

Custom: A Toast on the 13th of the Month

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One may wonder where this custom of a toast on the 13th at 9 PM, came from. It has been a popular gesture with Pal-Yam members on many of the vessels that transported Jewish refugees from Europe to Palestine, and was carried on land years later. Over the years, the true source must have been forgotten, or there wouldn't be so many versions claiming authenticity.

My version: As a cadet in Vessel Commanders Course number 6, I did not take part in the event sometime in 1943, when it was initiated. We were later told that it was decided on during a party in honor of two Pal-Yam members from Kibbutz Sdot-Yam, Zeev Freed and Gad Kempinsky, who had been saved when a Mercab [an arabic sailboat] they were riding hit a rock during a storm.

Abraham Zaccai, a Pal-Yam veteran, was appointed head of the Marine department in 1943, and soon after became Company Commander of the Pal-Yam. He wrote: *"the ultimate goal of each of us was to board a vessel and implement the skills we acquired in our training. At that time, [the end of the First Vessel Commanders Course, May 1943], two sailors, Benjamin Witenberg and Zeev (Gershon) Marcus boarded a freight vessel. Unfortunately, the vessel was sunk by the Germans and the two lost their lives at sea.*

The Farewell party prior to their departure was held on the 13th (must have been April 1943), and as we were all drinking, we vowed to celebrate that day every month, on the 13th, at 9 PM. Over the years, the custom survived and was glorified in poetry."

Recently, I polled some of my friends, in an unofficial survey, trying to revive their memory. Here are some versions I heard: The first Pal-Yam members to board a vessel did so on the 13th; It was attributed to Christian sailors, who believed the 13th stood for bad luck. Another version went further and limited it to the 13th which falls on a Friday.

In his poem '**Sailing Far away**', Haim Heffer mentions the custom of raising a glass: (free translation.)

When far away I sail,
Sea and waves I embrace,
We will remember, every month, on this evening,
a glass of wine we'll toast and celebrate.

This tradition led the commanders of the Israeli Navy, to name their special unit "Shayetet 13", also known as the Marine Commando unit.