

Famed Tel Aviv restaurant Raphael closes amid mystery over embezzled funds (Haaretz)

Chef and founder Rafi Cohen claims that money was being stolen from the restaurant, but staff tell a different tale.

Tel Aviv's Raphael, founded in 2001 and long considered one of Israel's finest restaurants, shut its doors suddenly over the weekend. Hopeful diners who called to make reservations were greeted with a message claiming "computer problems" and promising that the establishment will reopen on May 1. "In the meantime, we're renovating and changing the menu," the taped announcement said.

Head chef and founder Rafi Cohen said the decision to close was precipitated by the discovery that enormous amounts of money had been embezzled through the restaurant's computer system, which belongs to the MICROS-Fidelio information technology company.

In a conversation with Haaretz, Cohen emphasized that a number of restaurant employees were in on the embezzlement. He said he has not turned to the police, but intended to do so after the Passover holiday, which ended at sundown last night.

But workers who spoke to Haaretz told a very different story. They complained of a deterioration in their relations with Cohen since he opened his new restaurant, 5 Mendele, including threatening and humiliating treatment, verbal violence, threats of lawsuits, repeated accusations of theft and a series of resignations and dismissals that left the restaurant with a skeleton staff – more than 20 employees left or were fired in the past two weeks alone. Workers also complained of unpaid tips and wages, and submitted audio recordings and voice messages filled with obscenities from Cohen that came after they left Raphael.

"One day, out of the blue, Rafi decided to accuse me of stealing 50,000 shekels (\$14,400) in cash," one employee related, speaking on condition of anonymity. "He claims I started a business within his business and managed to hide that money. He also told me over the phone he was putting me on leave until further notice, and then hung up and refused to take my calls. He still hasn't summoned me to a [pre-dismissal] hearing, hasn't fired me or paid me for all of February and half of March – an amount exceeding 10,000 shekels," he said.

According to this employee, when Cohen accused him of stealing it was in front of the entire staff, and at the same time he also accused his managers of stealing.

"He shouted at all of us, 'You want "action," I'll give your action. I'll terrorize this place.' It's hard to survive in a restaurant in the face of these nerves. When he comes in, everyone starts wondering how he woke up that day. He comes into the kitchen, throws pots around, gets upset and shouts at everyone."

A woman who quit her job at Raphael adds: "He fired a lot of workers left and right, there were resignation letters arriving every day, until there were almost no office workers left and we were asked to take on various tasks. I asked to leave because I found him hard to work for, and he shouted at me that I was a mental case who didn't understand anything. He hasn't contacted me since I told him I was leaving. My pay for my last three weeks never came. I texted him: 'Hi Rafi, I didn't get my salary and I want to ask you about it.' He told me a private detective agency was investigating me.

"He hired private investigators and spent money to prove that people were stealing," she continues, adding, "He hasn't caught anyone, because there's no one to catch. No one

did anything. That's why it's so shocking. I cannot remain silent. The restaurant closed because there are no employees who are willing to work in these conditions anymore."

Another former Raphael employee described experiencing similar behavior from Cohen: "Even if there was a problem with the computer system, it doesn't justify the way we were treated and the withholding of salaries, which is illegal," she said.

"I would be happy to say I'm closing for a week because of the workers, but that's not the reason: our departments are full of workers," Cohen said in response. "The reason is much more serious. I am replacing the entire computer system after losing trust in it. We received false reports, the company made retroactive cancellations. It has nothing to do with the workers. Some of them disappeared because the thief has a guilty conscience: He had a small role, he collaborated and will be questioned by police. The restaurant's closure happened due to outside service providers. In the past two months we have been investigating the hacking of our cash registers in a giant scam, carried out in cooperation with employees who have been put on leave until the investigation is completed, after which we will hold hearings for them," Cohen said.

The managing director of MICROS-Fidelio Israel, Uzi Reuveni, said in response that MICROS has been providing computer services since 1975, working with some of the best restaurants and hotels in the world, adding, "I reject [Cohen's] claims and suggest he look within the restaurant to discover who is behind the fraud. Our system is secured in real time everywhere we operate."

Published by Dafna Arad, [Haaretz](#) , 22.04.2014