

Jean Staiman: A Lost Art

Jean Staiman, a lifelong member of the Williamsport, Pennsylvania, Jewish community, recently departed, was a lost work of art! There was a time when the “woman of accomplishment,” subject of the well-known Proverb, was the power behind the throne occupied by her husband. Jean fulfilled that role dutifully, while working nonstop on behalf of community causes, her religion, and “the business.” At the same time, she was raising children and trying to propel them in a positive direction. Women today have many more options in both academia and commerce, but that does not denigrate the role of those who passionately pursued the course of welding together many different strains of responsibility.

The proper translation of the Proverb is, *A'ysht Chayal*. It literally means, in the feminine tense, a fiery life. King James gave us the translation, “a woman of valor” which is wholly incorrect. Even the more modern translation, “a woman of accomplishment” is not accurate. Jean Staiman was that fiery female personality.

In the Proverb, this fiery woman was so precious because she contributed to her community, was active in commerce, worked diligently at providing for an exemplary household and exemplified *Torah Chesed*. She exemplified the loving kindness of Torah.

The Proverb has been misunderstood in the neomodern mind. There are even those who believe that it is “sexist.” After all, how could this woman be extolled for doing everything that she did, while her husband was sitting around with his feet propped up on the table of the study hall discussing philosophical abstracts? Those who feel this way could not be further from the truth. Social scientists have looked at Proverbs to understand how the Jewish woman lived 2,500 years ago. Unlike other women who were not even allowed to own property, this accomplished woman “sees a field and purchases it.” She was not only a full member of society, but at the same time she was a pillar of her household. What exactly is wrong with that? Perhaps the problem is one of expectation. Do we require too much of people today asking them to be responsible, accountable, productive, and engaged? For Jean Staiman, involvement in her family, religion and “the business” presented no inconsistencies. She was driven to excellence in all matters. Creating a future for her community, her family, “the business,” and Williamsport in general was a given fact of life for the likes of Jean Staiman.

The role of men, of course, is complimentary. What is unique about the Proverb is that it complimented a woman as a provider and intellect, clearly as equal if not superior to the male of the household. The Kabbalistic mystics claim that in the age of the Messiah, the feminine component will be dominant! Were not for the women among the Children of Israel, the Jews would not have been saved at the Red Sea, according to the most respected commentators. When the men demanded the Golden Calf, the woman refused to supply their gold for the idol. The men wanted to appoint a leader to return to Egypt but the Daughters of Zelophehad demanded their right of inheritance in the future Holy Land. For all of this, our Chasidic brothers say that women are unquestionably spiritually superior.

Jean Staiman would have been one of those Daughters of Zelophehad refusing to give up any of her jewelry for some ridiculous golden cow. She certainly would have wanted a nice piece of land in the Promised Land, where she now rests peacefully.

There are those who claim that the Proverb, a fiery woman, was written by a Jewish Queen, Salome Alexandra, as advice to her son concerning what sort of woman to marry. The Queen was one of the women to rule over Judea approximately 150 years before the current calendar. Her Hebrew name was Shelamzion. She wanted her son to marry someone worthy of Jewish tradition. Salome Alexandra was known as a “wise and pious ruler who lived up to the Torah.” It was she who removed the Sadducees from the Sanhedrin and installed the greatest scholars of their day to their proper role.

As others have observed, the woman that Proverbs refers to was what today we would call not only a pioneer but, without question, a leading feminist personality.

Balancing the responsibility of family and community is not an obstacle to achievement. Jean Staiman knew how to overcome barriers, which given her fortitude and drive, rarely existed for her.

Those who knew Jean Staiman will all miss her fiery life, which should help serve as a positive example to men and women throughout this community.

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