

Igbo Torah Thoughts

Parashah #3 Lech Lecha

B'reshit (Gen.) 12:1-17:27, Isa. 40:27-41:16

By: Rabbi Yehudah "Tochukwu" ben Shomeyr

And he that is eight days old shall be circumcised among you, every man child in your generations, he that is born in the house, or bought with money of any stranger, which is not of thy seed. He that is born in thy house, and he that is bought with thy money, must needs be circumcised: and my covenant shall be in your flesh for an everlasting covenant. Gen. 17:12-13

In Chapter 17 of Genesis we are introduced to the covenant and sign of circumcision which Igbo's have kept as it is written in the Scriptures, long before the white men came and for as long as the elders can remember. What other African peoples do this who are not Hebrew?

Some claim missionaries taught circumcision to the Igbo's and this is utterly ridiculous seeing as Christian Missionaries do not believe the spiritual necessity of physical circumcision. In fact when the missionaries came, they discouraged the practice, some even ban it!

BIRTH

Circumcision and Naming Ceremony

Gen.17:7-4, 21:4, Exd. 4:24-26, 12:43-44, Lev. 12:1-3, Josh. 5:2-3, Luke 2:21-24

Just as Israel circumcised and named their children on the 8th day, so too did the Igbo, long before any contact with white men or missionaries. As in Israel, so in Igboland.

F.C. Ogbalu an authority on Igbo culture and traditions agrees that the Igbos have always practiced circumcision of their male children on the 8th day after birth. “There are many things that make certain persons to say that Igbos are descendants of the Jews. One of those things is offering of Kolanuts, i.e. hospitality carries a religious weight; the second is circumcision on the eighth day.”

The former Igbo slave Olaudah Equiano said, “We practice circumcision like the Jews and made offerings and feasts on theta occasion in the same manner they did.”

The Anglican Missionary G.T. Basden noted that the Igbo sacrificed their animals and circumcised their 8 day old male children as recorded in the Old Testament.

Think of this, there are approximately 18 million Igbos at home and abroad and barring unusual circumstances all of them are circumcised making them the largest population of people outside Israel that are circumcised. How can they not be of Israel?

Remy Ilona in his book “The Igbos: Jews in Africa” points out stories he has heard as well as all that personal experience, how there is an urgent and unexplainable compulsion of Igbos in the diaspora far removed from their culture to have their male children circumcised. Mr. Ilona attributes this to raw instinctual ancestral memory with in the soul of Igbos.

After the circumcision as in Judaism, the Igbos has a naming ceremony (Iba afa na ana Igbo) which for the Jew takes place 8 days after the birth of the child and for the Igbo can take place at immediately after birth, 8 days, 28 days or any time after the birth of the child the family agrees upon to meet and have the ceremony and feast. The point is not when they do it, but that they do it with a ceremony and feast as Israel does, that it is a communal family affair. As with Israel, Igbo's like to have their children's name to reflect God (Chukwu) somehow. The Naming of the child is found in Scriptures; II Sam. 12:24, Luke 1:56-66, Matt. 1:18-25 and it parallels the naming of Igbo children almost exactly. In Judaism a child may be named Elijah, meaning: Eli = God- Jah (Yah) one of the proper Names of God. An Igbo child may be called Chukwudim meaning, "Chukwu (God) exists."

Sometimes, as with Israel, and Igbo child may be named after a departed relative. They may be named after an event. For example, Isaac's birth was a miracle, given to two people beyond child siring or bearing years. Isaac means laughter and it is implied people will laugh because it was such an unusual thing. Similarly, G.T. Basden, Anglican Missionary to the Igbo noted that a couple who had a hard time conceiving or were almost too old to conceive may name their child "Ogwalu Onyekwe" which means whoever is told will not believe the child has come after all these years.

The child could also be a symbolic name for the parent, for example, Moses named his child Gershom, meaning a stranger in a strange land. Similarly in the late Chinua Achebe's book "Things Fall Apart" the main character Okonkwo who was exiled and had a child in exile, names his son Nwofia, which also means a stranger in a strange land.

We find the presentation of a Hebrew Child in I Sam. 1:24, Luke 1:56-66, Matt. 1:18-25, Luke 2:21-40

“Igbos have a similar tradition... to bring the child to the obi; obi in Igboland is like a synagogue.

On such occasion presents are given or presented on behalf of the new child. It may be chicken or goat (an animal) which is reared for the child; and over a period reproduces offspring for the child; palm trees as well as land can be presented to the child.” – pg. 27 Our Roots: Igbo Israel Heritage – Caliben I.O. Michael

Next the Igbo women will, like the Jews, take a mikvah, a ritual bath and like Jewish women, are in a state of separation for more than a month as the Torah prescribes (Lev. 12:1-8, Luke 2:22).

Post Natal Seclusion Scripturally for a male child, a woman remains in seclusion for 33 days, 66 days for a female child. In Igboland regardless of the sex of the child an Igbo woman will remain in seclusion for 28 days the approximate time of a lunar month, after which a ceremonial purification of the women takes place.

From the time a woman gives birth to the time of her purification, in Igboland, the woman’s mother, aunt or close (post-menopausal, if possible) female relative comes to cook, clean and do the other household responsibilities the new mother is forbidden to do in her sacred state of separation; this stand in, also helps care for the new mother and the newborn child.

And the damsel ran, and told them of her mother's house these things. – Gen. 24:28

In the Hertz commentary called, "The Pentateuch and Haftorahs 2nd ed." Pg. 84 it comments on this verse and saying that "her mother's house" means the tents of Bethule's compound that are reserved for the women. You see in ancient times of Semitic peoples as well as in pre-colonial Igboland, husbands and wives had their own separate houses in the compound.

Finally after the time of seclusion and the ritual immersion in a running stream (mikvah) there is a presentation of the Igbo child to the community by the mother. Flora Nwapa in her work "Nwapa" p. 33 hinted about this practice, "Soon it was seven market days since Efuru's safe delivery. But before she went out she had to go to the lake and put her feet in the water." This is accompanied with feasting, music and dancing and the child is dedicated to God. This too is done in Jewish synagogues today. As in Israel, so in Igboland.

After the child is weaned the child is taken to a shrine to Chukwu Abiama (The God of Abraham) with an offering of yams and roosters and the child is formally dedicated to Him and the mother promises to raise the child to follow and serve Him faithfully according to the Igbo way. G.T. Basden, Anglican Missionary to the Igbo observed that it was like how the Israelites did, "...he (*the male child*) was brought and presented before (*Chukwu*)... the father followed with a ram (*sheep or goat*) and the beast was substituted and thus redemption was wrought for the son." – G.T. Basden "Nigers Igbos" p.417

This is like how the Israelites redeemed their children according to Exd. 13:13, 15, and Num. 18:15, 18-19.

This weaning and dedication is also followed by feasting, and we also see this occurred when Isaac was weaned (Gen. 21:8).

Like in Judaism, children are treasured in Igbo culture and are important in regards to carrying on the family line and name.

As in Israel, so in Igboland.

Menstrual Purification

Seeing as we have discussed the purification and separation of a woman after child birth, it would be a good time to mention here the laws of purification found in Lev. 15:19-24, 28-30.

In Igboland a woman lives apart from their husbands nor cooks for them or enters their husband's quarters when she is menstruating just as in our Scripture passages above.

"In Igbo land, a woman who is menstruating holds a special stick to indicate that she is menstruating and therefore unclean, this is a sign to people that she is unclean, and hence could defile anyone who comes close to her." – pg. 28 Our Roots: Igbo Israel Heritage – Caliben I.O. Michael

As in Israel, So in Igboland.

Isa. 40:27-31, 41:8-10

Why sayest thou, O Jacob, and speakest, O Israel, My way is hid from the LORD, and my judgment is passed over from my God? Hast thou not known? hast thou not heard, that the everlasting God, the LORD, the Creator of the ends of the earth, fainteth not, neither is weary? there is no searching of his understanding. He giveth power to the faint; and to them that have no might he increaseth strength. Even the youths shall faint and be weary, and the young men shall utterly fall: But they that wait upon the LORD shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings as eagles; they shall run, and not be weary; and they shall walk, and not faint.... But thou, Israel, art my servant, Jacob whom I have chosen, the seed of Abraham my friend. Thou whom I have taken from the ends of the earth, and called thee from the chief men thereof, and said unto thee, Thou art my servant; I have chosen thee, and not cast thee away. Fear thou not; for I am with thee: be not dismayed; for I am thy God: I will strengthen thee; yea, I will help thee; yea, I will uphold thee with the right hand of my righteousness. –Isa. 40:27-31, 41:8-10

Why and how (If Igbo's are Hebrews and Gadites) did they end up in Nigeria and settle in Igboland?

There appears to be a pre-exodus, exodus excursion to Nigeria by Gad's son Eri and his traveling companions. The Eri who came to Igboland may have not been the same Eri mentioned in Scripture. The Eri name was passed down from father to son. (Luke 1:59). There is evidence to suggest that there were many waves of Hebrew and Gadites to Nigeria.

- The Pre-Exodus-Exodus
- The Jeroboam Exodus

It is believed that the ancestors of the Igbo left Israel around 718 B.C. and trekked for 70 years before they came to Nigeria. These were the tribes said to have followed Jeroboam into Samaria when the 12 tribes split into two kingdoms. Those of Jeroboam's Kingdom who did not like his move into gross idolatry left and headed for Nigeria. This according to the book, "Igbo Jews" by Evangelist David A. Iheanacho pg. 55

- The Assyrian Captivity
- The Destruction of the Temple in 70 A.D.

After the destruction of the First Temple many Israelites and Gadites went to join the first Gadites of Eri, Arodi and Areli that were already there. As it says in the Brit Chadasha (New Testament) letter of Ya'akov (James):

James 1:1 James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ, to the twelve tribes which are scattered abroad, greeting.

Again, this means that during the first century, prior to the destruction of the Temple in 70 CE (AD) it was generally known where the 10 tribes taken into Assyrian Captivity were. So it is reasonable to believe that Gadites in the Jerusalem and surrounding areas knew where their brother Gadites were in Africa and stayed in contact with them and decided to join their brothers after the Temple was destroyed.

Prof. O. Alazei in his book "Ibo Exodus" page 74-75 that this second wave of Gadite and possibly other Hebrew and Jews first passed through Egypt, Libya and Sudan and eventually camped at Chad Basin in North Eastern Nigeria. From there some settled around Zaria, Benue, Ingala, Idoma, Uburu and the Delta regions. Some went as far as Cameroon to settle. But what is consistent in every account is that many made it to Aguleri, where the first wave settled and fanned out from there.

- The Masada Revolt

Josephus tells that not all committed suicide at Masada, but some escaped and some of these are believed to have made it to Nigeria.

- The Modern Diaspora

Some Black Hebrews in the Americas and worldwide who have discovered their Hebrew roots as Igbo descendants from the slave trade are returning home to Igboland.

Isa. 40:30-31, 41:8-10

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Like Jews who waited in ghettos during the holocaust, so too did Ndi Igbo wait in the shrinking Republic of Biafra.

Did the Jews die? No, they still live. Allied forces liberated the Jews who remained in the ghettos and death camps. Now there are Jews on virtually every continent on earth. Did Ndi Igbo die? No, the war ended and new Igbos live and thrive in communities all over the world.

So the question remains, why did Israel/Igbos faint and grow weary? From pursuing idols and from breaking God's Laws and thus they reaped the consequences for their disobedience by being persecuted by other peoples. For often in Scripture we see the LORD use other nations to chastise Israel until they repent and if the nation that the LORD brings against Israel goes too far, GOD brings down judgment on them.

But while Israel/Ndi Igbo is being corrected through the agency of another nation or peoples, a waiting process begins. Israel/Ndi Igbo wait until they realize and recognize their sin and repent and once a collective repentance is made by Israel/Ndi Igbo. Then another time of waiting begins. The wait for renewed strength that brings deliverance (Isa. 40:31).

But thou, Israel, art my servant, Jacob whom I have chosen, the seed of Abraham my friend. Thou whom I have taken from the ends of the earth, and called thee from the chief men thereof, and said unto thee, Thou art my servant; I have chosen thee, and not cast thee away. Fear thou not; for I am with thee: be not dismayed; for I am thy God: I will strengthen thee; yea, I will help thee; yea, I will uphold thee with the right hand of my righteousness. – Isa. 41:8-10

Though Ndi Igbo, made up of Gadites and other Tribes of Israel be far away from the Land of Israel proper, nonetheless GOD and His favor is with them who have repented and returned to their Hebraic roots and origins.

SHABBAT SHALOM! IGBO KWENU!

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