# Recognition Hunger: Thoughts for Parashat Lekh Lekha

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Angel for Shabbat, Parashat Lekh Lekha

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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, who 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.

In this week's parasha, we read about the early career of Abraham. Abraham is described in the Torah and rabbinic tradition as a strong, independent person, unafraid to stand alone. He is not described as a great orator or statesman, or a seeker of personal popularity. Rather, Abraham is one who walks before God, in the presence of God.

God refers to Abraham as "ohavi," My friend (Isaiah 41;8). Friendship implies a loving mutual relationship, loyalty, trustworthiness. Jewish tradition identifies Abraham with the quality of compassion (hesed), meaning that he really cared not only for God but for people. He took the time to speak with—not at—others. More importantly, he took the time to listen to others. He was not a self-aggrandizing politician or a back-slapping smooth salesman.

Others in Abraham's time may have been mightier, more popular, and wealthier. But God chose Abraham because Abraham was true. Abraham was the one who would become "father of a multitude of nations." Abraham was the one who would ultimately prevail in bringing the world closer to God and closer to

godliness.

Angel for Shabbat