

Igbo Torah Thoughts

Parashah # 12 Vayechai "And He Lived"

Gen. 47:28-50:26

I Kings 2:1-12

Gen. 49:33

In Igboland mourning is seen as a sacred duty and a last act of kindness one can give to a person, just as it is seen in Judaism.

Sometimes, unfortunately a child is still born and or the mother dies during child birth. If both die they are prepared and buried separately.

It is a sad fact of life that sometimes infants pass from this life to the next. When a child two years and younger dies, mourning and extreme expression of grief are not permitted. The infant is prepared and dressed in every bit of clothes that it had and buried quickly in the bush (jungle) in a coffin made from raffia.

If a young unmarried woman is taken in an unexpected way or by disease, she is heavily mourned, just as we see in Scripture regarding the man who lost his young daughter (Matt. 9:23); and she is buried in the bush in a part of the forest that is designated as evil, a place where it is said bad spirits reside. Wine is given to the mourners by the family. The Igbo parents as with Jewish parents "sit Sheva," mourn for seven days and on the eighth day they may get back to some similitude of normalcy by working, shopping, etc. If a young or unmarried man passes away his peers carry his body which is buried in the bush after which they announce

their mourning period of 7-8 days, and the family of the deceased present wine to his peers. They mourn by celebrating his life with rowdy behavior and dancing.

When a grown Igbo man passes away the expression of mourning and grief is most great within the family and community. Family and friends (as in Judaism) are notified and come if at all possible within 24 hours.

His peers launch a type of investigation on where and how he died and there if there were any witnesses to the man's death. Part of the reason is to make sure there was no foul play, but mostly to see if he died alone. If he died alone it is considered a bad thing in which a purification ritual must be performed.

His sisters and other female relatives act as if they are preparing the body for burial by pretending to cut his hair and wash his body. This is acted out three times. After this, his peers take yams from his storage barn and prepare a meal and place some of it on his mouth. These acts of washing and feeding are a symbolic gesture to prepare the Igboman for his journey to the Creator. In Judaism, family and friends keep watch over and care for the body in a similar way.

A goat is sacrificed to Chukwu and the blood is applied to the deceased's eyebrows.

Remy Ilona in his book "The Igbos: Jews in Africa" p. 51 points out, in regards to those who dig the grave, "...While the Igbo dig the grave; those who participate in the digging don't hand over the implements to others who would take their place. When they are tired they drop the implements on the ground and their

replacements pick them up. I noted that Jews have this tradition in the code of Jewish Law and Custom (Shulchan Aruch).”

Numbers 19:14-15, 31:23 speak of one who has dwelt with a corpse; the Igbo, like the Israelite see death as a corruption and contamination of sanctity and holiness and must therefore be cleansed.

In Igboland anything used to cover the dead body is burned and after seven days the room is cleansed by fire and washed. Interestingly enough the Torah states that if water cannot cleanse a contamination, then fire must be used.

Women are not permitted to be at the graveside. The dead is buried facing East (this is also a Jewish tradition) on his own property. Money is placed at the grave site as the dead is lowered into the grave.

In Judaism one does not wear jewelry or fine clothes during the time of mourning. The wife of an Igboman removes all her jewelry and wears black for a year or more.

When a married woman dies as with a man, family and friends are informed and come within 24 hours. Her sisters and peers stay with her body all night. When morning comes her death is announced to the community. Wine is given to the family of the deceased woman’s family. Her married siblings and married women of her family washed her corpse and prepare the body for burial. Her children come and see the body and place their forehead on that of their dead mother. In the evening the body is taken through the back door of the home with a gunshot salute and is taken to her clan’s village. The dead woman returns to the house of her parents for burial.

The woman's husband and in-laws praise the life of the dead woman and how they have been blessed by her while she was alive. After this they return home and the woman is buried on her father's property, unless she passed due to a disease and if such, she is buried in the bush.

If a titled woman dies, the procedure is the same except her peers of like title sing and dance in honor of her with knives in hand.

If the woman was abused, her peers will make demands in which the abuser must comply with or the women threatens to leave the corpse and return home which would be a great disgrace upon the one accused.

When a man who has a title dies, family, friends and colleagues are alerted; expressions of mourning are held in check. It is a quiet and somber event. His titled colleagues prepare his body and it is ritually washed and fed. His Ikenga is retired and his colleagues also dance a dance called abia while retelling the deceased's deeds and exploits. His children are to re-enact the ceremonies he performed when he took on his title. His wife or wives are to go through a purification ritual after 28 days. He is buried with a gunshot salute on his own property. These guns and or mini-cans when fired gives notice to the spirit world that someone is coming as well as gives the deceased permission to leave this realm and enter the next.

It is interesting to note that the Igbo's use to practice mummification could this have come from when their ancestors lived in Egypt for Jacob, Joseph and Gad and the rest of the patriarchs of Israel were mummified and carried out of Egypt during the Exodus.

Burial ceremonies in Scripture can be found in Gen. 23:2, 19, 25:8-9, 49:33, 50:7-9, Deut. 21:23. A corpse is buried within 24 hours unless extenuating circumstances call for an extended period of time to allow family to come in from abroad. As In Israel, so in Igboland.

In Igboland it is traditional for the sibling with the means (wealth) to do so should put forth the expenses to bury a parent. Joseph was not the first born, but being a viceroy of Egypt he had the financial means to bury his father Jacob/Israel (Gen. 50:7-9, 14).

One ritual of mourning practiced by Israel also practiced by the Igbos besides sitting sheva is shaving ones head as a sign of mourning during death or tragedy. Job practiced this, but after the Exodus and the giving of the Torah at Sinai, this practice was forbidden (Deut. 14:1-3). This may give greater credence to the theory and oral tradition that a portion of Gad left Egypt prior to the Exodus.

Before western influence took hold in Igboland, Igbos, like Jews sat Sheva (7 day sever mourning period see Gen. 50:4, Num. 20:29, Deut. 34:8), the dead were then mourned strongly but to a lesser degree totaling 28 days, approximately a lunar month where the mourner remains within their compound. After which they continue to mourn for a whole year but resume their daily activities but only wear mourning clothes. After the year is up the mourners garments are burned.

For Jews in Israel, one is considered “unclean” if one touches a corpse (Num. 19:11-13, 16, 31:19-20) and must be purified. The same holds true for the Igbos in Nigeria.

“In Igboland , anybody who touches a dead body normally washes himself in the stream on the seventh day with Hyssop (Akoro) and Okpete plus local soap (Ncha nkota), at the end, the person immerses himself in the stream four times. These materials used are thrown backward into the stream to be carried away by the current of the water.” – Caliben O.I. Micheal “Our Roots: Igbo Israel Heritage” p.62

As in Israel, so in Igboland.

In the Torah we read about the concept called the Levirate Marriage; that if a man dies with no sons to carry on the family, the dead man’s brother must have a son by the deceased’s wife, so that the dead man’s line will not die out (Gen. 38:6-8, Deut. 25:5-10, Book of Ruth). In Igboland this is practiced and is called Inye Okuko.

In Judaism if one converts to another religion or becomes an apostate, they are considered dead to the Jewish community and a funeral and mourning takes place for such a person. The same tradition is found among the Igbo’s for those who apostatize from Omenana or commit an abomination against Chukwu.

Lastly, it should be mentioned that Igbo’s livening in the diaspora has his/her body sent home to be buried in Igboland. The Igbo community in the diaspora in which he lives contributes financially in order to ship his body home. This is reminiscent of Jacob and Joseph requesting not to be buried in a pagan land and making their children take an oath to insure that they are buried in the Promised Land (Gen. 47:29-30, 50:4-6, 12-12, 25-26, Exd. 13:19, Jasher 80:62-63).

Ogulisi trees used as “headstones” make the grave and show the position of the head. I saw this with my own eyes at Obu-Gad in Aguleri where the second Igbo king was buried; three trees sprang up at the head and connected above ground

by the roots to mark the grave in a beautiful natural monument. As Jewish custom dictates, I left a stone atop the root of the tree to indicate a fellow Jew visited the grave.

In Gen. 15:15, 25:8, 35:29, 49:33, Num. 27:13 and many other places in Scripture it speaks that upon death one joins his ancestors. As in Israel so in Igboland. Igbo's when they die, like Israelites, believe that when they die they are gathered together with their ancestors in the afterlife.

Gen. 48:21-22

When an elderly Igboman feels he is close to death, he will call in his children and divide the inheritance among them and have kinsmen witness this.

As in Israel, so in Igboland.

Gen. 48:20, 49:1-2

It is said that Igbo liturgy cannot end without the parent blessing the child, and in Judaism, Jews liturgically bless their children as well, every Sabbath.

I Kings 2:1-12

In Israel as in Igboland if one was dying and had unfinished business the dying would instruct his eldest or first born son or near relative to swear to finish his business after his demise.

SHABBAT SHALOM! IGBO KWENU!

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