

Special Kosher for Special Needs

By Reuven Blau

A Brooklyn restaurant dished out a healthy serving of compassion for a family with a special-needs teen.

Leah Cohen, 38 (in 2016), of Boca Raton, Florida, wanted to go out for dinner with her family during a visit to New York for a family wedding. But she was concerned that her son, Ari, 13, would upset other diners due to his uncontrollable flailing and grunts and that his behavior would attract uncomfortable stares.

She decided to reach out to the owner of Kasai — a kosher Hibachi eatery in Flatbush — with the help of Elan Kornblum, who runs the popular Facebook group Great Kosher Restaurant Foodies.

She asked if it was alright to visit the popular eatery with her son.

"I told her she could come whenever she wanted," Kasai owner Victor Ebadi, 30, recalled. "If any customers had a problem I'd send them away."

Still, Cohen didn't want to inconvenience other diners and was worried how they'd react. So Ebadi offered to open the restaurant an hour before the dinner rush for Ari and the rest of the family.

"Your son is our son!" he told Cohen.

The experience was unforgettable. "Right from the beginning they made us feel like more than VIP." Cohen said.

Restaurant staffers set up a table in the back and catered to Ari's unique food needs. They served him scrambled eggs and cut cucumbers exactly to his liking.

Ari was born with a chromosomal abnormality called Trisomy 9 Mosaic, and doctors predicted he wouldn't live past his first year.

"The first doctor told us he was just like a lump of clay," his mother recalled. "Ari proved them all wrong. We celebrated the bar mitzvah in February."

But the boy suffers from a long list of ailments and the family has had a hard time going out without being looked at strangely. "We go to restaurants all the time and have not had very good experiences," Cohen said.



To thank the Kasai staff, she posted her story on the kosher Facebook food group with a set of happy pictures. "They made us feel special," she said. "They catered to my son's every need — even preparing things not on the menu. For once my husband and I were able to relax and enjoy."

Now, the group's organizer, Kornblum, is working to arrange similar nights at Kasai and other restaurants for other people with disabilities.

"I have a lot of friends with children with special needs who don't ever leave home because they can't take the stares or are unable to physically," Cohen said. "This will change that."

Kornblum hopes the idea takes off nationally. "I've already spoken to restaurants around the country and we're going to set up more designated nights for special needs families," he said. "So they can go out stress-free. This will turn into a big movement."

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*Source:* Adapted by Yerachmiel Tilles from the article in the May 19, 2016 edition of the New York Daily News, as posted on Shabbos Stories for the Parsha <keren18@juno.com>

*Connection:* Weekly Reading of *Vayera*, of which the *mitzvah* of hospitality is a major component -- see Gen. 18:2-8 (+ 21:33 with commentaries).

Photo caption:

Ari Cohen with his mother, Leah, at Kasai restaurant in Brooklyn.