



## Building Blocks: A Special Needs Magazine

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### "Special" Does Not a Disability Make

By Sharon Shapiro-Lacks

As a woman who has lived with Cerebral Palsy all my life, I pay close attention to the terminology that is applied to people with disabilities. Words such as "invalid," "cripple," "dumb," or "retard" have always hurt me deeply and most people today understand why. But the term "special needs" and the word "special" (as in "these special children") have disturbed me and many others with disabilities for years. Yet, this nomenclature has gained popularity in our community and beyond, especially among our well-intentioned parents and helping professionals.

Some justify using the term "special needs" as a convenient way of referring to a segment of people with diverse characteristics and needs. However, there is a deeper motivation. By using the term, "special needs" they avoid using the term "disability" which, for some, emphasizes a lack or deficit of which one may be ashamed. They, thereby, mask the disability behind the "special need," trying to avoid being perceived as lacking. Thus, any subcon-

scious feelings of (unwarranted) guilt, embarrassment, or feelings of personal failure that they might feel about having a disability, or having a family member with a disability, can be concealed as well.

However, by using the term "special needs", we, persons with disabilities, become known specifically for our imagined limitless needs. Our neediness, in particular, is showcased, thereby shaping perceptions of us as receivers rather than contributors. Also, why are our needs more "special" than the needs of our siblings or friends? Everyone has special needs in one circumstance or another, so why is our demographic - persons with disabilities -- set apart with the "special needs population" label? Perhaps, we should be attentive to all individuals' "special needs" whether or not they have disabilities.

Also, since our needs are considered "special", we, children and adults with disabilities, by extension, often become known as being "special", imbued with "special" midot, characteristics. Why are we identified as "special" in con-

tradistinction to others who endure, successfully handle, and grow from life's tests and tribulations? And, if we are considered special, why aren't shadchanim matching girls with disabilities with choice boys without disabilities? Why is the service called, Special Shidduchim reserved only for people with disabilities? If the title means what it says, then Special Shidduchim should match high quality people with high quality people, regardless of the existence of a disability or health condition. Or are we really using the term "special" as a socially acceptable way to segregate people with disabilities into separate programs, minyanim, and shidduch circles? Yes, occasionally, people with disabilities do want or require a service, program, or group that caters to specifically them. This should merely be an option in addition to the increasing number of inclusive programs. But please don't label the participants as "special" or use the word "special" when naming the group or program.

The terms "special" and 'special needs' do not serve our

cause and efforts to combat needless pity towards and the marginalization of people with disabilities. Whether we, our family members, or our neighbors use wheelchairs, alternate ways of learning, sign language interpreters, large print, Braille, or modified school or work schedules, we need to embrace the term "disability" as a fact of life in olam hazeh. We want society at large to continue to increase its regard for us as "people with disabilities", an identifiable and broad demographic, who can contribute to the destiny, well-being, and growth of klal Yisroel, if we've provided the right accommodation. May every one of us be considered "special" based upon our unique souls and our emergent good and Torah-adhering characters given our challenges in life; not because of or despite them. ❀

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