

Healing the country one mensch at a time

Moshe Kaplan, a native New Jersey doctor with a holistic attitude toward life, says Israel needs more decency, more nobility of character, more integrity, and more actions based on a sense of what is right.

By Danna Harman^[1] | Aug. 3, 2012 | 4:39 AM



Being a mensch adds years to your life and joy to your days. Photo by Reuters



How many Israelis would volunteer to help an old lady cross the street? Photo by Alon Ron

Chutzpah is a Yiddish term well known, and frequently practiced, here in Israel. Love it or hate it, that mix of audacity and arrogance that often allows Israelis to overstep the boundaries of accepted behavior is among the very first qualities one is likely to mention when defining the essence of the Israeli character.

Moshe Kaplan, a native New Jersey doctor with a holistic attitude toward life, is not a big fan of the whole "chutzpah thing," as he puts it. Instead, he's promoting a very different Yiddish term, one he feels does not get enough play in the Holy Land: mensch.

What Israel needs, explains Kaplan, is more "menschy" behavior - more decency, more nobility of character, more integrity, and more actions based on a sense of what is right. Kaplan dreams of a day when the notion of being a mensch will become so ingrained in this society that there will even be a mandatory matriculation exam in menschhood, which will certainly give the "chutzpah thing" a real run for the money.

"Being a mensch adds years to your life and joy to your days. It is the key to success in health, love, relationships, at work, at home, and in life," Kaplan says with a smile, sitting down for some bottled water in the somewhat tattered lobby of the Kings Hotel in Jerusalem. "And it's contagious! You can see changes in those around you just by being honest, courteous and considerate."

Kaplan has set up a small foundation to encourage people to "Be a Mensch." Among other activities, it is sponsoring a public service ad campaign calling for "being a human being," and "respect toward others." The foundation has also launched a pilot program to promote these values in Beit Shemesh, where tensions between ultra-Orthodox residents and their neighbors seems to have brought out decidedly un-menschy

behavior of late. The program brings together Israelis of all types for discussions on the importance of mutual respect. Another item on Kaplan's agenda is to produce a reality TV show, on which participants will compete to be the "biggest menschs."

Born 66 years ago in Trenton, Kaplan became interested in spirituality during a medical residency in San Francisco. "I was not a hippie or a flake," he insists. "but I began to understand something profound: That achieving well-being is only possible through mind, body and soul integration." At about the same time, Kaplan, who grew up in a secular home, became more interested in Judaism. He started wearing a kippa and donning tefillin daily, and, in 1986, he moved to Israel.

Compassion counts

He is now working on compiling essays by various authors that take the well-being argument one step further, positing that to have a happy, healthy, successful life one not only has to take care of his own mind, body and soul, but must also act kindly toward others. He hopes to publish these essays in a book entitled "Be a Mensch."

Being a good person, Kaplan stresses, does not necessarily mean curing cancer. Helping your grandmother on Tuesdays counts too, he says, as does checking in on a lonely neighbor, or putting a note on that car you bumped into when reversing out of the shopping mall.

"Israel is an unbelievable society. It takes in immigrants, has wonderful health care, and in times of crisis it pulls together like no other. But on a certain level there is also a basic lack of consideration," says Shoshanna Jaskoll, media adviser for the Be a Mensch foundation.

Jaskoll, nine months pregnant, had rushed into the interview flushed and late because so many parked cars were taking up more than one space that she couldn't find a place to park. "You can have a doctorate degree from the Technion but still be the kind of person who takes up two parking spaces," she points out.

"This country was built by survivors and we are always in a survival, 'I am not going to give an inch,' defensive mode," says Kaplan. "But that's short-term thinking. We need to think about our long-term goals here and begin healing the rifts in our country." And that, he says, will be done "one mensch at a time."

1. <http://www.haaretz.com/misc/writers/danna-harman-1.288434>