

A CANDLE AND AN AUDIT

How an effort to help patients was saved

AS TOLD TO CHAYA SILBER BY MALKY KAUFMAN

“I’m really sorry, but I can’t do this anymore.” Mr. Green, a very generous Kanfei Chaim Miles for Life donor, was apologetic yet firm. “British Airways seems to have locked my account. It’s a real nightmare.”

He was the 29th caller in the past few months with the same story. This time, it hit us hard. Kanfei Chaim Miles for Life is a non-profit *chesed* organization that connects airline miles donors with seriously ill patients who need to fly to world-class medical centers for treatment. Several months earlier, our organization had been profiled in *Ami Magazine*, which brought us much-needed publicity as well as donations. Since then, however, the number of seriously ill patients and their family members needing those miles had increased exponentially. We were getting referrals every day from Chai Lifeline, RCCS, Refuah Helpline and many other organizations, and were arranging over 100 domestic trips a week.

From August 2016 until late winter of 2017 we’d been arranging weekly trips to Pittsburgh for Gali, a darling young mother of three little boys who was struggling with a terminal illness. Gali was determined to maintain her children’s normal lives for as long as possible. Since the local doctors had already given up on her, her only recourse was a specialist in Pittsburgh who was trying to prolong her life and ease her suffering. Since these appointments could change from one moment to the next, we were never able to arrange tickets too far in advance. Last-minute tickets are expensive. But getting to Pittsburgh and back cost only 7,500 British Airways “Avios” miles, a special executive rewards club for frequent fliers.

Most of her trips were covered by a small pool of donors, who gladly donated their miles to help this courageous and brave mother who refused to succumb to despair. With superhuman resolve Gali kept smiling, going to the mountains in the summer, taking her children to the park and acting as if everything was fine.

Unfortunately, Gali’s constant round-trips to Pittsburgh, using multiple donors, raised a red flag at British Airways. These Avios accounts were now being audited, and people were calling our office every day with the same complaint: my account has been locked! The higher-ups at British Airways were convinced that these miles were being sold, and they started asking questions: Who had booked the tickets? What was their relationship to the ticket holder? How much were they getting paid?

I immediately called our legal counsel, who assured me that Kanfei Chaim Miles for Life had done nothing wrong. We were squeaky-clean, a registered charity organization. All we had to do was reach out to British Airways and explain the situation.

Before I contacted them, however, I advised the donors whose accounts had been shut down to send an email to British Airways explaining what was going on. I also called Gali’s husband, whom I hadn’t heard from in a couple of weeks, which was unusual. I needed him to confirm for the airline that his wife was seriously ill and had to travel for medical treatment. Surprisingly, it took me a while to reach him, and when he finally got on the phone he apologized. “I can’t speak to you right now,” he said. “I just got up from *shivah*. Gali was *niftar* last week.”



I was stunned and heartbroken to hear the tragic news. Beautiful, vivacious Gali, who had always been so gracious and appreciative, was gone. Gali's husband assured me that he would do whatever he could to help get us out of this mess.

In the meantime, the phone calls about account shutdowns turned into an avalanche. When Mr. Green called to say that his account had been flagged as well we knew we were in trouble. Mr. Green was one of our biggest donors, and had donated hundreds of thousands of miles to us over the past few years. If we lost him, we might as well close up shop.

Upon the advice of our attorney, I sent an email to the top audit executive at British Airways, putting all our cards on the table.

Dear Sir:

I am reaching out to you about a situation that affects both of us. My name is Malky Kaufman, and I am the founder of Kanfei Chaim Miles for Life, a

charitable organization that helps people with medical illnesses who need to fly to various locations around the world for medical treatment. The way we do this is by matching them up with someone who is willing to book them tickets by using their own mileage, thereby enabling them to obtain the lifesaving medical intervention that they would otherwise not be able to access.

Having said that, I would first like to thank you for the many lives your company has already saved without even knowing about it. Countless people have gotten a new lease on life thanks to your airline. You have also enabled spouses to be reunited after months of medical treatment, and children to be brought back together with their parents. These donated miles are a lifeline to those who turn to us for help. You would be

extremely moved if you met some of them so they could thank you in person. Your generosity and kindness are truly appreciated.

Lately, though, we have been encountering a very unfortunate situation. Some of your customers are being audited about their use of Avios miles, accompanied by warnings that they cannot be sold. I assure you that those generous people did not sell their miles.

Please look into this matter. I am sure that you will rectify this error and allow them to continue doing this noble deed. I thank you again in the name of the many people whose lives have been saved, and on behalf of their families for giving them hope and happiness.

Malky Kaufman

I didn't know what to do. There were too many people relying on us. How would they manage?

Executive Director of Kanfei Chaim Miles for Life

I also included a link to our website, which features the article that appeared in Ami and explains how we operate.

All of this occurred shortly after Purim last year, before the pre-Pesach rush. The holidays are always our busiest time of year, as no one wants to be alone for Yom Tov. Many patients and their families make arrangements to spend Yom Tov near the hospital, which means a greater than usual demand for trips. But now that all of our British Airways donors' accounts were shut down, we simply did not have enough mileage.

Fortunately, we were still able to book tickets through our excellent partnership with Air Canada through their Aeroplan

charity program (<https://beyondmiles.aeroplan.com/eng/charity/1180>). When people donate miles to our account with them, Aeroplan adds 10% to the donation; for example, 100,000 miles becomes 110,000. Many donors utilize this great option to make their miles count even more.

Still, with our British Airways miles tied up in legal limbo, Kanfei Chaim was seriously compromised. I didn't know what to do. I simply couldn't bear the thought of closing up shop. There were too many people relying on us. How would they manage?

In the meantime, it was two weeks before Pesach and we still hadn't heard anything from British Airways. I was working around the clock, not only making Pesach in my own house but trying to deal with all the requests we simply couldn't fill. After sending numerous messages to British Airways

I received the following automated response:

Dear Ms. Kaufman:

Thanks for getting back to me with more information about your company.

I've forwarded it to various people I think may be able to help and I'm waiting to hear back from them. As soon as I have any further information I'll be in touch.

John Miller*

British Airways

It was three days before Pesach when I finally lost it. This problem had been going on for far too long. Why was it so hard to reach the top honchos at British Airways? I'd already sent them countless letters and emails, spoken to several lawyers and coached the donors on how to handle the audits. Yet it seemed as if it

was *bashert* for us to lose our accounts with British Airways, putting Kanfei Chaim Miles for Life's entire mission in jeopardy.

I went home, locked myself in a room and lit a candle for Gali's *neshamah*. Then I sat down and talked to my dear, departed friend, envisioning her radiant face and sweet smile.

"Gali, you know I didn't do this for my own benefit," I cried. "I did everything for you, to help make you comfortable during your final months and enable you to do more *mitzvos* and spend more time with your family. You are now in a better place. Please, *daven* for Kanfei Chaim Miles for Life that we should be able to continue helping other patients as we helped you. Please do your best to help us get our British Airways accounts back, for the sake of other *cholei Yisrael*."

I cried for a while, releasing all of my pent-up emotions. When I emerged I felt cleansed, as if a great load had been lifted from my shoulders.

The *yeshuah* came on Chol Hamoed Pesach when I found the following email in my inbox:

Dear Ms. Kaufman:

I'm writing about the experiences you've had with flights booked through your charity being cancelled. I have been in contact with our senior management team about this, and we think we have a partial solution to the problem. I would very much like to discuss this with you by phone, so please let me know a time when I can call you, including your preferred telephone number.

Carl Jones*, team leader

British Airways Executive Club Auditing Department

I immediately reached out to Carl, who informed me that the airline's senior executives wished to speak with me. We set up a conference call for two days after Pesach.

After going back and forth with them and getting nowhere, I had no idea what to expect. But what happened was literally unprecedented. One of the top Avios executives got on the line, and he was exceptionally accommodating and supportive.

He related that he had read our email, including the article that appeared in *Ami*, and was awed to learn what we were accomplishing. He personally apologized for shutting down the accounts and said, "We are honored and privileged to be affiliated with your wonderful organization. I promise that we will do anything we can to help you!" He then gave us a set of guidelines on how to make the donations to make sure that the donors' accounts wouldn't be flagged.

Whew! What a relief! It was a true miracle and completely unexpected.

That very day, the phone calls started coming in. The account of every single donor that had been shut down was reopened that afternoon, and the person received a heartfelt apology.

In the nine months since, we have logged over six million miles with British Airways and haven't had a single issue. Kanfei Chaim Miles for Life is stronger than ever and arranges hundreds of trips every week, all in the merit of Gali's pure and lofty soul.

This winter we will be having a special drive—"200 Million Miles Fly Week"—the goal of which is to register 200 million miles in our data bank. We chose a date at random, the first week of January, and got the chills when we later discovered that it "happened" to be the week of Gali's *yahrtzeit*. ●

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