



# How Dan Dealt

BY Rachel Bachrach

## An innocent error became a windfall for thousands — and a nightmare for El Al — thanks to the popular network of a creative thinker known simply as “Dan”

**I**t all started last Monday morning, when Daniel Eleff noticed a post on his website’s forum about super-cheap flights to Israel. The \$330-price looked pretty incredible, so Daniel, who runs the popular bargain site Dan’s Deals, tested it out and posted it to his main page. It was then sent to 5,000 subscribers, many of whom get text messages with updates.

From there, the news spread like wildfire: El Al flights between November and March from several cities in America, including New York, were going for less than \$400 on some sites. Getting the airline’s winter special at \$800 is a good deal — it’s usually closer to \$900 or \$1,000 — so this was indeed a bargain.

Within about an hour, Dan’s Deals was flooded. The site usually gets 30,000 hits daily, but on Monday, so many people — 135,000, to be exact — visited for information and updates that his server couldn’t handle the traffic and he had to take it down.

“It just snowballed,” the 27-year-old Cleveland resident says with a grin.

El Al hasn’t confirmed the number, but rumor has it that more than 5,000 tickets were booked via Expedia, Orbitz, and other agencies. Daniel booked tickets for Pesach. (He ended up canceling

them because the trip didn’t work with his schedule.) Daniel also booked two flights for his Israeli contractor, one for a visit, another for Yom Tov. “I called him over right away,” Daniel says. “Right now he’s very happy he’s working for me.”

He knows someone who called El Al and told a manager he felt bad taking advantage of the price. “The manager told him, ‘Don’t worry about it, enjoy Eretz Yisrael.’” Later, hundreds of people posted that they had booked, some for 25 family members to attend a well-timed *simchah*.

Travel agents were also bombarded. The Brooklyn office of Destiny Travel was flooded with calls, and when they stopped answering the phone because they couldn’t handle the volume, hopeful flyers started streaming in.

But by 2 p.m., flights were listing prices of \$800 or more. The deal was over.

Even once the deal was dead, the dialogue continued. What had happened, people wondered, and would El Al honor the tickets?

Published airfares, explained El Al, include the basic flight, a fuel surcharge, and taxes, but in this case, the contractor erroneously omitted the surcharge when filing their winter prices to several sites. The reason the glitch stayed up for several hours was because

they can refile only several times a day. El Al corrected the price at the next opportunity — about 1 p.m. — but it took another hour or so to pull the cheaper fare from all the websites.

That evening, El Al said they would honor the tickets, but the next day, spokespeople told several media outlets they had yet to decide how to proceed. On Thursday afternoon, El Al announced they would honor the tickets, in addition to allowing upgrades to nonstop flights and cancellations without penalties.

Daniel was pleased with the announcement, but not surprised; he had predicted El Al wouldn’t void the tickets because industry regulations make it tough to rescind the deal. Department of Transportation guidelines dictate that once a traveler has a confirmed ticket, it has to be honored even if there was a miscalculation. The DOT has enforced this, making airlines restore tickets they cancelled due to fare errors. If they don’t honor the flights, airlines are fined \$25,000 per canceled ticket. It’s also bad for an airline’s reputation.

This type of mistake is not wholly uncommon, says Daniel. He remembers an Iberia Airlines deal to anywhere in Europe for \$248. Flyers were able to book through American Airlines as well, and those flights were honored. Recently, United Airlines offered first-class tickets to Hong Kong, for only four miles instead of the usual 16,000. The airline is still in discussions about whether they have to honor the tickets (rules may differ for mileage flights).

In addition to the legalities, this El Al episode has also sparked interesting halachic debates. Were people allowed to take advantage of the deal? Are you obligated to notify El Al about the deal? If you purchased tickets, are you obligated to return them?

Rav Chaim Kohn of the Business Halacha Institute says from a halachic perspective, people were permitted to book tickets. “It’s a strictly regulated industry, and it’s their obligation to bear the responsibility. The price they offer is their obligation — from a pure halachic point of view, it’s their problem.”

*Rabbanim* recommend speaking to your local *posek* for guidance, which is what Daniel says he tells people, too. “But do the deal first, then ask your rabbi and cancel if you have to,” he advises.

Daniel has been running Dan’s Deals for five years. It started when he was sent as a *bochur* on *shlichus* to Sao Paulo, Brazil. “The yeshivah there was broke and couldn’t even afford toilet paper,” he remembers, “but I found a deal for free toilet paper.” His knack for finding bargains spurred him to launch Ctownbochur.com (C for Cleveland), so family and friends could enjoy the deals he came across. Before he knew it, the site took off. The name was hard to spell, though, and “Dan’s Deals” had always appealed to him, but someone already owned the domain dansdeals.com. Daniel tried contacting him about purchasing it. He never heard back, but in

## DAN’S TIPS



Here’s what Daniel recommends if such a deal comes up again:

**Ask no questions.** Don’t call the company to ask about the deal — there’s no reason to alert them and potentially ruin it for people who have yet to take advantage.

**Act fast and overbook.** These deals don’t last, so book quickly. You probably won’t be able to change passenger names or flight dates, so if you’re unsure if it works for someone in your party, book anyway and cancel if necessary. Cancellation policies, especially within 24 hours, are usually generous.

**Go with the biggies.** Book through well-known and reputable sites. Some people booked through no-name sites, and their tickets weren’t honored.

**Remember the baby.** Even if you don’t usually buy your infant a seat, you’re charged 10 percent of the fare to bring him on an international flight. In a case like this, it might pay to get him a seat.

2007, the site expired and was available for the taking, so Daniel snapped it up.

Dan’s Deals is a full-time job. Daniel posts frequently with bargains for men’s shirts, electronics, hotel stays, and everything in between. Some of the instructions to redeem offers are quite complex — 17 steps involving multiple companies and combinations of various deals — but Daniel tries to make it clear and verify that it’s the real deal.

“In the process, I’ve opened up probably 300 credit cards and I got over 10 million miles,” he says. “I don’t have to pay for too many tickets!”

Daniel used to respond to questions and comments, but that proved to be impossible as the site grew, and he implemented a forum for users to contribute deals, discuss strategies, and advise each other. They can also subscribe for free updates.

Even so, some friends joked that they were miffed they didn’t get a call about the El Al snafu. “I can’t tell you how many friends texted me the next day, ‘I thought we were friends, why didn’t you tell me?’” Daniel says. “I tell my parents and my family personally, but everyone else would be too much, that’s why you need to sign up for the updates.”

Feedback to Daniel’s deals is usually positive, and in this case, even heartwarming. “Some people e-mailed me this is the first time they’re going to Eretz Yisrael. Others told me their kids never met their grandparents, who are getting older, because they couldn’t afford the flights for the family,” says Daniel. “Now they’re all going to meet them for the first time.” ●