



WHAT FILLS Empty Spaces

Name: Shana Meller

Dream: To build a vacation suite for couples undergoing infertility or pregnancy loss.

I stood, staring at the wide expanse: hills, trees, a village in the distance, a vineyard. On this spot we were going to make it happen.

Here we were going to build our vacation suite, a place for couples to come and reconnect with themselves and each other. A place where they could rest and recuperate from difficult procedures. A place where they could remember that life is not just about having a baby, a baby, a baby. It's also about being a person. Being a couple. Living.

My husband and I had learned the hard way. We waited six years to greet the daughter who now gurgled in my arms, pleased at being out with Mommy and Daddy. I lifted her up and held her high. "See, Tehilla! Take a look!"

When a couple gets married, they think the path is clear: *sheva brachos* outfits will make way for maternity clothing, and then for a rush of diapers and stretchies and *nachas*. So many assumptions. I could laugh.

We didn't focus too much on our childlessness. We explored Eretz Yisrael. We worked and took courses. We visited family and

friends. But there was the other side of our life, the side we shared with no one. Appointments. Specialists. Hospital trips. Injections. Second opinions.

And there was the relentlessness of it all. I remember speaking to my doctor on the phone. "And what if we're not successful?" I asked before a difficult procedure.

"Then you come in again on Monday and we'll start over again."

Over again? It seemed too much to bear. That I'd have to go through all this again and again and again until I either gave up or we were greeted with success. It was such a terrible drain — on my body, energy, emotions. What resources was I supposed to draw upon to keep going?

Around that time, I met up with a friend for lunch. As she stood up to go, she reached into her bag and took out an envelope. She leaned over and stuck it under my plate. "Use it to pamper yourselves," she said, and she slipped out the door.

I opened up the envelope. Inside were five crisp 100-shekel bills.

I felt my cheeks redden and unexpected emotion closed my throat. To be thought of. To be cared for. With shaking fingers, I placed the envelope into my handbag.

When my husband returned home that evening, I told him about the envelope. "Let's put it toward a vacation," he said. We went the next week. We found a tiny wooden cabin in the countryside. It was in the middle of nowhere, and when we arrived, we had to drive half an hour just to find a store that sold some bread and milk. Late that evening, as we sat on deck chairs in the garden, I felt a sense of peace that had for so long eluded me.

We talked. Not about treatments. Not about doctors. Just regular, plain old talk. I'd forgotten we knew how to do that.

We walked. We found a tiny, forgotten restaurant which served a loaf so crusty and soft and nutty I can still taste it.

In those three days, we found ourselves again. And in finding ourselves, we found each other.

Back home, I declared, "Every couple should have this chance." I called a couple of wealthy contacts and put the idea to them: a fund that would enable couples undergoing infertility — or pregnancy loss: I knew from friends and relatives that there were almost no facilities for women who had had stillbirths — to rest and recuperate. They were quick to puncture my bubble. "A fund like that would need constant topping up. It couldn't be sustained."

"Hmmm." I listened politely, not showing my disappointment.

Silence on the other end of the line. Then, "But I'll tell you what could work."

"Yes?"

"Buy a plot of land. Build a small, beautiful apartment. You can charge couples a minimal fee for upkeep. That would work."

It would? The original idea was so much easier. This seemed like a huge project, out of our realm. But there was also a niggling excitement.

That night, at supper, I shared the idea with my husband. He loved it. For a few moments, we put aside technicalities

and money and just allowed ourselves to imagine... A pastoral setting. A beautifully designed place, classy but cozy. We turned to each other. "Let's do it."

The first task was to find a plot of land. We visited moshavim, real-estate agents, dug up old contacts. But just as soon as we'd find the perfect location, something would crop up. Membership of a moshav was a requirement before we bought there, we discovered. There were zoning issues, permissions, laws. Such a tangle of complications.

One day I was talking to a good friend who had also been through the infertility circuit. I mentioned our idea and she got so excited. She told us of how she and her husband had just bought a tract of land on a nearby moshav to construct a spacious home. With her husband on board, she'd be willing to donate some of that land for our guest suite. It was a gift from heaven — and it was also a gift from an incredible family who wanted to make *chesed* the foundation of their new home.

I was already expecting when we went to see the place they offered us. In the months that followed, we planned our nursery and we planned the vacation suite.

Architects, designers, construction workers. A crib, the softest baby blankets, diapers. By the time we were dealing with plumbers and electricians, tiles and furnishings, our special gift, Tehilla, was already filling our hearts and our days.

Fundraising. There were days I could have thrown up my hands in despair, when there was another delay or a mistake was made in some measurement. But slowly, as our little Tehilla learned first to crawl and then to walk, our dream became a reality.

An empty space had become a place of connection. An empty space inside had fueled a project I could never have dreamed of. Each time we go down to the site, I unstrap Tehilla and watch her toddle around the garden into the apartment. She checks that I'm following, flashes me her toothy grin. And I can't help but wonder if the best things don't come from the hardest places. ?