



Shabbat Hol Ha'moed Sukkot
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Unrecognized

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I don't know if the family was actually sitting shiva; the news reports didn't say. But they were certainly within the shiva period. The father had died on Friday, and on Monday morning, his daughter was leafing through his email, when she learned that her father had just won the Nobel Prize in Medicine.

A Nobel Prize announced within the week of shiva—a first in human history.

This is the story of Dr. Ralph Steinman who received the award for his pathbreaking work in immunology, though he had died just three days earlier of pancreatic cancer. In his own life, he never received the coveted recognition. Both the New York Times and the Wall Street Journal on October 4, page 1 above the fold, show this poignant vignette of Dr. Steinman, pictured on a big screen, with a broad smile on his face, with his wife, his son, and his two daughters in the background, staring at in image of their recently deceased husband and father who had just won the single most prestigious award in the world but was not alive to receive it. He was a Nobel Prize winner who never knew it.

His unique predicament made me reflect on the question: how important is it to be recognized for the good work we do? Is recognition for the good we do an affirmative Jewish value?

There is a mitzvah called *hakarat hatov*, recognizing the good. But that means we are supposed to recognize the good *in others*. If somebody does a kindness for us, we are to acknowledge and thank them for it. But is this mitzvah two-way: is there a similar ideal that *we are to be recognized* when we have done something good?

We are not Nobel Prize winners. We don't have Dr. Steinman's issue of being a Nobel Prize winner who never knew it. But each of us faces this issue of being unrecognized in our own way.

Rabbi Harold Kushner tells the story of a housewife who came to see him. Something was eating at her. She was at home raising their three young children while her husband had a demanding career which had him leave early in the morning and get home most nights just as his children were ready to fall asleep. She was left every morning to get the children up and out, drive the car pool, do the dishes, do the laundry, do the grocery shopping, straighten and clean the house, cook dinner, feed the children, and do the night time ritual, bath and bed time, at which point her husband finally got home to give them a kiss good night. The years go by all too fast, but the days go by all too slow. She did this day after day, year after year, with the disquiet bubbling up within her.

Her problem was not exhaustion. Yes, it was a tiring day, but she actually loved and believed in every part of it.

Her problem was not angst over the road not taken. She was doing exactly what she wanted to do, doing the day-to-day child-rearing and home-making.

Her problem was not isolation and lack of adult conversation.

Rather, she realized as she was talking to Rabbi Kushner, her problem was *lack of recognition*. She did all this work, day after day, and it went unrecognized. Every day my family has clean laundry and a warm, home-cooked meal. Where do they think it comes from? But do they ever thank me?

What did Rabbi Kushner say to her? What might friends say to the Steinman family about the pathos of Dr. Steinman not being recognized while he was still alive? What should we think when our good work goes unrecognized?

Our answer comes from our Torah reading today. Moses says to God: *hareini nah et kavodekha*, show me your Presence. Show me your essence. Let me see your core. This is God's response:

As My Presence passes by, I will put you in a cleft of the rock and shield you with My hand until I have passed by. Then I will take My hand away and you will see My back; but My face must not be seen. Ex. 33:22-23.

This passage is famously enigmatic. Moses can see God's back but cannot see God's face. What does it mean exactly?

There are many interpretations, but here is mine. The Torah is teaching us that what matters is not recognition, but impact. The divine move, to imitate God, is to do good without being recognized. Moses can see God's back after it has passed which, as Eitz Hayim suggests, is a metaphor for the difference God has made, the impact God has had in our life. But Moses cannot see God's face, meaning that the focus is on the work that was done, not on God for doing it. Impact, not recognition.

The same notion is found in secular literature. In Jim Collins' classic Good to Great, the author examines why some companies remain mired in mediocrity while other companies in the same industry thrive. Why do some companies go from good to great and others don't? One of the key factors that Collins identifies in the companies that become great is that they are headed by what he calls "level 5" leaders. The heart of level 5 leadership is combining personal humility with passion for the company. The level 5 leader does not want personal recognition but has in Collins' phrase a "ferocious resolve...to do whatever needs to be done to make the

company great.” For example, the level 5 leader wants to make sure that his or her successor thrives. Collins writes:

Level 5 leaders want to see the company even more successful in the next generation, comfortable with the idea that most people won't even know that the roots of that success trace back to their efforts. As one level 5 leader said, 'I want to look out from my porch at one of the great companies in the world someday and be able to say, I used to work there.

In contrast, the [non-level 5] leaders, concerned more with their own reputation for personal greatness, often failed to set the company up for success in the next generation. After all, what better testament to your own personal greatness than that the place falls apart after you leave?

There is a remarkable consilience between our Torah portion and Good to Great. In today's reading God says that the divine essence is about the back that has passed, the difference that has been made, the impact that has been caused, and not the face of the one who does this good work. Jim Collins teaches us that the best business leaders are passionate about the company thriving without their getting credit for it.

All of which shaped Rabbi Kushner's response to this hardworking but unrecognized housewife. Everyone loves a complement of course, and they do have the obligation of *hakarat hatov*, recognizing the good that you do, Rabbi Kushner acknowledged. And yet, you don't do what you do for the recognition. You do what you do because you believe in the cause. You do what you do because you love those children and nothing is more important to you than giving them a warm, safe, loving home. You will never get recognition commensurate to the hard work that goes into these sacred goals, but your recompense is the impact you are having on your family. Impact, not recognition.

So too with Dr. Steinman. What mattered was the work he did. His life work was to develop a vaccine against cancer for human beings, having shown that a cancer vaccine could be effective in mice. When he was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer, he applied his own research

to his own treatment, developing a vaccine against his own tumor. While he was a Nobel Prize winner who did not know it, he surely knew that what he did mattered. His life work was about life itself. What could be more urgent than that?

It turns out, then, that recognition is more of a one-way mitzvah than a two-way mitzvah. It is important to recognize the good in others. *Hakarat hatov*. And yet it is not similarly important that the good we do get recognized. Yes, everyone loves a complement. And if others are fulfilling their mitzvah of *hakarat hatov*, they will thank us for the good we do.

And yet, there seems to be an ideal of doing good that is unrecognized. Doing good for its own sake. Doing good, whether raising your family, doing scientific research, or whatever the good is that you do, because you believe in it, because it is larger than you.

At the end of May, the New York Times columnist David Brooks wrote a column entitled “It’s Not about You.” It was the season of college graduations. He had read the commencement addresses of a number of speakers, and he argued that many of their messages were not helpful.

If you sample some of the commencement addresses being broadcast on C-Span these days, you see that many graduates are told to: Follow your passion, chart your own course, march to the beat of your own drummer, follow your dreams and find yourself. This is the litany of expressive individualism, which is still the dominant note in American culture...

Today’s grads enter a cultural climate that preaches the self as the center of a life. But, of course, as they age, they’ll discover that the tasks of a life are at the center. Fulfillment is a byproduct of how people engage their tasks, and can’t be pursued directly. Most of us are egotistical and most are self-concerned most of the time, but it’s nonetheless true that life comes to a point only in those moments when the self dissolves into some task. The purpose in life is not to find yourself. It’s to lose yourself.

Dr. Steinman, unrecognized in life, lost himself in his research.

The housewife who came to see Rabbi Kushner, unrecognized in the day to day grind, lost herself in the sacred work of raising a family and creating a home.

In this new year, to what will you lose yourself? Shabbat shalom.