

Recognition Hunger: Thoughts for Parashat Ki Tetsei

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Angel for Shabbat, Parashat Ki Tetsei

by Rabbi Marc D. Angel

In his book, “Games People Play,” Dr. Eric Berne wrote of a phenomenon that he described as recognition hunger. We all have a deep psychological need to be recognized, to be validated. It is a natural desire to want to be noticed. These signs of affirmative recognition convey a message: your life matters, you are good, you make a difference. When someone sincerely praises or thanks us, we feel better about ourselves.

While all people have recognition hunger, it manifests itself in different ways. Dr. Berne notes: “A movie star receives hundreds of strokes each week from anonymous and undifferentiated admirers to keep his spinal cord from buckling; a scientist may keep physically and mentally healthy on one stroke a year from a respected master.”

While all humans need affirmation from others, different people have different sorts of recognition hunger. Some are internally weak, they need constant validation and applause. They seek publicity for themselves. They are afraid of being ignored, and they ache when they are not noticed. The hungrier they are for recognition, the weaker they are. They don't think their life matters unless they receive constant attention, however superficial or ephemeral. It is often very true, that the most “popular” and “powerful” people are also the most lonely and unfulfilled.

There are others, like the scientist in Dr. Berne's statement, whose lives are validated by affirmation from a few. Such people are very strong within themselves. They don't pander to the crowd, they don't seek attention to themselves. They work diligently and humbly without seeking the limelight. They feel personally valued when a respected person loves them, admires them, or compliments their work. They don't measure their internal happiness by how many people praise or clap for them; rather, they find contentment and validation from the admiration and respect of a few--or even one—special individuals.

Generally, the saddest human beings are those who receive little or no recognition from anyone. They feel unappreciated. Others see them as being inconsequential; they come to see themselves as being insignificant. This is why the Torah constantly reminds us—and commands us—to care for the widow and orphan, to practice kindness and charity, to respect the elderly. The Torah wants us to be sources of validation for those who feel neglected and abandoned.

People with excessive recognition hunger are so worried about their own egos, that they are callous and uncaring about others. They want praise aimed at themselves; they are self-centered and self-serving. They will do anything for anyone and do almost anything in order to advance themselves and gain more recognition. The Torah

this kind of person.

It is precisely the psychologically strong people who are best able to care for others. Only the most selfless give generous compliments. Only those who receive admiration, respect and love can properly convey admiration and love for others. The Torah guides us to become this kind of person.

The outstanding figure in the Torah is Moses; what do we know about his recognition hunger?

The Torah describes many episodes in the life of Moses. It seems that he received very little positive feedback. In one story after the other, Moses is rebuked, threatened, betrayed, and challenged. Jethro appreciated him for his service to his daughters, but we never find an Israelite who says to Moses: thank you, you've done a good job. You are a strong leader, you've helped us live better lives. It is truly amazing that a man could have served his people so effectively...and yet receive next to no gratitude, appreciation or words of kindness.

So how did Moses maintain his inner strength and composure?

The book of Devarim, including this week's parasha Ki Tetsei, represents Moses's recap of his career to the new generation of people. He recounts the historical events; he underscores and expands upon the commandments; he shares the vision imparted to him by the Almighty. As a servant of God, he drew his validation from God, not from human praise. He never lost heart or if he ever wondered whether his life meant anything, God's voice reassured him: I know you are accomplishing great things, don't lose heart, don't give up on yourself.

Moses, of course, was in a category of his own. He is the only one to have spoken with God "face to face" and to have had such a close relationship with God. And yet, his example can inspire all of us.

Moses reminds us that recognition hunger can be satisfied to a great extent by our own internal validation. When we know that our work is meaningful, we feel validated even if others do not praise us. When we act righteously in serving the Lord, we are strong even if no one knows of our righteousness. When our own consciences are clear, we can live happily and securely even without receiving applause and public recognition.

This does not preclude our psychological need for being loved, appreciated, and thanked. Recognition is a natural factor in human life. Yet, the finest and most secure people are those who are internally validated, who know that ultimately the validity of their lives is a matter between themselves and God. It is as though God speaks to them and they hear.

Without that validation, life is empty. With that validation, life is a blessing.





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