Fair Isn't Equal

By Lisa Friedman/ Jewish Special Needs Education: Removing the Stumbling Block (Blog)

I recently came across the following visual:



The caption shared by Joe Bower on his blog For the Love of Learning was “Fair isn’t equal; fair is when everyone gets what they need.” This really got me thinking about the concept of fairness. How do we, as a society, determine what is fair?

Joe’s caption reminded me of a quote from Rick Lavoie, a professional who works with teachers and students with learning disabilities. Lavoie suggests that the definition of “fairness” is really quite different from what most people believe. Most people believe that “fairness means that everyone gets the same”; whereas in reality “fairness means that everyone gets what he or she needs.”

Look at the image; there is nothing unfair about the picture to the right, is there? And yet, nevertheless, it has been my experience that people most often determine fairness through equality.

If you ask my kids, equal is fair. They each want the same amount of ice cream for dessert. They want the same amount of spending money at the mall. And if one has a sleepover, the other somehow feels entitled to one, too.

Are they right? Is equal the only measure of what is fair? What if one of my kids ate a birthday cupcake from a classmate at school; is it still fair that she have the same amount of ice cream as her brother?

Let’s extend this concept to education. In a classroom of 4th graders all students are expected to read the same Hebrew prayer and master it by the same due date. This is certainly equal; but is this fair? One of the criticisms of inclusion that I have heard most often is of fairness: “It's not fair to have different expectations for different students.” Why not?

Using the same Hebrew example, what if a student hasn’t yet grasped the concepts covered by the assignment? Is it unfair to extend the due date to allow for remediation? And if a student excels, shouldn’t he have the opportunity to move forward and be challenged? Meeting each child where they are currently functioning isn't unfair to the other students.

When we determine fairness based on need we capitalize on an educational philosophy that is not only fair, but helps all students to reach their full potential. Not a predetermined potential that we expect all students to eventually reach; but their own individual potential. This is the premise upon which differentiated instruction is based.

Fair isn’t equal. Fair is ensuring that everyone receives what he or she needs