



October 27, 2021 | 21 Cheshvan, 5782

Educator's Corner

Educators Are the Heroes of the Classroom



By **Elana Naftalin-Kelman**

I believe the most important work I can teach to my students and future educators is how to nurture Jewish children with special needs and their families through their first schooling experience. This important first step for parents and their children makes all the difference when educators are prepared to handle any situation for every child from special needs to gifted. Teachers and directors are the heroes of the classroom – not only in teaching young children with special needs, but by offering support to their parents as well as other educators.

I am a new instructor at the School for Jewish Education at American Jewish University and this semester I teach *Addressing Special Needs in the Jewish Early Childhood Setting*. We cover topics such as what is an ideal classroom environment, how the pandemic has affected early childhood classrooms, as well as the importance of documentation. I engage my students to consider these topics with care for our young special education learners. I ask my students to think about how a child who is struggling a little more than others would interact with their classroom environment, or how has a family with a special needs child struggled at home since the start of the pandemic? We also think about how we will document the children in our class and track their progress to allow for meaningful learning. I challenge my own student educators to use the tools they learn during class in hopes they can then implement them in their own classrooms.

It feels almost magical when the tools and techniques that I teach support all styles of learners in our early childhood settings. We are moving toward the understanding that all children benefit from a kind, caring classroom environment that supports not just students, but their families.

Elana Naftalin-Kelman has been working at the intersection of special education and Jewish education for over 20 years. She was inspired on this path by her time as a camper at Camp Ramah in Ojai, where she has been directing their Tikvah program for campers and young adults with disabilities for 15 years. These programs include a camper program, a vocational program for young adults, a camp for families that have children with disabilities, and a year-round program for job support and placement in the Los Angeles area. Elana is an adjunct professor of Special Education at American Jewish University and at San Francisco State University where she teaches in the Special Education Department. She has consulted with multiple Jewish institutions to aid them in thinking about how to be more inclusive of Jews of all abilities. She has taught professional development courses in differentiated instruction, behavior management, and teaching Hebrew. She lives in Berkeley, California with her husband and three sons.



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