Recognition Hunger--blog by Rabbi Marc D. Angel

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In his book, “Games People Play,” Dr. Eric Berne wrote of a phenomenon that he described as recognition hunger. Humans have a deep psychological need to be recognized, to be validated. It is a natural desire to want to be loved and appreciated. 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 actor may require hundreds of strokes each week from anonymous and undifferentiated admirers to keep his spinal cord from shriveling, while a scientist may keep physically and mentally healthy on one stroke a year from a respected master.” (p. 15)

While all humans need affirmation from others, different people have different sorts of recognition hunger. Some are so internally weak, they need constant validation and applause. They seek publicity for themselves. They want to be noticed, and they ache when they are not noticed. The hungrier they are for recognition, the weaker they are within themselves. They don’t think their life matters unless they receive constant attention, however superficial or ephemeral. It may seem odd, but it is often very true, that the most “popular” and “powerful” people are also the most lonely and insecure people.

There are others, like the scientist in Dr. Berne’s statement, whose lives are validated by affirmation from an esteemed master. Such people are very strong within themselves. They don’t pander to the crowd, they don’t strive to call undue

attention to themselves. They work diligently and humbly without seeking the limelight. They feel personally validated if one respected person loves them, admires them, or compliments their work. They don't measure their internal success and happiness by how many people praise or clap for them; rather, they find contentment and validation from the love, 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 are ignored, unloved, unappreciated. Others see them as being inconsequential; they come to see themselves as being inconsequential. Perhaps this is why the Torah constantly reminds us—and commands us—to care for the widow and orphan, to treat the poor with kindness and charity, to respect the elderly. The Torah wants us to be sources of validation for those who might otherwise feel neglected and abandoned.

People with excessive recognition hunger are so worried about their own egos, that they are callous when it comes to caring about others. They want praise aimed at themselves; they are self-centered and self-serving. They will step on anyone and do almost anything in order to advance themselves and gain more recognition. The Torah urges us not to be this kind of person.

It is precisely the psychologically strong people who are best able to care for others. Only the most secure people can give generous compliments. Only those who receive admiration, respect and love can properly convey admiration, respect 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 validation from others. In one story after the other, Moses is rebuked, threatened, betrayed, and challenged. Jethro appreciated Moses' kindness to his daughters, but we never find an Israelite who says to Moses: thank you, you've done a good job, you've been a strong leader, you've helped us live better lives. If Moses had recognition hunger, he must have been starving if he had depended on the Israelites. It is truly amazing that a man could have served his people so long and 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 Vayikra begins: “And He called to Moses, and God spoke to him from the tent of meeting.” The classic rabbinic commentators note that first God called Moses and then He spoke to him. God called Moses as a sign of love and respect, extending an invitation to Moses before simply giving him commandments. Thus, it was God—not human beings—who validated Moses’ life. Rashi cites the Talmudic statement: God’s voice reached Moses’ ears alone; none of the Israelites heard God’s voice when He addressed Moses. This is a way of saying that God and Moses had a unique relationship unshared by anyone else. If Moses ever lost heart or if he ever wondered whether his life meant anything, God’s voice reassured him: I love you, Moses, 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 even though we are on much lower spiritual levels.

The example of Moses is a reminder that recognition hunger can be satisfied to a great extent by our own internal validation. When we feel that our work is meaningful, we feel validated even if others do not praise us. When we feel that we act righteously, we feel strong even if no one knows of our righteousness. Our validation does not ultimately come from others, but from our own inner sense of meaning, goodness and idealism. When our own consciences validate us, 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 hunger is a real factor in human life. Yet, the finest and most secure people are those who are internally validated, who understand that ultimately the validity of their lives is a matter between themselves and God. It is as though God speaks to them and no one else hears.

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