

THE STEWARDSHIP PAPERS

The Old Woman

The old woman sat watching her television. The room was up one flight of cinder block stairs just off a busy three-lane highway. The news was on.

“Did you hear what they did?” she said. “Terrible! Must have been her first husband...only someone like that would do such a thing!” She spoke with a heavy Yiddish accent. “Shot both of them through the head,” she added, and then swung her chair around to the cluttered desk as if to pay attention to the customers that just came in.

“Brought you some business,” said my husband, smiling as he laid down the motor vehicle registration form in front of her. She took it, gave it a cursory glance and looked back over her shoulder at the T.V....then back to the papers.

I wandered around the room and looked at some of the maps on the wall. It was a small room, an office, and yet it looked as if it doubled as a living space. I wondered if this was going to take a long time. The woman seemed distracted; in fact, I wondered if she would make a mistake, since it was obvious that she was more absorbed in the news than she was in transacting any business.

Finally, however, she seemed to concentrate on the papers in front of her, and raising her eyebrows, asked my husband “You paid how much for this car?”

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“\$2100,” he answered.

“What year?”

“1985”

“You paid that much for this car?” she said in surprise.

“Yes,” he grinned.

“Are you sure you want to pay this much?” she persisted. I moved closer to the desk. What was this woman trying to tell us? Did she think that we had paid too much? We certainly weren’t very good at business. Maybe \$2100 was too much to pay for a 1985 car. Then, as an aside, she added “You know...you have to pay taxes on anything over \$500...” She turned and directed her question to me. “Are you sure you paid \$2100?”

“Yes,” I said with certainty. “We paid \$2100.”

She looked at my husband, and he smiled and shrugged his shoulders. “\$2100,” he acknowledged.

The old woman looked from him to me. “You know, he only says that to please you,” she smiled.

I didn’t answer.

“Do you have something against money?” she asked.

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“No,” said Tom, not once losing the smile on his face. He, too, looked at me.

They waited for me to tell them to put a smaller amount on the piece of paper...

“It’s not right,” I said.

“Not right?! Look at what these politicians do! Do you want them to take your money and do something foolish with it?”

What could I say to this woman? She seemed so sincere and was trying so hard to help us. “I don’t care how they spend the money.” I put my hands over my heart. “It would hurt me...inside. If I do something wrong with a little thing, maybe later I’ll do something wrong with a bigger thing.”

The old woman put her own hands over her heart and turned to my husband.

“She’s worried about hurting in here...but if she had to worry about putting bread on the table!...”

“We’ve been with money and without,” I said with rather more feeling than I had intended.

“But we’ve always managed to put bread on the table,” Tom added quietly.

“Hmmm,” said the old woman, thinking. “Do you have children?”

“Yes, two girls,” answered Tom.

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“Where are your children?” she asked.

“One’s going to the University of Maryland, and the other is going to Frostburg State University.”

“It’s very expensive sending two children through school at the same time,” she said in a half-hearted, hopeful way.

We talked for a while longer, but finally, she filled in the form with the \$2100 price written in its proper place, figured out what we owed in taxes and, shaking her head over the amount, handed the bill to Tom with her final comment. “She’s cute, your wife...and honest. There aren’t very many of those in the world.”

After paying the bill, we wished her a good evening; and as we were getting in the car to leave, I asked Tom if he had ever been to this place before. He said yes and that he like the man and his wife very much, that they were cute.

“I didn’t recognize the accent,” I said. “I wonder what country they’re from.”

“Germany,” he answered.

How do you know?”

“One day when I was here, we got to talking and I asked them,” he replied.

On the way home, I thought about this Jewish woman—born in Germany and maybe ten years older than my 51 years. She would have been born in about

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1932, and, in an instant, the bits and pieces of our conversation took on a very different meaning. A Jewish child in Germany during WWII.

The Kingdom of Heaven is like this encounter with the old woman. It can only be perceived when you are able to change your frame of reference, to “turn around,” as it were, and to listen and see with your heart.

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