

At Your Service

by: Rachel Stein
for Olomeinu Magazine

“How do I look?” Zevi brushed off his suit, tightened his tie, and looked towards his twin for approval.

“Not bad, not bad at all,” Ari nodded. “How about me?” Ari took a small bow, also decked out in his Shabbos best.

“Well, if you really want to know...” Without batting an eyelash, Ari lifted his pillow and aimed it straight at his brother. Zevi ducked, laughing as the pillow flew onto the floor.

“We better go,” Ari remarked, glancing at his watch.

“Yochi’s simcha just won’t be the same without us.” The boys pounded down the stairs, excited to go to the first bar mitzvah celebration in their class.

“Bye, Ma! Bye, Ta!” they shouted together, and the front door slammed behind them. A burst of cool air greeted them as they fell into step beside each other, quickly walking the few blocks to Congregation Ahavas Torah’s simcha hall.

Lively music filled the air as the brothers eagerly made their way into the social hall.

“Will you look at this?” Ari whistled, impressed. About twenty round tables were beautifully set, color coordinated with black tablecloths and gold paper goods. Real-looking tefillin centerpieces adorned each table, and there were a number of waiters pattering around, taking care of finishing touches.

“Not bad,” Zevi nodded. The band began to play a popular tune, and friends and family members on both sides of the mechitza formed circles and began to dance. Several songs later, everyone was asked to take his seat. A young-looking waiter served the twins and their friends.

Ari and Zevi obligingly made room for him to place their appetizers, but continued talking as if the waiter did not exist. And then the boys dug in.

“Hey, waiter!” Ari called. “This meat knish was pretty good. Do you have another portion for me?”

“Of course, sir. At your service!” The waiter rushed off to the kitchen to get Ari’s order. Just moments after he served Ari and began to walk away, Zevi called, “Uh, excuse me, Mr. Waiter, but could I have a refill, too?”

Obligingly, the waiter trotted off to bring Zevi another knish. And then, like a line of dominoes, identical requests rained down on the waiter’s unsuspecting head from the rest of the class. Everyone wanted a refill. Had the class bothered to look at the waiter’s face, they might have noticed a flicker of annoyance in his eyes, but they were too busy talking and laughing with each other to notice.

“Hey!” Ari exclaimed. “Did you just flick that pickle at me?” An olive flew through the air. A carrot landed smack in the middle of the waiter’s white shirt. He quickly brushed himself off and dashed off to the kitchen. Within moments, food fragments littered the floor. The boys grinned at each other. After all, they were here to have a good time. The paid help would deal with the mess, they were sure.

When Rabbi Fine, the shul Rav, got up to speak, the boys respectfully stood up, and then gave him their full attention. About five minutes into his talk, Zevi picked up his fork to dig into some more food. Ari followed suit. Suddenly, he dropped his fork against his plate, making aloud clang just as Rabbi Fine was delivering the climax of his speech. Quite a few people shot some disapproving glances in his direction, and Ari felt his face turn red. When the speech was over, Zevi and Ari got up to use the restroom. As they were ready to walk back down the long hallway and into the social hall, they heard an angry voice that caught their attention.

“And if that’s what the behavior of religious kids is like, then I want no part of it!” Peeking around the corner, they saw their waiter, Dave, talking to the janitor.

“They just don’t care! I’m not a person to them. They order me around, they don’t say ‘please’ or ‘thank you,’ and they make messes. They even disturb when the rabbi is speaking. You know, Charlie, I got really excited when I was hired to do this job; I thought that working with religious Jews would be a special experience. I was really curious because I’ve never been around religious Jews before; I grew up just going to synagogue a few times a year and that was it. But I see now that I really haven’t missed anything. I mean, if this is what religion means, then who needs it? I’m better off without it!” Janitor Charlie put his arm around the waiter’s shoulders and spoke in soft, soothing tones.

Ari and Zevi looked at each other, terribly upset by what they had heard.

“What should we do?” Ari whispered, almost in tears.

“We better apologize and change the way we’ve been acting – pronto!” Zevi said, looking shaken.

“Talk about a chillul Hashem! Maybe we can fix it before it’s too late.” By the time the waiter came in with their main course, Ari and Zevi had already filled in their whole table on what they had overheard. Expressions with “please” and “thank you” resounded, and the waiter wondered what had hit him. Was he dreaming? After their table had been served, not one boy asked for a refill or for anything else till the waiter returned and began to clear their plates; their decorum was perfect. And each boy expressed wholehearted gratitude for the service.

“Have you been working as a waiter for a long time? You’re the best!” Zevi smiled, bringing a happy flush to Dave’s face.

“Yeah, I second that,” Ari agreed.

“Well, thank you,” Dave smiled. “It’s been a few months now. I’m trying to work my way through college.”

“And Dave . . .?” Zevi began, “Um . . . we’re really sorry for the way we acted before. For some of us, this is the first big event that we’ve ever been to, and I guess we forgot our manners. Hope you’ll forgive us.”

“That goes for me, too,” Ari seconded the motion. The others added their agreement.

“If you guys are men enough to admit your mistakes, then I’m man enough to accept your apologies.” David held out his hand to shake Zevi’s, and then all the kids held out their hands. Dave walked around the table wearing a big grin on his face.

After the last dance, Zevi and Ari were ready to call it a night. After wishing a hearty “mazel tov” to Yochi and his family, they made sure to thank the waiter and the janitor for all their hard work. Then they walked to the coat-room to collect their coats and also thanked the coatroom attendant. Just as they were putting on their coats, once again their ears perked up as a conversation wafted out towards them from around the corner.

“Charlie, those guys really made a one-eighty! I mean, anyone can make a mistake. But for a bunch of twelve-year-olds to realize they goofed and to turn around their behavior – man! I’m really impressed! Maybe I will talk to the rabbi and find out more about this religion stuff, after all. ‘Cuz if that’s what it can do for kids, it sounds like something I’d like to investigate.”

Zevi and Ari exchanged happy grins, giving each other high-fives as they walked out into the brisk night. How happy they were that they had turned things around just in time!

“It really pays to be careful,” Zevi commented. “You just never know who’s watching you.”

“But . . . well, it really doesn’t matter if anyone is watching us – I mean, we have to behave properly because Hashem expects it of us – because of who we are. We have to be ‘at his service’ all the time. And we always have to be considerate of everyone. We slipped up tonight at the beginning.”

“You’re right,” Zevi agreed. “It’s a good thing we have a lot of bar mitzvahs coming up so we’ll have a lot of opportunities to practice doing things right!”

