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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 recog
have a deep psychological need to be recognized, to be validated. It is a natural desire to want to be
These signs of affirmative recognition convey a message: your life matters, you are good, you make a
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 mov
hundreds of strokes each week from anonymous and undifferentiated admirers to keep his spinal cor
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 hun
internally weak, they need constant validation and applause. They seek publicity for themselves. They
and they ache when they are not noticed. The hungrier they are for recognition, the weaker they are v
They don’t think their life matters unless they receive constant attention, however superficial or epher
odd, but it is often very true, that the most “popular” and “powerful” people are also the most lonely ar

There are others, like the scientist in Dr. Berne’s statement, whose lives are validated by affirmation f
master. Such people are very strong within themselves. They don’t pander to the crowd, they don’t st
attention to themselves. They work diligently and humbly without seeking the limelight. They feel pers
respected person loves them, admires them, or compliments their work. They don’t measure their inte
happiness by how many people praise or clap for them; rather, they find contentment and validation f
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
unappreciated. Others see them as being inconsequential; they come to see themselves as being inc
this is why the Torah constantly reminds us—and commands us—to care for the widow and orphan, t
kindness and charity, to respect the elderly. The Torah wants us to be sources of validation for those
feel neglected and abandoned.

People with excessive recognition hunger are so worried about their own egos, that they are callous v
caring about others. They want praise aimed at themselves; they are self-centered and self-serving. T
anyone and do almost anything in order to advance themselves and gain more recognition. The Tora
this kind of person.

It is precisely the psychologically strong people who are best able to care for others. Only the most se
generous compliments. Only those who receive admiration, respect and love can properly convey adm
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
In one story after the other, Moses is rebuked, threatened, betrayed, and challenged. Jethro apprecia
to his daughters, but we never find an Israelite who says to Moses: thank you, you've done a good jo
strong leader, you've helped us live better lives. It is truly amazing that a man could have served his
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 caree
people. He recounts the historical events; he underscores and expands upon the commandments; he
vision imparted to him by the Almighty. As a servant of God, he drew his validation from God, not hu
ever lost heart or if he ever wondered whether his life meant anything, God's voice reassured him: I l
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
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 valid
that our work is meaningful, we feel validated even if others do not praise us. When we act righteousl
serving the Lord, we are strong even if no one knows of our righteousness. When our own conscienc
live happily and securely even without receiving applause and public recognition.

This does not preclude our psychological need for being loved, appreciated, and thanked. Recognitio
factor in human life. Yet, the finest and most secure people are those who are internally validated, wh
ultimately the validity of their lives is a matter between themselves and God. It is as though God spea
else hears.

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

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