

Christmas Fish
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Thursday, December 24th late afternoon - I knew it was a terrible time to go for groceries. All the frantic last minute shoppers and people who'd gotten off early from work would be crowding the stores. But I wanted fish for a quick and easy dinner; I needed bread and milk and greens for a salad to bring to friends' traditional Jewish non-Christmas Day party on Friday. After that would come the relief of stepping out of a world decorated red and green and into the peace of services on Shabbat.

I drove to my usual supermarket and jockeyed for a spot in the crowded lot. Outside the store, the Salvation Army man was shaking his pail to *Jingle Bells*. People were pushing past with laden carts.

By unwritten code, this store caters mainly to white people. Today most customers appeared to be Italian. The store was full of women in dark dresses, elderly couples, men wandering lost, cell phone consultations, and a young woman racing the aisles with a look of frenzied wonder who seemed never to have been in a supermarket before. At the bakery section, a man I didn't know jostled my arm and asked how was my day; I couldn't tell whether he was confused or filled with one or another sort of Christmas

spirit. As carts collided around the panettone and holiday cookies, I navigated away and headed for the fish counter. I was annoyed with myself for coming, but enjoying the excitement.

The fish counter, the heart of the store, pulsed with motion. A mass of people were shouting orders.

“Calamari, scungelli, clams!”

The countermen were calling back. “Two pounds! three pounds!”

“Baccala, eel, crab claws, lobster.”

Call and response. Large packages of sea food were being handed over.

“I’ve got the last of the steamers,” a woman announced as she walked off with a dripping bag.

Of course! the Feast of the Seven Fishes. I’d forgotten about the meal of seven different sea foods that Italian people eat on Christmas Eve. That accounted for the eager energy. I took a ticket number, went off to get milk, and returned to find a place at the counter. All I wanted was a half-pound of salmon fillet. There’s only two of us at home and we’re not big eaters.

“Half pound salmon. What else!” the counterman demanded in a loud voice.

“That’s it, thanks,” I said

“No scungili!” he exclaimed.

I smiled and shook my head.

“ No crab! No shrimp!”

The fish man was Asian. Do I look Italian to him, I wondered. In China I’d had trouble distinguishing one face from another. Maybe he has the same problem with Caucasians.

I shook my head again.

“Only half-pound salmon here ,” he bellowed.

A woman glanced at me concerned.

All at once, weaving through the crowd with my small oblong packet, I felt out of place. I must be the only Jew in the store, I thought.

Outside, the Salvation Army tape was playing *Silent Night*. The song began to resound in my head. I knew all the words. And all the words to *O Little Town of Bethlehem*, *Good King Wensesclas*, *Away in A Manger*, *Deck the Halls*, *Adeste Fidelis* and *The First Noel* . I remembered the booklet of carols with its colorful illustrations that we little girls held in mittened hands as we went singing around the neighborhood long ago. Many of us were Jewish. The first house we went to was Mrs. Finklehoar’s. She was Jewish, and my mother, the leader of our caroling Brownie troop, was Jewish, too.

Mixing it up with the Christian world was the sort of thing many middle class assimilated Jews did in those days. I also sang the Christian hymns that were taught in my elementary school until I got old enough to realize their meaning. My Reform synagogue had a choir, but Eyn Kelohanu was the only Hebrew hymn it sang.

At Bet Am Shalom, I stand for Eyn Kelohanu. Automatically, without thinking about it. Many people sit down. The service is long and we're on our feet for much of it. But I keep standing. Eyn Kelohanu and the Shema were the only Hebrew I learned in my early years and the only Hebrew liturgy I confidently knew when I joined the synagogue in the 1990's. Even today I tend to stumble over parts of the service. At Shabbat services that post-Christmas, I realized that standing is my tribute to the Judaism I claim despite the distractions and attractions of other identities embedded in me.

Some early experiences never leave you. Just as the way I learned at home to broil fish moist and flavorful, that early Eyn Kelohanu is always with me. It is a sign of my continuing immersion in Jewish identity.