

Yom Kippur at Sea

By Sam Kestenbaum

DEER ISLE, Me.

TODAY is Yom Kippur, the holiest day in the Jewish calendar. It is the Day of Atonement, a day of meditation, of repentance and redemption.

Many Jews will spend it at temple or in a house of study, meditating, reading Torah and chanting contemplative psalms together or quietly to themselves.

Last year, right after graduating from college, I took a job on a commercial lobster boat here in my hometown as a sternman, one half of a two-man crew. A few days before Yom Kippur, I told the captain that I couldn't work on the holiday.

This is not a typical day for lobstermen to take off, at least not on Deer Isle, and he looked puzzled. I explained, "You see, it's a High Holy Day." It was 4:30 in the morning and the sun had yet to rise. We were sipping coffee on the dock as the row of diesel boats beside us sputtered to life.

I wasn't sure how much he knew about our holiday, or how much I should tell him.

Should I explain that we fast on this day, humbling ourselves before God and preparing for judgment? Should I tell him how fates are sealed in the Book of Life? Or should I instead share some of the biblical stories that we retell on Yom Kippur? Launch into the tale of the binding of Isaac, or talk about Abraham and Sarah? Should I recount Jonah's trip to the bottom of the sea, and the redemption he finds there in the belly of a whale? Should I commandeer the CB radio on our boat and blow the shofar, the ram's horn, across the airwaves?

We finished our coffee and made our way to the boat, lunch boxes in hand. I decided it was too early in the morning for shofar blowing. Besides, we had more than 300 traps to haul — a full day's work.

Growing up on Deer Isle, I quickly learned that there was something a little different about how my family wor-

shipped. There were many churches on the island — from Catholic to Protestant to Latter-day Saints; from small, one-room church houses to big, established churches with freshly paved driveways. We didn't pray at any of these. Instead we made a weekly pilgrimage to the nearest synagogue, 60 miles away in Bangor.

One day, earlier in the fishing season, my captain and I were stacking lobster traps in his dooryard. Another fisherman sat nearby and watched us. He was in his mid-80s and spoke with a thick Down East accent, the kind that would be unintelligible to anyone from out of state.

"I see you've got a man who works hard. Think you'll keep him around?"

Holiday reflections of a Jewish lobsterman in Maine.

he asked my captain. Then he chuckled and turned to me.

"What did you say your name was again?"

"Sam," I said. "Sam Kestenbaum." He raised his eyebrows.

On the island, the name Kestenbaum is often met with this kind of puzzled look, then followed by, "You're going to have to spell that." Certain last names fill up pages in the phone book here. The names of old families that have been here for generations, networks of cousins, aunts and uncles — Eaton, Haskell, Hardy, Heannsler and Weed, among others. But you will find only one Kestenbaum family in Hancock County. And you won't find too many other Jewish lobstermen (perhaps not particularly surprising considering the non-kosher status of the catch).

Despite this, I feel close to my faith when I'm on the water. The work is difficult, but meditative. Fishermen grapple daily with the elements: the wind, the tide, the shifting of the seasons. Jews also keep their eyes on the elements, recognizing the great,

sacred powers that are present in the world. And wherever we go, we believe God travels with us.

It is said that when the Jews went into exile, the Shekinah, the divine presence, went into exile too, hovering over us, around us wherever we were, waiting for us to invite it sacred into our lives. This is one of the great gifts of diaspora: we travel, move, but remain who we are.

Last year, during the week of Yom Kippur, a storm whirled into Penobscot Bay, the first of the fall. The rain was heavy; fierce winds shook the trees and bent their branches. It turned out I wasn't the only fisherman to spend the holiday onshore. Most stayed in the shops, mending traps, coiling rope and painting buoys.

And me, I drove the hour and a half to the Bangor temple to meditate teshuvah — on turning and returning to God, on starting fresh. It wasn't busy work, but it was work — a kind of repair, a checking of the knots and wiring, refueling for another year.

And today I'll do the same. On this Yom Kippur I wish my fellow Jews "gmar chatima tova," may you be written in the Book of Life for good. And to my fellow fishermen: I wish safe waters and good hauls. May the price per pound of lobster rise. May we weather the coming storms.

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Sam Kestenbaum works on a lobster boat.