

## Connecting Africa with Rhode Island

by Shai Afsai

There is a popular tradition among the Igbo people, whose homeland is in southeastern Nigeria, that they are descendants of the tribes of Israel. Due to missionary activity and colonialism, today most Igbo are Christian, but even while practicing Christianity large numbers consider themselves ethnically Jewish. In the past few decades, several thousand Igbo have taken this self-identification a step further and embraced Judaism, viewing the religion as their lost heritage.

I traveled to Abuja, the capital of Nigeria, three times and stayed at the home of Habakkuk and Amaka Nwafor.

A competitive boxer in his youth, Habakkuk heads the Tikvat Israel Synagogue, works in construction and also raises goats and chickens, which roam freely about the family compound. Bearded, lean, and muscular, he has a distinctly raspy voice and an intensely religious fervor. In the distance, beyond his home, a towering and tree-lined mountain was visible, and it was there that Habakkuk retreated by foot to fast and meditate in seclusion.

As my host, he never left my side, accompanying me on all my trips to homes, synagogues, and sites around Abuja.

When I returned to Rhode Island, I began consulting with local rabbis about how the community's isolation might be mitigated. Before long, Obadiah Agbai and Pinchas Ogbukaa, two leaders of Abuja's Gihon Synagogue, received an invitation from two synagogues in Providence – Congregation Beth Sholom and Temple Emanu-El.

The two men flew abroad for the first time, leaving Africa's most populous country,

with more than one hundred and seventy-five million inhabitants, for a stay in the smallest state in the US.

An especially moving moment of their twelve-day visit took place a couple of days after their arrival. On our way to morning prayers at Congregation Beth Sholom, I asked Pinchas if he would be willing to deliver a speech during the service. He replied that he would be happy to. However, when it came time for his talk and he stood in front of the congregation, Pinchas had to fight back tears, and I wondered if he would be able to regain his composure.

Eventually, Pinchas collected himself. Before concluding his talk, he asked to share one of the Igbo Jewish prayer melodies that are sung during services at Gihon Synagogue.

Pinchas possesses a deep and sonorous voice, and was known as a bit of a crooner in his younger days. The highs and lows of his Hebrew song took me by surprise. When I escorted him back to his seat at the conclusion of his talk, it was evident that many of the people in the synagogue, including its rabbi, had been moved to tears by Pinchas's words and by his melody.

Afterward, I told him that I'd had a similar experience when I was asked to speak before the members of Abuja's Tikvat Israel Synagogue. There was something about being half way across the world, among people who looked very different from me and spoke a different native tongue – but were praying in the same Hebrew language and following the same traditional Sabbath service – that made words difficult and tears easy.

