

What Are You Building—and Who Are You Becoming?

Parshas Lech Lecha

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The question behind a lifetime of achievement

A person can look back over many years and point to a great deal. He has raised a family, earned a living, supported institutions, attended shiurim, and helped people. He has been busy, sometimes extraordinarily busy. There are buildings that exist because of him, projects that succeeded through his efforts, and people who have benefited from his generosity.

Those are substantial achievements. Yet there is another question that deserves a place beside them: What has all this activity done to the person who performed it? Has his learning made him more teachable? Has his giving made him more generous? Has serving the community made him more attentive to the individual standing in front of him?

Sometimes the answer appears in a moment that will never enter an annual report. Someone interrupts him when he is tired. Someone else receives an honour he had hoped to receive. A person who cannot advance his interests needs a few minutes of his time. Suddenly, the question is no longer how much he has accomplished. The question is what kind of person has emerged through those accomplishments.

Our achievements build things in the world. They are also meant to build the human being who accomplishes them.

That is a way to understand the first command Hashem gives Avraham Avinu.¹

A journey for your own good

Look at Source 1. The opening of our parsha reads:

וַיֹּאמֶר ה' אֶל אַבְרָם לֵךְ לְבְּרִיחֶךָ וּמִמְלַחְתְּךָ וּמִבֵּית אָבִיךָ אֶל הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר אֹרְאָךְ.

Hashem said to Avram: Go forth from your land, from your birthplace, and from your father's house, to the land that I will show you. (Bereishis 12:1)

Stay with Source 1 for a moment and look at the second pasuk printed there:

¹ Based on a shiur by Rav Shimshon Dovid Pinkus, Tiferes Shimshon, Bereishis, Parshas Lech Lecha, “איזהו — המתחסד עם קונו חסיד,” pp. 75–76. Adapted and developed for presentation.

Avram went as Hashem had spoken to him. (Bereishis 12:4)

Now look at Source 2, Rashi on “lech lecha”:

לְהִנָּאתְךָ וּלְטוֹבָתְךָ, וְשֵׁם אֲנִשְׁךָ לְגוֹי גָּדוֹל, כֹּאֵן אִי אַתָּה זֹכֶה לְבָנִים. וְעוֹד שְׂאוֹדִיעַ טְבַעְךָ בְּעוֹלָם.

For your benefit and your good. There I will make you into a great nation; here you will not merit children. Furthermore, I will make your reputation known throughout the world.

Rashi is speaking about real blessings: children, a great nation, and a name known throughout the world. Avraham is being told that leaving will be good for him. How does that fit with the emphasis that he went “as Hashem had spoken to him”?

There is a beautiful interpretation that reads these words as a tribute to Avraham's purity of intention. Although Hashem promised him personal benefit, he went because Hashem had commanded him. The promise of reward did not determine his obedience.

But consider another possibility. Hashem Himself said that this would be for Avraham's good. Why should we assume that Avraham had to put that part of the command aside? Perhaps “as Hashem had spoken to him” means that he fulfilled the command in its entirety. He went on a journey that would indeed benefit him, because Hashem wanted him to grow through it.

Rashi's promises retain their straightforward meaning. Alongside those blessings, we are considering the inward benefit of Avraham's journey. Hashem's commands also develop the person who fulfils them. Avraham could welcome the good Hashem intended for him while remaining entirely devoted to Hashem's will. **His own spiritual growth was part of what Hashem wanted.**

Avraham is going to bring blessing into the world. He is also going to be built through bringing that blessing. To understand how those two purposes fit together, let us examine a simple act of kindness.

What happens when you feed a hungry person?

Someone has nothing to eat. You provide him with a meal. What has happened?

The first answer is obvious: a hungry human being has received food. His need mattered before you arrived, and your kindness has made a real difference to his life. If we lose sight of that, we have already misunderstood chesed.

There is also a second result. You have exercised the capacity to give. You saw another person's need and allowed it to make a claim on you. You took something that could have remained yours and made it available to him. Through that choice, you have taken a step toward becoming a baal chesed, a person whose character is shaped by kindness.

A single deed has therefore produced two kinds of building. Something has been repaired in the recipient's circumstances, and something has been developed in the giver's character.

Which aspect receives most of our attention? Usually the visible result. How many meals were distributed? How much money was raised? How many families were helped? Those questions are necessary. Food must reach people; funds must be administered responsibly. Yet Hashem also desires the inward result: that the giver become a person whose heart is increasingly open to others.

Imagine someone who has given generously for years but still treats a person who approaches him with contempt. His generosity has accomplished good. We should never erase that good. But there is further work to do within the giver. The kindness has not yet reached every part of his personality.

The same is true of learning. A person may accumulate knowledge while remaining unable to listen. The knowledge is precious, and he must continue learning. At the same time, he needs to ask how the Torah is shaping his responses, his humility, and his treatment of people.

What can a human being give Hashem?

Look at Source 3. The Zohar offers a remarkable description:

איזהו חסיד? המתחסד עם קונו.

Who is a chassid? One who acts with kindness toward his Creator. (Zohar, Mishpatim, II 112b)

How can we speak of kindness toward Hashem? Kindness ordinarily supplies something another person lacks. Hashem lacks nothing. He does not need our money, our resources, or our assistance in sustaining His world.

Think of a child with a packet of sweets. He offers one to a friend who already has a cupboard full of them. It is still a kind gesture. But when he gives to a child who has none and cannot obtain one, we see clearly how he has supplied something the recipient lacked.

What could possibly correspond to that in our relationship with Hashem? The answer requires the word “כביכול”—so to speak. We are describing the purpose Hashem has freely chosen for creation, never a limitation in His power or a need in His being.

Hashem has chosen to give us moral freedom. He can place food on a table and arrange shelter for a family. But a freely chosen act of generosity must be chosen by the person. If goodness were imposed on me without my choice, it would not be my freely chosen goodness.

When I overcome my selfishness, exercise restraint, or become more compassionate, I fulfil something Hashem desires from me. I bring Him, so to speak, the person I have chosen to become.

The good person I freely become is something I can offer my Creator.

This gives us a deeper understanding of Avraham's work. Was Hashem dependent on Avraham to provide accommodation for travellers? Could He not have arranged that they already had homes? Was Hashem unable to guide people without Avraham's efforts? Of course He could have supplied every need in another way.

But He wanted Avraham's kindness. He wanted a human being who would search for guests, care about their hunger, and lead them toward recognition of their Creator. The guests needed food, and Avraham needed to become Avraham through feeding them. Both purposes belong to the mitzvah.

We cannot choose an imaginary inward growth while leaving the hungry person hungry. The practical deed is the means through which growth takes place. "Lech lecha" directs Avraham into a life of action that will build his own neshamah.

When a brick becomes more important than a person

We can now understand a fundamental contrast between Avraham and Dor Haflagah, the generation that built the Tower of Babel.

Look at Source 4, Pirkei de-Rabbi Eliezer, chapter 24. Listen to the contrast:

ואם נפל אדם ומת לא שמיי' את לבם עליו, ואם נפלה לבנה אחת היו יושבין ובוכין ואומרים: אוי לנו, אימתי תעלה אחרת תחתיה.

If a person fell and died, they paid him no attention. But if a single brick fell, they would sit and weep, saying: "Woe to us! When will another be brought up in its place?"

The words "be brought up" matter. The brick had to be carried to the height at which they were building. Losing it meant losing the effort invested in getting it there. They felt that loss keenly, while the loss of a human life left them unmoved.

Why would a brick matter more than a human life? Because the builders had made the collective project their supreme value. The brick contributed to the building.

The individual was judged by whether he served it.

Follow the chilling logic of their attitude. The world supplies the individual with air, food, and the necessities of life. He consumes resources. What does he contribute in return? The brick helps build the tower. If a worker dies, another worker can take his place. If a brick is lost, the project has suffered a setback.

Once that becomes the measure of a person's worth, the human being disappears behind his usefulness. A society can speak about humanity while becoming indifferent to an actual person.

The Midrashic picture of Egypt pressing Jewish children into the construction when the required number of bricks was lacking expresses the same horror. The construction must proceed. A child can be treated as material for its completion. The project has swallowed the person.

Avraham's starting point is entirely different. A traveller is a human being created by Hashem. His worth does not depend on what he can contribute to Avraham's enterprise. Avraham gives because another person needs something, and through that giving he fulfils the purpose for which he himself was created.

The collective, the outsider, and the individual

The principle is larger than one ancient tower. Modern communism sought to organise economic life around collective ownership: land, factories, and resources were to belong to the public rather than private individuals. Its language promised equality and brotherhood. Yet in its totalitarian forms, the individual could become expendable before the supposed interests of the collective.

The history of Stalinist repression, deportation, forced labour, and killing shows what can happen when a state gives itself permission to dispose of human beings in pursuit of its programme. Claims of universal concern provide no protection once actual people are denied dignity.

Nazi Germany displayed murderous hatred, above all in the systematic murder of six million Jews. Stalinist terror illustrates another way in which human beings can be destroyed: the regime treats them as obstacles, suspects, or expendable labour in the service of its aims. Hatred and ruthless expediency are distinct motives; both can lead to appalling cruelty. We need no competition between atrocities to understand the moral warning.

Why the return of socialism deserves scrutiny

The point of considering politics here is to test the same question on the scale of a society: does its system protect and develop human beings, or do human beings become instruments of the system?

These questions belong in today's political discussion as well. The Democratic Socialists of America advocates replacing capitalism with democratic socialism and bringing major sectors such as energy and transportation into collective ownership. These are substantial proposals about who should control economic life. The organisation also states that it rejects authoritarian socialism. We should therefore distinguish its stated position from Soviet communism, while examining critically the assumptions they share about collective ownership. (Democratic Socialists of America, "What Is Democratic Socialism?", dsausa.org/about-us/what-is-democratic-socialism/; consulted October 21, 2026.)

The appeal is understandable. People see poverty, exploitation, and inequality, and want a fairer society. Torah certainly demands concern for the poor, honest dealing, and protection of the vulnerable. The question for our class is what such structural changes can accomplish on their own. Fairer arrangements can address real problems; they still leave the moral character of the people administering them to be developed.

Taking property out of private hands does not remove greed, ambition, or the desire to dominate. Those qualities can reappear in officials who control the collective resources. When control becomes concentrated and independent voices are suppressed, the individual has fewer places to turn. The terrible record of communist dictatorships shows how dangerous that concentration can become.

This is a fundamental objection to communism: the promise of equality can become a justification for coercion, while the people wielding power remain morally uncorrected. Giving a system authority over people does not make its administrators righteous.

A society needs just institutions and practical provision for human needs. It also needs people who learn to govern themselves. An economic programme cannot substitute for the work of developing honesty, restraint, responsibility, and compassion. We should test today's political promises by that standard, without assuming that every public service is communism or that every socialist supporter endorses dictatorship.

Changing who owns the building does not, by itself, improve the character of the people running it.

The same moral test must be applied to private wealth. The tower's problem can also appear in a wealthy society that values private property. Sedom said, in effect: We have built our prosperous community. Why should outsiders enter and consume what belongs to us? Its cruelty protected a closed circle of comfort.

A wealthy society can fall into the same pattern. Its citizens may fear that newcomers will consume their food and draw away their resources. The moral question concerns the attitude toward the outsider—whether he is seen only as a burden. We should apply that question to ourselves as readily as to any country. Practical decisions about resources require judgment; they never remove the human worth of the people affected.

A collective society can sacrifice the individual to the public project. An affluent society can exclude the stranger to protect private comfort. Underneath both lies a temptation to value systems, possessions, and achievements above people.

Avraham stands outside that reasoning. Hashem can build a world. My task is to become a person who responds properly to the people He places within my reach.

Looking up at the buildings—and then at the people

We have looked at societies that failed to value the individual. Now let us bring the question closer to home: how much effort do we put into developing ourselves compared with developing our surroundings?

When Rav Shimshon Pinkus visited America, a host who assumed that Rav Pinkus had never visited America before offered to show him a newly built city. He took him up a forty-storey building to admire the view. “Look at our building,” he said proudly.

Rav Pinkus had lived in New York, so tall buildings were familiar to him. Nevertheless, the new city impressed him. He described gleaming steel and glass, marble-lined corridors, and broad, comfortable streets. Everything looked fresh and carefully planned. He stood and admired what people had built.

Then he turned his attention from the buildings to the people. Their manner and conduct left him deeply troubled. He kept looking from the impressive surroundings to the people inhabiting them, and a question arose: How could people build with such sophistication while investing so little in the development of their own character?

He was describing a painful contrast: the city had been developed with enormous care, while the human beings within it seemed to have received far less attention. We may know how to make a street attractive without knowing how to speak kindly to someone who lives on it.

Human ingenuity can produce astonishing results. We can construct magnificent buildings and devices that place information from across the world in our hands. Those achievements do not automatically produce patience, honesty, self-restraint, or kindness. **Technical ability and moral character require different kinds of work.**

We need to ask whether the inward building is receiving the attention we devote to the outward building.

That question belongs within our own Torah lives too. Someone may spend his day learning Torah and doing chesed. Those are immense achievements. Yet there remains a question that no calendar can answer: Who is he becoming through them?

Can he accept correction? Can he rejoice in another person's success? Does he notice someone who is uncomfortable? Does he speak gently to the people who serve him? Does the person closest to him experience the generosity everyone else praises?

These questions do not reduce Torah and mitzvos to ordinary good manners. They ask whether the avodah we treasure is entering the whole person. What we do and what we become must be brought together.

The building can be magnificent while the builder still has work to do within himself.

A surprising question about Olam Haba

Now look at Source 5, the Gemara in Avodah Zarah 18a. It tells of Rabbi Yosi ben Kisma becoming ill. Rabbi Chanina ben Teradyon came to visit him. Their conversation concerned Rabbi Chanina's public teaching of Torah despite the danger posed by Roman persecution.

Here stood a man whose devotion to Torah involved mesirus nefesh, readiness to sacrifice his life. He gathered people and taught them at the risk of his life. His accomplishments were neither comfortable nor superficial. They were extraordinary.

During the encounter, Rabbi Chanina asked Rabbi Yosi:

רַבִּי, מָה אֲנִי לְחַיֵּי הָעוֹלָם הַבָּא?

My teacher, what is my standing concerning life in the World to Come?

Rabbi Yosi answered with a question:

כָּלֹם מַעֲשֶׂה בָא לְיָדְךָ?

Did a particular deed come your way?

Rabbi Chanina replied:

מַעוֹת שֶׁל פּוּרִים נִתְחַלְפוּ לִי בְּמַעוֹת שֶׁל צְדָקָה, וְחִלְקֵתִים לְעֲנִיִּים.

Money for Purim became mixed up for me with charity money, and I distributed it to the poor.

The brief words need explaining. Rabbi Chanina had personal money set aside for his Purim meal, as well as charity money for the poor. He mistakenly distributed his own Purim money, thinking he was distributing the charity money. After discovering the error, he did not reimburse himself from the charity purse. **His response turned the accidental distribution into a personal gift.** This is the explanation of Rashi printed beneath the Gemara on your sheet.

Rabbi Yosi then said:

אִם כֵּן, מִחֻלְקֶךָ יִהְיֶה חֶלְקִי וּמִגּוּרְלֶךָ יִהְיֶה גּוּרְלִי.

If so, may my portion be from your portion, and my lot from your lot.

We have to feel the force of the question. Rabbi Chanina was risking his life to establish Torah among the Jewish people. Why did Rabbi Yosi ask for another incident? Why did an episode involving Purim money produce such an extraordinary response?

A deed that reveals the person

We can understand Rabbi Yosi's question as a search for the person within the accomplishments. He knew about the Torah that Rabbi Chanina had taught and the communities that had benefited. Now he sought an incident through which the inner person could be seen.

Imagine that we are shown an imposing building and asked whether its builder is generous. The building alone does not answer. We need to know how he treated a person when his own interests were involved.

Likewise, even a great public accomplishment leaves room for a question about the inward disposition of its author. In Rabbi Chanina's case, the unexpected financial incident disclosed something personal. When the opportunity arose to recover money that was his, he let it remain with the poor.

The point is not the size of the sum. It is the freedom of the response. This had come his way unexpectedly. It was not a public project or a planned demonstration of righteousness. His reaction revealed generosity that had become part of him.

A deed of this kind can be quiet enough that nobody else knows about it. The person himself may not even recognise its importance. Yet it can show what years of Torah and avodah have formed within him.

Rabbi Chanina's mesirus nefesh itself expressed extraordinary devotion. Nothing in this explanation diminishes it. The financial incident disclosed an additional quality: generosity when his own private interests were involved. A quiet deed can show how deeply Torah has entered parts of a person's life that the public never sees.

The connection to Olam Haba now becomes clearer. My achievements matter. But the person entering Olam Haba is also the person I have become. What qualities have I made my own? What kind of neshamah has been formed through the life I have lived?

Sometimes a quiet decision shows how deeply our greatest commitments have taken root.

The deeds must build the person

Now look at Source 6. Here is the central point in Rav Pinkus's own words:

ואמנם אין הכוונה, חלילה, שאברהם לא היה צריך לעשות את כל המעשים הטובים שעשה, כי ודאי שללא עשייתם לא היה בונה את עצמו. אבל היופי של הכל, הדבר שבמיוחד חפץ בו השי"ת הוא שבנה את עצמו, כלומר, העיקר לא מה שאתה עושה, אלא מה שאתה בונה את עצמך

This certainly does not mean, Heaven forbid, that Avraham did not need to perform all the good deeds he performed; without doing them, he certainly would not have developed himself. But the beauty of it all, what Hashem especially desires, is that he developed himself. In other words, the essential point is not what you do, but how you build yourself!

Notice how the quotation begins. Avraham needed the deeds. **His character was built through performing them.** The closing words ask us to look beyond the completed task and examine the effect of that task on the person doing it.

We can now hold the two sides together. The recipient is a person whose needs deserve care. The giver is a person whose character needs development. The deed should bring help to one and growth to the other. If I start treating a recipient merely as a tool for my own spiritual achievement, I have lost the very sensitivity that chesed is meant to develop.

A person may ask: what does that growth actually look like? The following three stories show it in a very concrete way. In each, someone facing a deep personal need still made room for another person.

Three quiet decisions

The following three accounts involve people who longed for children. Each account includes a reported yeshuah. We receive these stories with gratitude and reverence, without turning them into a promise that a particular deed must produce a particular outcome. A person whose prayers remain unanswered has not thereby been shown to lack goodness or merit.

What unites these accounts is the remarkable sensitivity of the choices they describe.

Rav Yosef Lis: protecting someone else's heart

Rav Yosef Lis escaped together with the Mir Yeshivah during the Second World War, leaving behind a wife and children who apparently perished. After many difficulties he reached America, and later Eretz Yisrael.

Eventually he considered marrying again. The woman who became his second wife had herself been married for ten years without children. Her first husband had died. Rav Yosef also lacked clear evidence concerning the fate of his first wife and feared

the implications of remarrying. The Brisker Rav strongly encouraged him to proceed, and they married.

Eight years passed without children. Subsequently they were blessed with a son and a daughter.

When Rav Yosef was asked whose mofes, or wondrous intervention, this had been, he gave an unexpected answer: he called it his own. He explained that throughout those years he had never asked the Brisker Rav for a brachah for children. The Rav had urged him to marry. Rav Yosef did not want the request to cause the Rav pain over having encouraged the shidduch. He thought that perhaps the consideration he had shown was the merit through which he had been helped.

Consider what that restraint meant. He carried his own loss and longing. There was a great tzaddik to whom he could have turned. Yet he was sensitive to the possibility that his request might hurt the person who had advised him.

This is not a general instruction to avoid asking for a brachah. It is a glimpse of the concern that governed this man's particular decision. Within his own pain, another person's feelings remained real to him.

The Leshem's daughter: tears outside the house

The second account concerns a daughter of the great mekubal known as the Leshem, author of works of profound Torah wisdom.

She had been without children for several years. After consulting a doctor, she was told that she would never have children. She returned home brokenhearted and found her father learning.

She did not want to disturb him. She went outside to a storage room in the courtyard and cried there.

Later, her father went outside and heard her crying. He entered and asked what had happened. She told him what the doctor had said. He then asked why she had gone outside to cry rather than remaining in the house.

She answered that she had not wanted to disturb his learning.

He told her that in that merit she would have children, and she subsequently had children.

At the centre of this story stands an extraordinarily tender moment. A daughter has just received devastating news. Nevertheless, she notices that her father is learning and tries to spare him interruption. Her pain has not erased her capacity to consider another person.

This is no demand that a distressed person hide suffering or forgo support. It is an account of one woman's exceptional response in a particular moment. We honour that response by seeing the sensitivity it reveals.

The maftir he chose to relinquish

The third story concerns a Jew from Yerushalayim who had been without children for many years. He heard that receiving maftir, the aliyah followed by the reading of the haftarah, on the first day of Rosh Hashanah in the court of a certain Bnei Brak Rebbe was associated with a segulah, a spiritual practice regarded as conducive to blessing, for having children.

He went to the Rebbe, explained his situation, and was told to come for the first day of Rosh Hashanah and receive maftir.

On the first night of Yom Tov, after Maariv, he met another man. In conversation, the man explained why he had come. He too longed for children. He had heard about the maftir and had travelled to Bnei Brak in the hope of receiving it.

The first man now faced a decision. He did not know whether the other man would actually receive maftir. What he could decide was whether he himself would stand in the way. He had already spoken to the Rebbe. He had reason to expect the aliyah. He had come with a longing no less deep than the other man's.

But he decided to give it up wholeheartedly. The next morning he davened elsewhere so that the second man could receive maftir without competition from him.

He was blessed with a daughter that year. Rav Pinkus personally knew the man to whom this happened.

Think about the choice before the outcome. The man did not know what would happen. He simply encountered someone carrying the same longing, and made room for him. **He relinquished the very opportunity for which he had travelled.**

That quiet withdrawal revealed a generosity no announcement could adequately describe.

What do the three stories have in common?

These are three different circumstances, but each presents a person whose concern extended beyond the immediate pressure of personal need.

Rav Yosef Lis thought about the Brisker Rav's possible distress. The Leshem's daughter thought about her father's learning. The visitor to Bnei Brak thought about another man's hope.

None of those decisions required the construction of a building, the founding of an institution, or public recognition. Each disclosed the human being within the action.

Think back to Source 5: “כלום מעשה בא לידך?” A particular situation comes into a person's hands. There is room for self-interest, and there is room to see someone else. What does he choose?

We should not wait for an extraordinary episode. A smaller version may be waiting at home this afternoon. Someone needs to speak when we would rather rest. Someone makes a mistake that we could expose. Another person receives an honour, and we can either diminish it or help him enjoy it.

The choice may be brief. The character expressed through it has been under construction for years.

Bringing “Lech lecha” home

Return to Sources 1 and 2: “lech lecha”—for your benefit and your good.

We began with Avraham's journey. Hashem told him to go for his benefit and his good. That benefit was bound up with the person he would become through fulfilling Hashem's command.

Avraham's guests were real. Their hunger mattered. His responsibility to them was practical. Through meeting those needs, he became a person whose life expressed chesed.

The tower builders could mourn a brick and overlook a human being. Avraham could see in a stranger both a person deserving care and an opportunity to serve his Creator. His greatness brought those two forms of building together.

We too have things to build. We have families to care for, Torah to learn, institutions to sustain, and people to help. Let us do that work seriously. Alongside it, let us ask what is taking shape within us.

Has learning made me readier to hear the truth? Has responsibility made me more considerate? Has giving made it easier to notice another person's need? When someone comes into my path unexpectedly, is there room in my heart for him?

These questions can accompany a person at every age. A lifetime of accomplishment still leaves room for another act of patience, another generous response, another quiet victory over self-concern. The building of the neshamah continues.

After everything I have built, learned, and accomplished—who am I becoming?

Perhaps the next answer will appear in a deed so small that nobody else notices. Hashem will see it. And through that deed, the person He wants us to become can take another step forward.