Project Kesher Ukraine Interview with Dana Pulver on Torah study, women’s representation, and Jewish women’s leadership

Dana Pulver is a Jewish educator, biblical scholar, and commentator. She teaches Jewish texts to students at Hebrew University of Jerusalem, and is involved in various American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee Jewish education projects. She teaches for Hillel, Moishe House, and pluralist spaces of Jewish study. Dana has appeared on RTVi, international Russian-language television, and Israeli press including Maariv online, Makor Rishon and others. She was born in Kyiv, Ukraine, and now lives in Israel.

Q: What do we get from Torah study?
A: Torah study gives us everything. It gives us the means to understanding ourselves and others, and the world. We learn how it is organized, what kind of nation we are, our heritage, our origin. We suddenly realize that we haven’t descended from apes, neither are we products of more or less successful Soviet or post-Soviet upbringing, rather we are the children of all those characters and all those stories the Torah is filled with. It turns out that we have the whole universe in Torah and it gives us wings!

Q: What 3 recommendations for Jewish text study would you give to our activists and readers?
A: Advice #1 – Read texts separately. If you want to study Torah – read Torah. If you want to study Rashi – read Rashi. You shouldn’t read Rashi to understand Torah. Those are different texts. Even if we read all these texts simultaneously, you should understand that they are different and be able to distinguish between them, this way their beauty will manifest itself better.

Advice #2 – Read texts beyond their boundaries. Some smart guys – sages, in the middle ages, said - decided that the first chapter starts here and ends there, while the second here and there, and so on... but those are their individual whims! Read with boundaries you set yourself. Because Torah and Tanakh are written without boundaries, they are limited only to the size of those books. When we read and end the story in the middle of chapter four rather than at the end of chapter one, we perceive the story differently. This advice is easy to follow, but try to consciously shift your perspective. Look for other possible boundaries and other framing of the story.

My third advice is a little bit more complicated – study Hebrew. Texts sound different in Hebrew. Sometimes they can be translated and I love it – to explain how the original text sounds. But sometimes it is impossible and nothing can be better than your own interpretation of the original language.

Q: How does Torah depict women?
A: It is wonderful that Torah doesn’t have one given image of a woman. The Torah shows us different archetypes, and each of them is complicated and beautiful in her way. We will see a beautiful woman who stays at home taking care of her children, and next to her we will find a warrior who goes and kills for a commander. We will see a woman who loves, a woman who writes, who seeks, who saves her family. That is, the Torah is filled with different archetypes regarding femininity and each of them is beautiful.

Q: Who is your favorite female character in Torah and why?
A: As the Torah has more than one female character, it’s hard to say who of them is my favorite. I love many of them, each for a separate reason and aspect. And to choose between Mikhal – the only women that texts describes as a woman ‘who loves somebody’, and Hannah – who seeks for some wholeness – is impossible for me. But I would mention and highlight one character. This character has no name, we praise her every shabbat – she is a woman of valor, Eshet Chayil, and we sing a song about her (last chapter of the book of Mishlei). That hymn is an example of a wrong interpretation of a classical and well-known text.

Q: Why do you think that the image of Eshet Chayil is misinterpreted?
A: Eshet Chayil is usually presented as a wife of valor working at nights, making food for everyone, and taking care of them. But if you read the Hebrew text, you will see an extraordinary and belligerent tone and it is much more obvious than her virtues. “Eshet Chayil” in Hebrew is directly translated as “woman-warrior.” Proof to this statement can be found in the second sentence, “The heart of her husband safely trusts in her, And he has no lack of gain.” In Hebrew, “chalal” means military gain. In the same way we can study other verses and see this pattern. When she seeks wool and flax, in Hebrew she “DEMANDS wool and flax.” She considers a field and buys it, she has strategically planned it and conquered it, and so on. We see how in one text, two different aspects of a woman intertwine in a beautiful way. One is superficial, the one we commonly understand – Eshet Chayil as a very nice and virtuous woman. But underlying is another meaning – a woman-warrior. It seems as if the text is sending us a message that there is not one ideal image that is being presented, rather there exist several interpretations, and many characters are much more complex than they may seem.

By the way, the Midrash says that Eshet Chayil song was sung by Bathsheba to her son, King Solomon who was late to the opening of the Temple because he was in bed with his newlywed wife – the Egyptian queen. In the song, Bathsheba was trying to explain to Solomon how a wife of valor should behave. The thing is, that no one dared to awaken the king and the first day of opening of the Temple could have become a day of heavy disappointment. Bathsheba took off her shoe and tried to wake up her sleeping son. Such an interesting interpretation and way to wake up sons in the morning!

Q: What do we learn from the Torah about Jewish Women’s Leadership?
A: Women in PK leadership groups grow much in the same way that leaders in the Torah are formed. This process where, in the Torah, the main character has to step up and overcome whatever challenge they are facing requires that the character realize what quality they need in order to achieve their goals. This seems to me to be the core of women’s leadership. We feel our strength and what skills we still need to acquire but its power needs to be channeled into the goals that we have not achieved yet. We understand that we are in this process and this understanding and desire to grow is also one of the features of women’s leadership.