

Igbo Torah Thoughts

Parashah #5 Chayei Sarah “The Life of Sarah”

Gen. 23:1-25:18, I Kings 1:1-31

Rabbi Yehudah “Tochukwu” ben Shomeyr

Gen. 24 is a very lengthy chapter but one that should seem very familiar to an Igbo. It contains a detailed narrative of a father looking for a wife for his son insomuch as sending some neutral party on behalf of the family on a fact finding mission for a good bride for the Patriarchs son. The narrative then goes into negotiations with the bride’s family. All of which is very familiar to one of Igbo descent.

Marriage

And Jacob loved Rachel; and said, I will serve thee seven years for Rachel thy younger daughter. And Laban said, It is better that I give her to thee, than that I should give her to another man: abide with me. And Jacob served seven years for Rachel; and they seemed unto him but a few days, for the love he had to her. – Gen. 29:18-20

Marriage in Igboland as in Israel has many different facets and stages that are very detailed. I will stick with the basic principles shared by Israeli and Igbo alike.

G.T. Basden, who spent 20 years among the Igbo said of the Igbo and marriage, “The degrees of affinity in the matter of marriage are even strictly adhered to, or rather, they are more meticulous than those set forth in the Levitical code.” He also said, “Marriage is a most important event in the Ibo’s life. From the time that boys and girls are capable of thinking for themselves, marriage is set before them

as the object to be attained... Celibacy is an impossible prospect. Unmarried persons of either sex, except in special cases, are objects of derision, and to be childless is the greatest calamity that can befall a woman. Hence a very high value is set upon marriage." - "Among the Ibos of Nigeria" pg.68

Igbos who are not married are not taken seriously in Igbo society.

The prerequisites for marriage for the Igbo and the Hebrew, is financial stability and to build one's own house.

As in Israel, so in Igboland.

Betrothed

Deut. 20:7, 22:23-29, 28:30, Matt. 1:18-25, Luke 1:26-38, 2:1-7

As in Israel, so in Igboland; a betrothed woman is considered more or less married and are unavailable to others partners. Not like an "engagement" in the West, where many are unfaithful to the betrothed. If an unfaithful betrothed woman is discovered, though they are not married, divorce proceedings take place as Joseph contemplated in regards to Mary but changed his mind when it was divinely revealed that Mary had not been unfaithful.

As in Israel, so in Igboland.

Fact Finding Prior to Marriage

Gen. 24. Ruth 2:5-7

Personal and family reputation and honor is very important in Judaism as much as it is to the Igbo and we see both cultures practice this fact finding prior to marriage. Why? Because they are one and the same. Everything that can be uncovered; if the woman is a virgin, or has been previously married, whether she is slave or free, and such things as what is the family medical and genetic history of the woman and her family.

As in Israel, so in Igboland.

Virginity

Deut. 22:20-21, Matt. 1:18-25

Modern Western influence has worked its way as a slow poison into Igbo society, for virginity is not highly prized as it once was in the recent and ancient past. If an Igbo woman was betrothed and the Igbo man discovers she was not a virgin, though betrothed and not officially married, the man would have to engage in legal proceedings in order to break off the engagement, just as Joseph considered with Mary.

There is a long standing custom in Judaism not spelled out in Scripture but hinted at in Deuteronomy 22:13-19, that is also practiced in Igboland, and that is when the marriage is consummated by the sexual act on a white sheet so as to catch the blood from the woman's torn hymen which proves her state of virginity prior to marriage.

As in Israel, so in Igboland.

The Middle Man and the Bride Price

Gen. 24:53, 34:12, I Cor. 6:20, 7:23

Just as Eliezer negotiated a bride price for Rebecca on behalf of Isaac, so to this is done in Igboland with great pomp and circumstance.

Gen. 24:10, 15

A non-relative, yet a close friend of the family(s) in Judaism and in Igboland usually takes on this role in contracting the marriage for purpose of neutrality and such was Eliezer, who though a servant of Abraham and somewhat like a son was not a blood relative. Interestingly enough we read in Genesis 24 that Eliezer prayed that HaShem make him successful in finding a wife for Isaac, and Igbo's before seeking a wife for another pray for Chukwu to give them success in the endeavor.

As in Israel, so in Igboland.

Maidens Decision

And they said, We will call the damsel, and enquire at her mouth. – Gen. 24:57

During marital contract and negotiations between the two families, Igbo tradition dictates as does Hebrew tradition, that the woman to be wed is called forth in front of both parties and asked her opinion on the matter, seeing as she is the one whom the negotiations is about.

This is truly unique, for in many cultures the woman has no say in issues of arranged marriages or contracted marriages.

As in Israel, so in Igboland.

Wedding

Gen. 24:59, Jud. 14:10

The traditional wedding is held at the wife's place just as in the story of Samson and his wife.

Gen. 29:22-23

The traditional Igbo wedding takes place in the evening just like the tradition was for Abraham's family and kin (Laban). This also testifies to the Igbos Hebraic origins.

In Judaism the vows are exchanged under a chuppah, a prayer shawl turned into a canopy and in Igboland, Igbos exchange vows under a canopy as well.

As in Israel, so in Igboland.

In I Kings chapter one, we read in verses 17, and 30

And she said unto him, My lord, thou swarest by the LORD thy God unto thine handmaid, saying, Assuredly Solomon thy son shall reign after me, and he shall sit upon my throne... Even as I swear unto thee by the LORD God of Israel, saying, Assuredly Solomon thy son shall reign after me, and he shall sit upon my throne in my stead; even so will I certainly do this day.

We see David's two sons (Adonijah and Solomon) at odds with each other and in competition for the throne, to the point Adonijah stages a coup; when in fact the successor for the throne had already been chosen.

Solomon means, "Son of Peace." After David's fall with Bathsheba and their child conceived by the act of adultery and murder dies (II Sam. 12). David repents and

marries Bathsheba and Solomon is born. Solomon's birth was the peace child symbolizing reconciliation of David with God and as a result Solomon is Divinely chosen by God to be the next King (II Sam. 12:24, I Kings 3:6-7).

While in Igboland in 2011 I asked one of Eze-Chukwuemeka-Eri's sons who would be the next Eze, who would succeed his father? The Prince replied that no one knows because the next Eze is Divinely appointed, and an elder will reveal who Chukwu Abiama (The God of Abraham) will choose. Similarly to our passage, we find that Nathan the Elder and Prophet likely knew who would succeed David as King.

SHABBAT SHALOM! IGBO KWENU!

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