the good life, that is, the moral life". I say to my children, "When you wonder whether you should or should not do something, ask yourself this question, "Does what I am about to do enhance me or debase me? Will this deed make morally stronger and more proud of myself, or will this deed make me ashamed of myself?"

We could apply this same test to ourselves as adults. The Jewish philosopher Maimonides taught hundreds of years ago, "Act as if each deed will be the deed which turns the scales of life in the direction of peace and justice". Each deed, in the Maimonidesian sense, is the critical deed, the existential deed. To act with the knowledge that each deed we perform is the decisive deed, the holy deed, is what defines the ideal Jew. It is not enough, then, for a Jew to toast, "L'chayyim". He must also toast, "L'chayyim Tovim", "To the responsible, morally oriented, God-approved life".

"L'chayyim Tovim U'l'shalom!"

The Jewish toast does not end with the word "Tovim", it goes on "U'l'shalom, And to Peace". In a world overshadowed by the threat of the H-Bomb, this part of our ancient toast gains added meaning. "Shalom" is a magnificent word, linguistically speaking. It means "peace" only because it comes from the word meaning "to complete or to fulfill". The Roman word for peace, pax, (from which our English word "peace" is descended) means an entirely different kind of thing. Pax simply means that kind of stability which is the result of the forceful control of the weaker by the stronger. Pax is the absence of armed conflict, because one mighty power imposes its will on others of lesser power. The Hebrew word for peace, "shalom", which is part of our toast, has no relationship to armed conflict or to power. It has no military connotations whatsoever. It means that state of being, for the individual, or for society, which results from the completion or fulfillment of one's needs.

The Hebrew understanding of peace is more related to the concept of harmony than to the Roman-English word for peace. The Bible teaches that "shalom" is the end product of the just society, so the Jew who makes a toast "L'chayyim Tovim U'l'shalom" is reminding himself of the Jewish challenge to work for the just society. The Talmud teaches, in the name of Rabbi Hillel, that the Jew must be amongst those who go in pursuit of peace. The American Declaration of Independence says that man is entitled to "the pursuit of happiness". These two pursuits - the pursuit of peace and the pursuit of happiness, are not necessarily the same.

In the traditional marriage ceremony, "shalom" is listed as one of the goals of the bride and groom. They are each bidden to work towards a goal of harmony. Shalom in a marriage does not imply the absence of arguments and conflicts. Every marriage has its points of contention. Shalom is reached in a marriage when the two partners are able to reconcile their differences in a spirit of understanding and friendship. Shalom is the result of the blending of opposites, the enriched end product of a give and take amongst equals. Shalom does not imply the passive yielding of one partner to the stronger partner; that would be a state of "pax", peace as the Romans understood it. Shalom between people, or between groups or nations, implies work, adjustment, compromise, sharing. All of this is part of the meaning of the full Hebrew toast.

There is another kind of peace sought after by some people today. This is the peace described by the Indians of the Far East, the so-called "peace within", Samadhi. Peace, to the Indians, means

the absence of personal desire. In this sense, it is the opposite of shalom, which means the fulfillment of legitimate desires. Recently, a girl born of Jewish parents came into my office. She was unhappy, and she had come to me for advice. "Rabbi", she said, "My husband and I both belong to the mystic sect of 'Hiray Krishna'. We joined the group while we were students at the University of Florida. As my husband becomes more religious, according to our teaching, he no longer kisses me or hugs me. Although our religion teaches us not to be passionate, I don't think I can continue to live this way." I explained to the young lady that Judaism teaches that personal shalom is attained when human desires are fulfilled in a way that elevates and strengthens the individual, and, from our point of view, sex within the marriage relationship is both beautiful and ennobling. After our little talk, the young lady left the office with the intent of converting her mystic husband to Judaism.

So, not a little bit of philosophy is contained in the Jewish toast. If one looks closely enough, all of Judaism is contained therein. Think on these things the next time you take a drink. Say the words meaningfully:

L'CHAYYIM - To Life, to the joy of being alive!

L'CHAYYIM TOVIM - To the Good Life, to the God-approved
life, to the moral and elevating life!

L'CHAYYIM TOVIM U'L'SHALOM - To Peace, to fulfillment, to
the harmonious life for the individual,
To peace between people and between nations!

If you understand it properly, the Hebrew toast can be a prayer and a life's work.

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