

L'Hiyot Mensch

Meeting Our Jewish Brothers with Respect and Understanding



By Sholom Nachtman

In his coverage of the 1986 confirmation hearings for William H. Rehnquist, columnist Richard Cohen made the following observation: “Maybe the supreme gift of Yiddish to the English language is the word ‘mensch.’... The question before the U.S. Senate can best be stated in Yiddish: Is William Rehnquist a ‘mensch’?”

Proponents of salty words like “chutzpah” and “schlemiel” might disagree, but it is hard to argue with Cohen’s assessment of the value of the word “mensch.”

Mensch is a unique term, perhaps without cognate in the English language. It denotes a holistic ideal of goodness that encompasses

religious, interpersonal, and societal behavior. In Judaism, being a mensch is something of an unofficial 11th commandment, a convenient shorthand we use to sum up our vast library of *mussar* and *halachic* literature relating to personal conduct.

However, as the Ramchal points out in his introduction to *Mesilas Yeshtarim*, it is often our most fundamental beliefs that we tend to overlook. Despite its centrality in our thoughts, *menschlich* behavior is often absent in our conduct, whether it is within families, communities or just between strangers in the street. Many bemoan the disappearance of *menschlichkeit* and the decline of common courtesy in modern society. One man, though, is attacking

the problem head on and is changing worlds.

L'hiyot Mensch

Meet Dr. Moshe Kaplan M.D., founder of the Be A Mensch foundation, who believes that being a mensch is a simple, unifying message that can do wonders for healing rifts between individuals and in society. His Israel-based organization has rallied behind this slogan and delivers its message in many different, creative ways. Despite not speaking Hebrew, Dr. Kaplan has managed to change Israeli society through his organization’s activities. The foundation’s success has

shown that the simple idea – *L'hiyot Mensch* – can be a silver bullet for one of Israel’s most intractable problems: the rift between the religious and non-religious sectors.

Dr. Kaplan’s mission revolves around a fundamental ideal, encapsulated by the foundation’s name: be a mensch in all interactions with other people. As laid out on his website, being a mensch is something everyone can do: “A mensch is many things and one simple thing. A mensch does what is right because it is right towards family, towards strangers, at home and in public. When people behave with honesty, integrity, consideration, and respect, they themselves prosper, as does society at large. By spreading



Israeli basketball star Tal Brody in an endorsement video for Be A Mensch foundation



Founder Dr. Moshe Kaplan (left) with Nof Atamna-Ismaeel and Prof. Dan Shechtman

mensch-like behavior, we can make our society happier, healthier and more successful."

Dr. Kaplan's mensch crusade began with the publication of his third book, *Be a Mensch: Why Good Character Is the Key to a Life of Happiness, Health, Wealth, and Love*, in 2009. His previous book, *A Wholly Life*, was an anthology of advice from experts in different fields on how to integrate spirituality into all aspects of life. Dr. Kaplan was looking to write a similar book of anthologized advice and decided to explore the idea of what it means to be a mensch. He realized it was a concept that could appeal to everyone, regardless of their political or religious feelings. The publication of this book led to Kaplan exploring ways to promote common decency and respectful dialogue between people who might otherwise be at odds.

Meetings of Understanding

The year after Dr. Kaplan published his "Mensch" book, he founded his foundation. The central focus of Dr. Kaplan's organization is to bridge the gaps in Israeli society by facilitating the meeting of people from different backgrounds in a non-confrontational way. The theme of these meetings is simple: everyone deserves to be treated like a mensch, no matter who they are or what they believe. The foundation arranges for meetings between

chareidim and *chilonim* all over the country. His organization is so successful that he does not need to seek out *chiloni* organizations with which to connect. For example, three years ago, when there were protests in Kikar Robin, some of the Be A Mensch founders – clad in suits and black hats – gathered there to speak with protestors and to, at times, address the crowds. The *chiloni* protestors were impressed: you care about us and our problems and came to join

"The dream of many secular Israelis is to meet a chareidi because chareidim represent a link to Jewish identity."

us in our protest. At least six people came over to one organizer, Mordechai, with tears in their eyes to share their amazement at how *chareidi* people were concerned with *chilonim*'s problems. When you show people you care, you can move worlds.

Since then, many *chiloni* groups – including Shomer Hatzair, Bnei Akiva, Israeli Boy Scouts, divisions of the IDF, and the Betar Youth Movement – have benefited from the Be A Mensch foundation. The Boy Scouts in Israel is a huge organization – it consists of around 80,000 members – and is an expensive unit to join. So many of the country's leaders have gone through its ranks

that the organization can charge such high fees. But the group realized that they needed to offer their members something more meaningful in their lives, and so they have their Scout leaders join in Be A Mensch. Scout leaders – who are in charge of over 40 boy and girl scouts – come back to their units praising and promoting the program.

How do the meetings work? Be A Mensch trains *chareidi* individuals – whom they interview and screen

12 months. During that time, *chareidi* individuals, who are meeting with the groups of around seven Scout leaders every week, develop a true rapport with their newfound friends. They began to respect one another; they endeavor to understand one another.

At the first meeting, a video is shown. It's an amazing film, created entirely by a *chiloni* cast. Rav Elyashiv, *zt"l*, had a few cousins who were completely secular and were big in the TV and film industry in Israel. After the *tzaddik*'s passing, they wanted to make a movie about him. They filmed part of the movie in Rav Elyashiv's apartment, and the only ones involved were *chilonim*. At the end of the film – which was shown on Channel 1 in Israel – one of the actors says, "I like these people – and I'll tell you why."

He asks, "Who are the *chareidim*? It's my grandfather and your grandfather." We all come from the same place, he points out.

The movie, when shown, helps to break the ice between the *chilonim* and *chareidim* in the program. The *chilonim* are receptive to it; after all, it was created by *chilonim*.

At one point during the meetings the Boy Scouts show a film about their program. At another point, the *chareidim* show a movie about what life is like as a *chareidi*. Slowly, the two groups develop respect for each other; no longer is each one part of a faction – they are individuals who are all part of one nation.

These get-togethers are often

The program meets weekly for

revelatory for those involved. People from radically different backgrounds get the rare chance to relate on a personal level. Longstanding fears and misconceptions about others are dropped. Non-religious people learn about the sacred heritage they share with their religious neighbors. People who attend these meetings are often deeply moved and find their lives changed by the interactions facilitated by the Be A Mensch foundation.

Sometimes, as a natural consequence of the new friendships, *chilonim* begin to come to their *chareidi* friends for advice. As one organizer explained, if you have a friend who is a doctor, sometimes you'll ask him for advice. Or if you have a friend who is a lawyer, sometimes you'll ask him questions about law. It's the same concept here. These *chilonim* now have a friend in the *chareidi* world. Should they want to ask someone about Shabbos or *brisk mila* or *kashrus*, they have somewhere to turn. And when they do, and want to pursue their Jewish heritage further, there is someone there to help them along the way.

Secrets to its Success

Since its inception, the Be A Mensch foundation has been a resounding success, albeit one that does its best to fly under the radar. They do no advertising, but they have developed a sterling word-of-mouth reputation. Participants in Be A Mensch events write glowingly of how the organization has allowed them to connect with their Jewish brothers and sisters. Many *chiloni* organizations eagerly initiate contact with Be A Mensch and request meetings. In fact, the Boy Scouts have asked Be A Mensch to set up 15 meeting programs in the upcoming year. But training *chareidi* leaders and facilitating the program require funds that the foundation does not have. One of the Be A Mensch organizers quipped, "We are *menschlich*, so we wouldn't hire people without having the funds, but the funds are



sorely needed." When our brothers and sisters reach out to us, shouldn't we be there?

According to people who work with the organization, there are several reasons for the success of Be A Mensch. Gavriel Sanders, an associate of the organization's directors and resident of Far Rockaway, explains that the low profile main-

in one word: disruption. "Rav Shach advised Rav Avrohom Ravitz from Degel Hatorah to use disruption in first address to Knesset. When he spoke, Rav Ravitz proclaimed that the one issue that bothered him the most ... was religious coercion. To hear these words from a religious MK shook the walls of Knesset. It was the last thing the crowd expect-

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tained by Be A Mensch is a key part of their successful approach. "This is a group of people that understands the value of attracting people to a unifying message, as opposed to inflating itself with promotion. This means adopting a lean, no fluff financial model, as well as pursuing dialogue that draws people in. The rhetoric and methods of conventional outreach can sometimes intimidate or alienate people. Be A Mensch avoids this by being a true grassroots movement that allows people to have a baggage-free personal encounter with their shared heritage."

A director of the organization explained that the secret to Be A Mensch's success can be summed up

ed to hear from a religious person. This made them stand up and take notice." He continued, "We utilize a similar method of disruption in our outreach efforts. We try to shatter every stereotype about *chareidim*. By breaking these barriers, we disarm people and build the trust that allows us to share our message."

The director also pointed out that unlike previous generations, modern day secular Israelis are not anti-religious. There is a strong desire among the wider Israeli community to find meaning, and this often means seeking out their religious brethren. "The dream of many secular Israelis is to meet a *chareidi*," he says, "because *chareidim* repre-

sent a link to Jewish identity, and what these people want most is to understand what it means to be a Jew and a moral person. Unfortunately, sometimes they are scared off by the intensity of *chareidim* and religious practice. By creating a safe, non-threatening feeling we allow them to fulfill their dream. We allow them to peacefully explore the most pressing question that they have: what does it mean to be a part of *klal Yisroel*? This is something that everyone wants to know, from the youngest Boy and Girl Scouts to the highest ranking members of the army. Now the organizations reach out to us, because the desire is so strong to have these events take place at the schools."

Dr. Kaplan is not alone in his quest to bring *menschlich* behavior to the world. He is backed by a prestigious advisory board, as well as the endorsement of many eminent rabbinic figures. The eclectic nature of the advisory board, which includes former United States Senator Joe Lieberman as well as Nobel Prize winners, MKs, rabbis, professors, and an Israeli basketball star, speaks volumes about the universal appeal of the organization's message. In addition, Be A Mensch teams up with other organizations and activists to bring the ideals of peaceful dialogue and sincere interactions to Israeli society. One of these teammates is Rabbi Yehuda Shine, a charismatic speaker who has made enormous strides towards uniting Israeli society. Shine captured the attention of the media during a 2013 anti-*chareidi* protest. In front of a crowd in Tel Aviv that was decrying *chareidim* as parasites, Rabbi Shine appeared on-stage clad in the traditional *chareidi* uniform of a dark suit and black hat. He exhorted the crowd that religious and non-religious people must refuse to be enemies, a message that electrified the crowd and transformed the rally. Since then, supported by Be A Mensch, Rabbi Shine's message of unity has spread across the country and changed people's lives. Dr. Kaplan has also cooperated with Rabbi Benzion Klatzko

of Shabbos.com with initiatives like Mensch of the Year, a contest that awarded a prize to a family that had proven themselves to be exceptional hosts to Shabbos guests. Efforts like these, in addition to public service announcements promoting unity after divisive incidents in Israel, are some of the many ways that Be A Mensch delivers its message of unity and tolerance.

A Personal Journey

Dr. Kaplan points to his own path to observance as proof that it is often personal interactions that create the spark, not a lightning bolt of spiritual inspiration, that leads to religious observance.

Dr. Kaplan was raised in Trenton, New Jersey, in a family that cared

deeply about Israel and supported the ZOA but was largely unobservant. After completing his residency in San Francisco and military service in U.S. Public Health Service, Dr. Kaplan opened and maintained a successful medical practice. He achieved material success but felt unfulfilled, and he began to explore his Jewish background. His quest began with reading books about Judaism and eventually led him to seek out the Bay Area's small religious community. It was these people, and the conversations and Shabbos meals he shared with them, that ultimately drew Dr. Kaplan to Torah Judaism. One of the most pivotal of these personal interactions, which led to Dr. Kaplan's move to Israel, came one day in the mid '80s when Rav Chaim Kreiswirth stopped in San Francisco en route from An-

twerp to Melbourne. Dr. Kaplan asked the *rav* for a *bracha*, but the rabbi refused. "I'm going to get you a better *bracha*," said Rav Kreiswirth, who proceeded to place a midnight call to the Steipler Gaon who gave Dr. Kaplan a *bracha* that he should be able to move to Israel.

With this inspiration, Dr. Kaplan gave up his old life, sold his practice, and moved to Har Nof in 1986. His first Shabbos in Jerusalem, sitting in a cold and rainy apartment with plastic covering the windows, Dr. Kaplan started to have second thoughts about his move. He had gone from being a Rolls Royce-driving American medical professional with a 3,500 square-foot mansion to being unemployed, freezing in a tiny apartment in Israel. Despite this rocky start, Dr. Kaplan persevered. He attended *yeshivos* and joined the

community. Through connecting with others, he built a life for himself in Israel and became involved with the non-profit work he does today.

Dr. Kaplan says he has gratitude to those who helped him on his journey and hopes that with his current efforts he can return the favor to others. As we enter the Three Weeks, the mission of this vital organization and its inspiring team provides us with a reminder about the power of reaching out with love, connecting with understanding, fostering respect – and the importance of being a mensch. ▲

Funds are needed to expand the Be A Mensch program for the upcoming year. Be a part of connecting to our brothers and sisters. To learn more or to donate to Be A Mensch, contact <http://beamensch.com/donate/>.

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