

Healing the Hatred

Israel's Secret Revolution

BY SARA YOHEVED RIGLER

Just when you think Israeli society couldn't become more polarized, something arises – like the present crisis over judicial reform – to push the poles of national unity further apart. The massive protests this week, leading to the shutdown of the airport, the banking system, schools, government offices, even diplomatic and consular services abroad – all indicate how seriously the country is reeling.

Israel is steeped in ideological divides, hence the famous adage, “two Jews, three opinions.” Since the modern state of Israel was founded, tensions have persisted between the parties that make up each coalition and the constituencies that voted them in. Many Israelis have never sat down to engage in a meaningful exchange of ideas with those holding opposing worldviews and values.

But one quiet organization is challenging the standoff and bridging the gap. And in this case, it's a chasm that a *Jerusalem Post* survey claimed was one of Israel's most serious of social ills: the rift between secular and Hareidi Jews.

Enter the Be A Mensch Foundation, established in 2011 by two American olim with the aim to foster genuine Jewish unity galvanized by complementary shared values. The elegantly simple concept of “being a mensch” caught on and attracted the attention and participation of such Israeli icons as Tal Brody, Yehoram Gaon, Nobel laureate Professor Robert Aumann, WIZO president Tova Ben-Dov, serial entrepreneur Noah Alper, educator par excellence Rachelli Sprecher Fraenkel, and from the U.S., former Senator Joe Lieberman.

The press took notice. Stories were shared. A book was published. A commercial was produced to propagate the commitment of a cross section of Jews

to the high road of *menschlichkeit* – of being a person of integrity and honor. A torn community in Beit Shemesh was reunited. But this was only the tip of an iceberg.

By invitation, Be A Mensch launched weekly encounters with members of the Tzofim (Israeli scouts), many of whom become future leaders in Israel. This was the first time that completely secular Israelis had the opportunity to create a relationship – a friendship, really – with someone deeply chareidi. The simple concept of unity through communication spread. Other scouting groups heard about it. Suddenly, demand outstripped supply. And so it remains today.

Today, Be A Mensch presents myth-busting, eye-opening encounters, facilitated by highly trained chareidi staff, in secular high schools, kibbutzim, select military groups, and, most recently, among high-level business leaders. In all cases, the invitation to meet comes from the non-chareidi side. Why?

Attraction vs. Promotion

Following the advent of the TV series *Shtisel* and *Srugim*, many secular Israelis have cultivated a curiosity about the inner workings of the chareidi world. After all, going back two or certainly three generations, the ancestors of most secular Jews were chareidim of some sort. Is it possible that having common ancestors can spawn a sense of mutuality and identification which can transcend the layers of cultural disconnection?

For the tireless members of Be A Mensch, the answer is a profound yes. The results have exceeded their expectations, noting that the transformation of attitude happens quietly, slowly, very much at the granular, individual level. 18-year-old Liat from the mixed community of Beit Shemesh is a worthy ex-



We're all brothers

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ample. She stated, “I’d speak for an hour about how horrible the chareidim are, but I never met a single chareidi in my life. Now that I’ve met chareidim, I realize that all those things I knew before were not based on truth.”

In light of so many issues in Israel, how serious is the chiloni/chareidi divide?

The rift in Israel between secular Jews and chareidim endangers the country even more than the threat of a nuclear bomb from Iran. This was the surprising conclusion of five former Chiefs of Staff of the Israel Defense Forces (Ehud Barak, Moshe Ya’alon,

Gabi Ashkenazi, Benny Gantz and Gadi Eisenkot) in a rare joint interview on Israeli Channel 12 in August 2022. After a long discussion of the Iranian nuclear threat, General Eisenkot stated: “The thing that most endangers the State of Israel in my eyes is the lack of solidarity in Israeli society.”

Moshe Ya’alon agreed: “I say that in the face of the Iranian threat, we will know what to do. But there is an internal existential threat.”

Ehud Barak chimed in. “I think that all living Chiefs of Staff, almost all living Mossad heads, and all living Shin Bet chiefs would agree on this. I mean, all

the people who are involved in, or were at the head of the security apparatus, understand today that there is a more serious threat to the future of the State of Israel than from Iran, Hezbollah, or Hamas. This threat is what is happening within us — the risk of losing the internal cohesion, the internal solidarity.”

Unknowingly, the generals were echoing the chilling pronouncement of Chazal that the destruction of the second Bais Hamikdash and the grueling exile was caused by *sinas chinam*, hatred among groups of Jews.

While today’s headlines are focusing on the rift between the right and the center/left in Israel, the rift between secular Jews and chareidim has long been the most hostile and vicious conflict in Israeli society. A study commissioned by Gesher in early 2021 found that 65% of Israelis ranked the chareidi-secular conflict as the country’s most pressing conflict, compared with less than 18% who prioritize the Arab-Israeli conflict and 14% who think the Right-Left conflict is the most problematic.

Refusing To Be Enemies

Be a Mensch is the only organization in Israel whose goal is achieving Jewish unity between these factions. Mensch has done 900 encounters with various secular groups and has met with 34,000 participants. Its motto is: “Healing the rifts in Israeli society — one mensch at a time.” It is registering some miraculous successes.

In November 2013, Be a Mensch organized an event in Tel Aviv with Ha Noar Oved V’ha Lomed (The General Federation of Working and Studying Youth), Israel’s most extreme leftwing youth movement, and the leaders of other secular organizations. Mensch invited Rav Chaim Zvi Senter, Rosh Yeshiva of Aderes HaTorah, who, after getting approval from Rav Dovid Cohen, sent a bus with 25 kollel couples to the event. Tel Aviv’s Cinamateque Square was festooned with giant Hebrew banners proclaiming, “The religious and the secular refuse to be enemies.” There was no need for the official police protection arranged by Be a Mensch; instead, the atmosphere was one of camaraderie, like a family reunion. A Mensch staff member gave a brief introduction. Then the Jews in the square met each other in personal encounters meant to vanquish the stereotypes propagated by the media.

A leader of one of the participating secular organizations effused, “We are

in a very unique event, totally unique. I don’t think there is right now anywhere in Israel such a diverse group, so many diverse people from all of Israel’s society here together to proclaim, ‘We refuse to be enemies.’”

Rav Senter himself was surprised by how open the secular Jews were to meet chareidim.



Meeting one-on-one on a kibbutz



Connecting with the Scouts

“It was so nice to see how interested these people are in hearing about our lives and how much they really felt close to us. It was really amazing. It’s something I never imagined without experiencing it.”

The secret of Be a Mensch’s success is to counteract the negative images of chareidim plastered all over the media by arranging direct encounters. As Rabbi Yitzchak Berkovits, Rosh Kollel of the Jerusalem Kollel and Rosh Yeshiva of Aish HaTorah, explained: “*Bayis Sheini* was destroyed because of *sinas chinam*, baseless hatred. Especially in this day and age, the divide between the chareidi world and those on the other side is based primarily on all sorts of images that we’ve got of one another that aren’t

necessarily representative of what’s really going on.... To get to know each other as people dissolves so much of the *sinah*, so much of what we’re imagining.”

Be a Mensch has proven that when secular Jews actually meet chareidim and get to know them, their animosity melts away. As Rav Yosefs Shalom El-yashiv, zt”l, directed Be a Mensch, “Let

fully chosen chareidi men and women in their twenties and thirties have gone into 51 secular high schools, meeting with individual classes. They do not lecture to them. Rather, each Be a Mensch representative sits in a circle with one class and invites them to ask their questions about chareidim and their way of life. Typical questions are: Why do chareidim have so many kids? Why don’t the men work? Is it really like we saw on the television series “Shtisel” that people get engaged after just one or two meetings?

Shani is a 28-year-old chareidi woman from Jerusalem, a rabbi’s daughter, who has been working for Be a Mensch since 2018. With her friendly smile and unflappable personality, she is the perfect representative to face a potentially hostile audience. Recently, she was sent to speak with an 8th grade class in the leftwing bastion of Ramat Aviv.

“I heard a lot of hate,” she recounts. “It was a whole class of 30 kids, and they voiced very strong, leftwing opinions that they hear at home. I had to do damage control. I asked them, ‘From where do you get your information? Television shows the people who are burning garbage, not the people higher up in our society.’ I told them that in my family, people are hard workers, and respectful, and pay taxes.

“Some of the kids wanted to connect with me. One kid in the class told me that he has tefillin and puts them on every day. I said, ‘Wow!’ And I gave him a lot of praise to make him feel good about himself. Another kid told me that he is descended from the Chatam Sofer. I said, ‘I was just there at his *kever*. Do you know what a genius he was?’ I made him feel really good about it. A girl opened up her computer and found a picture of her grandfather, a rabbinic figure.”

One boy in that class was particularly aggressive. He asked a lot of hostile questions, voicing very strong leftwing opinions he absorbed at home. Shani answered calmly and patiently, without getting defensive. At the end of the class, he came over to Shani and told her that he wanted to thank her. “You answered very well,” he said. And he apologized that he wasn’t respectful. Shani later reflected, “Some of the things I said really resonated with him. I was very impressed. I saw a different child at the end.”

As Shani sums up: “They’re really sweet kids. Some were asking questions just to provoke. I try not to get provoked. I need to remember that they don’t know

the Name of Heaven become beloved through you.”

“Certified Secular Youth”

A key demographic concern for Be a Mensch is the half million young adults who will shape the next generation in Israel. Israel’s population is 30% *shomer mitzvos*, 35% traditional, and 35% secular. Be a Mensch recognizes the significance of what they call “certified secular Israeli youth,” meaning those who have never fasted on Yom Kippur. Thus, while they have held many meetings with secular kibbutzim and other adult groups, they have elevated their focus on high schools, the Scout movement leaders, and pre-military academies.

As of this writing, a cadre of care-

anything about us. I have to be their window to religious people.”

One elite Tel Aviv high school wrote to Mensch:

We would like to express our deepest thanks for the fascinating Be A Mensch meetup with the 10th grade civic-studies-major students.

At the meetup, the students had the opportunity to make something of a closer acquaintance with the charedi world, to shake off prejudices and stereotypes and to experience pleasant, open, accepting, and constructive discourse. The meetup allowed them to ask complex questions, and it shed light on various issues pertaining to Israeli society and the relationship between the groups that comprise it.

In a world where everything is political, we got to see a more reliable, less heated picture; a reality in which communication can happen in spite of differences.

Another high school wrote:

I want to thank you for the fascinating meetup with the ninth grade students here at the school.

I feel the meeting was very significant. For the first time, the students were able to make in-depth acquaintance with the charedi society, face-to-face, and to form circles of discourse with members of this sector.

Thank you for your openness and for your desire to bring different factions of society together.

Specifically now, during these turbulent times, you proved things can be different.

I strongly recommend that every school in the country participate in the program, and promote discourse on values and tolerance of others, and get to know the beautiful side of charedi society and religion.

On a recent trip to Israel, Gavriel Aryeh Sanders of Far Rockaway accompanied a Be A Mensch team to an elite Tel Aviv high school. He stated, “I’ve never seen two such polarized groups forge such a deep and genuine connection in such a short time. In three hours of animated conversation, I watched bias and ‘myth-perceptions’ about charedim melt before my eyes. The students and school staff wanted more contact. They themselves stated that this was a life-changing encounter.”

The Book

It all started with a book. Dr. Moshe

Kaplan is an immunologist originally from

Trenton, NJ. His grandfather, Rav Yosef Kaplan, learned by the Chofetz Chaim before emigrating to Passaic. In 1986, Dr. Kaplan made Aliyah. Driven to try to explain the treasures of Judaism to the larger public, he compiled a book of essays called, *A Wholly Life: Spiritual Integration of Mind, Body, and Soul*. In 2009, he felt inspired to publish a different book, about good middos. *Be a Mensch: Why Good Character is the Key*



Meeting protesters at a Kikar Rabin demonstration

to a *Life of Happiness, Health, Wealth, and Love* consists of essays by such notable people as Nobel laureate Prof. Robert J. Aumann, Natan Sharansky, Rabbi Abraham J. Twerski, successful CEO Howard Jonas, Rabbi Dovid Gottlieb, and psychologist Judith Mishell.

This stellar cast each asserted that the most important achievement in life is character development. A rabbi who worked in kiruv pointed out to Dr. Kaplan that this book could be a great unifier in Israel’s fractured society, since everyone – religious and secular – could agree on the importance of good middos.

Dr. Kaplan took the book to one of Israel’s major publishers, Yedidot Aharanot, and asked them to publish the book in Hebrew. The publisher deferred, explaining that they primarily publish novels. But he promised to look over the book. Three days later, Dr. Kaplan got a call from the publisher. He enthusiastically declared that this book is so important that they decided to publish it in Hebrew.

The launch of the Hebrew book, followed soon after by the launch of the Be

a Mensch Foundation, garnered glowing support from Israeli luminaries, including star basketball player Tal Brody, famous singer Yehoram Gaon, and two celebrated Nobel Prize winners. Professor Dan Shechtman asserted, “Your values are my values and your wish to make a change is also mine.” Professor Aaron Ciechanover declared, “The enemies around us will never defeat us. If we shall be defeated, it will be by ourselves – in strife, hate among different groups, inability to listen and discuss in

University.

Meeting such brilliant people who have chosen to observe the religious precepts that their own grandparents rejected exploded the kibbutzniks’ stereotype of chareidim as primitive and backward. A letter from the Kibbutz Movement after one such Shabbos declared: “The meeting was exciting and fascinating, and goes far beyond expectations. ... You must succeed!”

At the beginning of Mensch meetings with leftist youth groups, a moving short film is shown. After the passing of Rav Yosef Shalom Elyashiv, zt”l, the secular grandson of Rav Elyashiv’s first cousin, prominent in the Israeli television and film industry, asked to make a film about the *Gadol HaDor*. Filmed partly in Rav Elyashiv’s tiny apartment, the film includes his grandmother’s reminiscences about her famous cousin and family photos of their common ancestor, the Leshem. The film shows Maj.-Gen Eliezer Skeidy, former head of the Israeli Air Force, asking, “Who are the chareidim? My Saba and Savta and yours.”

Crisis In Beit Shemesh

For decades, Beit Shemesh was a sleepy development town in the valley just beyond the Judean Hills. It was inhabited mostly by traditional Sephardim with some secular and *dati leumi* [national religious] Ashkenazim attracted by the low prices and proximity to Jerusalem. Then the government started to build new neighborhoods. Ramat Beit Shemesh Aleph attracted Anglo immigrants, mostly Litvak chareidim with a mix of *dati leumi*. Ramat Beit Shemesh Beit attracted an overflow of Mea Shearim families – Chassidic and Yerushalmi.

In 2011, a *dati leumi* school opened in the middle of a Chassidic neighborhood. “Extremist elements” were accused of harassing the schoolgirls. When a television news channel interviewed a sweet 8-year-old girl, who told how she was cursed at and spat upon on her way to school by Chassidic men, the whole country erupted in a virulent anti-chareidi reaction. Over 10,000 protestors descended on Beit Shemesh, and violent clashes ensued.

The government, desperate to put out the conflagration, decided to air calming public service announcements on television. The Jewish Federation of Washington, D.C., the “twin city” of Beit Shemesh, offered a \$100,000 tender to the three best submissions for such TV ads. Out of a hundred competitors, Be

a Mensch won one of the three tenders.

Their ad shows a kaleidoscope of men and women of different ages and religious affiliation (or none), each uttering two or three words of a Hebrew pledge that together states: *"I pledge not to judge anyone based on his or her appearance, style of dress, or affiliation with a specific group. I will be careful not to make generalizations and will always try to see the person behind the outside appearance. I will judge everyone favorably and I will always try to see the good in every person, and to focus on the good. Let's create a new Israeli reality, one of acceptance, brotherhood, and unity. Together we can [said by a Chassid with long peyos]."*

The final phrase of the video, "And it's possible" are spoken by the same sweet 8-year-old girl whose interview sparked the conflagration. How did Be a Mensch pull that one off? They contacted her mother and convinced her that her little girl could be part of the solution. That's how Be a Mensch works.

In addition, Mensch arranged some 300 meetings between different groups in Beit Shemesh. These included 50 meetings – 3-hour meetings every Friday night for a year – between B'nai Akiva [*dati leumi*] boys and Yerushalmi Chassidim. The B'nai Akiva boys actually went into the Chassidic enclave of Ramat Beit Shemesh Beit and learned Torah with the Chassidim there. The water of Torah can put out the fiercest of fires.

Scout Leaders

Be a Mensch's most long-term victory emerged from the Beit Shemesh crisis when Israel's Scout movement, the country's biggest youth movement, approached Mensch to arrange meetings between their 18-year-old Scout leaders and chareidim. Knowing that the greatest influence is exerted by loving personal relationships, Mensch agreed on the condition that the meetings would be held weekly for an entire year. Now, twelve years later, with a new cadre of Scout leaders annually, the meetings (currently held every two weeks) are still going strong.

Devoting a year between high school and the army, Scout leaders often go on to assume influential positions in Israel's political and military hierarchy. Mensch sends *avreichim* to meet with the male Scout leaders and young married chareidi women to meet with female Scout leaders. They forge warm, personal one-on-one relationships, each talking

about what's happening in his or her life at present. Often, they have group discussions on meaningful topics such as, "What is joy?" "How do you acquire joy?" or "Do human beings have free will?" In such discussions, the chareidim convey Torah values, and, most importantly, the message, "We care about you."

An "ice breaker" in the initial meeting of the women is symbolically significant. They sit in a circle. A Mensch representative holds a very large ball of yarn and makes a statement about

their chareidi friends, sometimes asking to come for a Shabbos meal or requesting a mezuzah for their homes. Close to 80% of the Scout leaders decide on their own to start fasting on Yom Kippur and Tisha B'Av. As one Mensch director says, "We are changing the trajectory of their lives. You don't know where it's going to end."

Flying High

Miraculously, Be a Mensch has become a sought-after program provider



Members of a kibbutz get answers to real questions

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herself, such as "I'm the youngest in my family." Holding the end of the yarn, she then tosses the ball to someone in the circle for whom that is also true. That young woman says something about herself, such as, "I have a problem with math," and, holding the yarn, she tosses the ball to someone who shares that quality. Eventually, everyone in the circle is connected by the web of yarn – a physical representation of the spiritual reality that all of Am Yisrael are connected, for, as the Leshem and the Meshech Chachma teach, all Jews are part of the collective soul of Am Yisrael.

At the end of every year, the Scout leaders go into the army, but most of them retain their relationships with

for an ever-expanding circle of Israeli organizations and institutions. They do regular encounters with pre-military academies, which are the gap-year institutions for secular 18-year-olds to prepare them for the army. As Ofir, a jeans-clad student, exclaimed after one meeting, "This dialogue obligates all of us to really find a common denominator and partnership. Because, ultimately, we are part of you, and you are part of us."

Within the last year, the Israeli Air Force asked Be a Mensch to meet with their most exclusive squadron, fighter pilots. Fighter pilots are the elite of Israeli secular society. Starting with 270 highly screened candidates, only 41 make it through the rigors of the tests

and, after a three-year training course, become fighter pilots. It was this group that met with *avreichim* from Be a Mensch to learn about who the chareidim really are.

After the first meeting, one pilot declared, "This interaction was very interesting. They answered all the questions I had. Even the minor issues were addressed and answered, which I found significant. I came out of this meeting with an understanding that there is a challenge in living together.... We all want to live in the same country, but there are conflicts in our differing lifestyles. It's very good to know and understand the other side. For someone who chooses to live in Israel, it's a given that he will do whatever it takes [for mutual understanding]."

The interviewer then asked him, "So, do you recommend these types of meetings?"

"Passionately!" the pilot answered. "I absolutely recommend it. In my eyes, this is very significant, and we need to do it much more. That I did this only at the age of 21 is a problem. But at least I've done it now."

Another pilot testified, "First of all, this was important. We've never had an opportunity to meet in such an intimate way. I've never had the chance before to speak one-on-one to a chareidi person.... There's nothing I can do about it. They are part of my People."

Since the first meeting, Mensch has been holding two-hour meetings with pilots twice a year. After every meeting, some of the pilots choose to continue to be in contact with the chareidim presenters. A few pilots requested to be invited to their presenter's house in the chareidi neighborhood of Beit Ar.

Business Leaders

Mensch's latest tour-de-force was initiated by a group of hi-tech business owners. They requested a tour of the Ponevezh Yeshiva and also to learn one section of Talmud in Chavrusa with yeshiva students. Mensch arranged the tour, which was eye-opening for these hi-tech entrepreneurs who live within several miles of Bnei Brak but had never seen a yeshiva in action.

Then, Mensch chose for their learning a *sugya* in the Gemara about cancelling a contract in halacha, a highly relevant topic for businessmen. Mensch hired outstanding *avreichim*, both brilliant in their knowledge of the *sugya* and adept in engaging people on a personal level, and paired them up with the

businessmen. They learned the Gemara and the commentaries together. When an *avreich* asked, “What do you think of this opinion?” and listened to the businessman’s answer, the *avreich* responded enthusiastically, “Oh, you just said the same thought as Rav Shimon Skop (or the Ktzot).”

The meeting was phenomenally successful. As one Mensch director exulted, “These businesspeople are exactly the brain type that can learn Gemara. They have a *Gemara-kup*. They loved it.”

One of the hi-tech moguls wrote afterwards: “A fantastic and uniquely special experience. It opened our minds through a window to an important world that was previously totally unknown to us.”

Why?

Why are secular organizations and institutions lining up for Be a Mensch programming?

On a facile level, as one Mensch director puts it, “It’s Anthropology 101. We’re a foreign culture. We’re the Indians. They want to learn about and experience the Indians. We’re exotic. It’s like they’re tired of hamburgers; they want sushi.”

Rabbi Moshe Shachor, director of Mensch programming, takes it to a deeper level. “They want us to help them connect to the chareidi community,” he explains. “This year, when the situation is very dire in terms of hatred and demonstrations, the seculars are afraid. They turn to us because they want to know us, and actually meet chareidi society. They are afraid that soon they won’t be free to lead their lives as they want. They want to be much calmer, to feel comfortable with us. They want to know that we are not so scary. Of course, we want them to keep mitzvot, but we can’t force them. It won’t work. We want them to learn, to know, to connect to Truth. We want them to choose.”

Of course, there’s a second alternative: to distance oneself from those one fears. But Rabbi Shachor claims that this is not the response of most secular Israelis. “They know that we are here to stay; it’s a done job. They want to feel more comfortable with us, to hear what we have to say.”

Surprisingly, secular Israelis are very concerned about what chareidim think of them. “In every meeting,” says Rabbi Shachor, “they ask me: What do you think about us? I say, ‘First, you are my family. You’re part of us.’ Second, I think we agree that we have a deep argument

about almost everything. But it’s an argument, not a fight. An argument like you have with your brother. In a fight, you try to beat the other side. In an argument, we can talk about it.”

There are two explosive issues raised by secular Israelis in virtually every meeting. Here are a synopsis of the replies of the Mensch representatives:

Marriage. Most secular people believe that Judaism is anti-pleasure, that couples get married only to fulfill the duty to have children, that religious marriages are duty-driven rather than love-driven. Mensch representatives don’t skirt the issue. They tell them that Judaism is not against having pleasure; rather, pleasure is so important that the Torah wants it to be in the right way, with sanctity. “They actually ask me if I love my wife,” Rabbi Shachor muses. “I tell them that the Torah wants us to live life with a high level of pleasure, not to be a monk. We play music, we go on excursions to the zoo or hiking, we

er. “You love them, and they love you.”

The biggest surprise for the Mensch representatives who go into the high schools is to see that the students don’t hate them. As Rabbi Shachor, who has been involved in hundreds of such meetings, testifies, “In secular schools, we’re excited to see that they love us. They don’t hate us, as we thought they did. We discovered that what we thought, that they hate us, is not really true. Of course, in the media and in politics, the discourse is very divisive. But in the hearts of the people, it’s not like that. And after they meet us, they love us much more, because they see that we often have the same goals, that we are a family. They also know that we have the same history, the same grandparents. Most of them know, even if they do not keep Torah, that our Torah is an integral part of the Israeli nation’s values.”

Perhaps the dynamic is as Mishlei states, “As water reflects a face back to a face, so one’s heart is reflected back



“We’re sisters”

Yehuda S. (afterwards on the staff of Be a Mensch) revealed something that proved a watershed in chareidi-secular dialogue. The “social justice protests” in October of that year drew tens of thousands of secular who prioritize the Arab-Israeli conflict and 14% who think the Right-Left conflict is the most problematic.

Then he stood up on the stage in front of 70,000 protesters and turned the secular protest into a Jewish cause by proclaiming, “Social justice is an ancient Jewish value. Mercy and compassion for the weak are Jewish values.” The crowd erupted in applause. He continued: “Social solidarity is the mutual responsibility that Judaism defined so well. Only all of us together will succeed in generating a real revolution for real equality and solidarity among us. The struggle is a struggle of all of us... No more divide between *chilonim* and chareidim! We are together, one body with one heart!”

The crowd went wild. News channels carried Yehuda’s speech, and the video of it on social media went viral, with over 100,000 “likes.”

Yehuda’s message – that we are in this together and we care about your struggles – was life-giving water to the secular crowd that was apparently thirsty to hear just such a message. As one director of Be a Mensch puts it, “The source of the secular hostility is hurt feelings. There are widespread hurt feelings among the secular public that ‘you chareidi people don’t care about us!’ What we saw with Yehuda’s appearance at the social protest movement was an Aha! moment. ‘We see that you *do* care about us!’”

With every meeting, Be a Mensch is proving that chareidi Jews do care about their secular brethren, as witnessed by the distribution of cholent and bottles of water last week when the leftist protestors arrived at Bnei Brak. This care vanquishes the *sinas chinam* that otherwise brings calamity to Am Yisrael.

And Heaven smiles. ▲

“I have to be their window
to religious people.”

travel to interesting places. I tell them that simcha is a hallmark of a Torah-obscure life.”

Chareidim in the workforce. In typically Jewish fashion, Mensch representatives answer the question with a question: What percentage of chareidi women do you think work? What percentage of chareidi men? Most of the secular participants answer between 10% to 20%. They are shocked when they hear the real answers: 77% of chareidi women and 53% of chareidi men work. “I don’t want you to memorize these statistics,” Rabbi Shachor says. “I just want you to realize how little you know of us.”

“As Water Reflects A Face...”

Yet, beyond the “family arguments,” there is another reason why so many secular Israelis are reaching out to meet chareidim. As Rabbi Shachor explains, “Every Jew who lives here wants *achdus*, because all of them understand on a deep level that we are one nation.” He points out that when religious Israelis go abroad and they meet secular Israelis, they are delighted to talk with each other.

to him by another.” The secular groups understand that Be a Mensch is spending time, money, and energy to dialogue with them because they care about connecting with them. Thus, they respond in kind.

Beset by an expanding budget, Be a Mensch is struggling to raise funds to keep up with the growing demand. But nothing can deter it from fulfilling its holy mission.

In all its activities, Be a Mensch follows daas Torah. The Gadol they most frequently consult is HaGaon HaRav Mordechai Goldstein of Ramat Bet Shemesh Aleph, the son of Rav Tuvia Goldstein, founder of Emek Halacha in Boro Park. As the director of Mensch asserts: “I feel that the reason we have such miraculous *siyata d’shmaya* is because we don’t rely on our own judgement. We ask *shailos*.”

Rav Yitzchak Berkovits and other Israeli gedolim have given their written support to Be a Mensch.

We Care About You

In 2011, a young *avreich* named