

Keren Ohr — “A Ray of Light”

You know that thrill of reaching the top of a roller coaster? The only caveat is that you know the downward plunge is about to hit you full-force, and your stomach will be left 50 feet behind you. Roller coasters are fun ... when they're in amusement parks. Not in real life.

Infertility is a real-life roller coaster we all hope never to be faced with. The truth is, the experience of a couple facing the challenge of infertility can only truly be comprehended by those who have been through it. For such a couple, the road to what many people take for granted is often paved with years of uncertainty, severe disappointment, and a gaping void.

But it isn't just the years. When one is living through it, it's each month on its own. Each month breeds its own fear, its own loneliness, its unique crashes. Only, there's no thrill at the end. Those months add up and before they know it, couples are years' deep into the world of infertility. Confused, scared, and so, so alone.

Keren Ohr was established by those who get it. Reb Shmuli Falk and his wife, having been through this experience themselves, established Keren Ohr — “A Ray of Light” for couples who are overwhelmed by the darkness of pain, of disappointment and of stigma that inevitably accompanies infertility.

Just three years ago, Keren Ohr started out as a dream. Knowing exactly how it feels to go through this long and lonely journey, Reb Shmuli and his wife were aware of a gap in the support received whilst on this tumultuous path. There are so many wonderful organizations that help couples with carefully researched medical advice and even treatment funding, but none can guarantee positive results. In reality, after all those hopes came crashing down time after time, they felt lost, alone and not sure how to pick up the pieces and move on. They knew they were not the only ones. Being such a private and personal *nisayon*, many couples are unable to share with even their closest friends and family, the extent of what they are going through. They are left to grapple with a mammoth test on their own.

They dreamed of creating a space of healing — an oasis for couples recovering from difficult medical procedures. There needed to be a place where couples felt understood, cared for, and able to recharge their energy so they'd have the courage and emotional wherewithal to enter between the hospital walls once more and try again. Between treatments, it is vital for them to recharge their batteries so they can tackle the obstacles ahead together and with the required energy. A short respite break — a mini getaway — can give the couple that desperately needed ‘recharge and reconnection.’ Such a getaway not only gives the husband and wife the strength to continue, it can save a marriage that is severely challenged from so early on.

For couples living far from familial support here in Eretz Yisrael, renting a small holiday apartment (*tzimmer*) is not an ideal setting for financial and logistical reasons. A small rental unit can cost upwards of £100 a night. Treatment costs can empty a typical couple's bank account quite quickly and they need to allocate all funds for that purpose. The typical Israeli *tzimmer* is not built with religious needs in mind and oftentimes couples cannot use them when they need it most.

Enter Keren Ohr.

Designed to perfection, the *tzimmer* the Falks created from this dream has been a remarkable story of *siyatta diShmaya* from its inception. An opportunity landed on their doorstep early on, when their friends Mr and Mrs Palmer informed them that they were building a new home on a *moshav* near Ramat Beit Shemesh. Having endured the trial of infertility themselves, the Palmers were keen to see the Falks' project through and graciously offered the entire ground floor of their new home, along with a sizable piece of enclosed private garden property, for this purpose.

After much planning, a beautiful one-storey vacation home was built — complete with jacuzzi, a picturesque view that is typical of our Holy Land, and hotel standard amenities. But above all, the attention to detail is what brings Keren Ohr's vacation suite to a new level. Walking in, one is immediately aware of an atmosphere that lends itself to the couple regaining the feeling of the home they once envisioned — a home of warmth, of closeness and, above all, of hope. As one couple aptly described it, “I felt

mer.”

Since its opening in Elul 5779, over 100 couples have benefitted from this incredible *tzimmer*; a number even more remarkable when one considers that Eretz Yisrael spent several months in lockdown due to COVID-19. These 100-plus couples were from the entire spectrum of *shomrei Torah* in Eretz Yisrael — Chassidish, Yeshivish, Modern Orthodox and everyone in between.

It isn't just Israeli couples who benefit from this island of hope and rehabilitation. Many couples from the UK and other countries get a chance to enjoy it as well, since it is common to travel to Israel in order to benefit from the advanced medical expertise offered by a country that prides itself in its high birth rate. They come with elevated hopes, often after months of planning, but those hopes are not always realised. The *tzimmer* is the perfect place for them to rest and recover before returning home to plan their next course of action.

But Reb Shmuli and his wife are not finished dream-



you had given us a piece of your heart.”

The guests are charged a nominal fee per night. This is just to ensure that they don't feel that they are a recipient of *tzedakah*, but does not even cover the basic running costs.

Keren Ohr's high demand is evidenced by the fact that its clientele comes entirely from word of mouth; it has never needed to advertise its services. Not one Shabbos has gone by with it not being used and on most weeknights it's fully booked as well. Most couples stay for about two or three nights, though some who need more stay for up to a week.

As mentioned above, the *tzimmer* eventually began to serve other couples, who had undergone a different heartbreak — the loss of a full-term baby. Despite enduring the immense difficulties of childbirth, a regular “Mother and Baby” home is not an option. At times, the bereaved mother simply cannot face returning home, whether to her home blessed with children or to her empty nest prepared for a first arrival. Instead, the couple travels straight to the *tzim-*

ing. Their first dream, having seen success beyond expectations, has made them aware of how vital this project is. Further branches are needed not only in Eretz Yisrael, but in the U.K., too. They have already supported the establishment of two similar venues in the USA. The model works and they are only too happy to see it replicated worldwide. Expanding the services to provide more support to these couples is in their vision as well. Some ideas include providing meals to couples staying in the *tzimmer*, especially those coming directly from hospital, or for those couples who are unable to travel, to ‘bring the *tzimmer* to them’ by sending them care packages and meals delivered to their door.

Within the next few months *b'ezras Hashem* with your help and support they will be able to open another accommodation in Eretz Yisrael, so that more couples can access this all important, vital service. For those couples who so desperately need the respite, picking up the phone is difficult enough, having to turn them down is simply no longer an option.

When that roller coaster hits rock bottom, there needs to be someone to give another push so the riders can reach the finish line. Keren Ohr is here to fill that need.

Email us at info@kerenohr.co.uk or contact us through our website www.kerenohr.co.uk

Keren Ohr was strongly supported by two of England's leading and sorely missed *poskim*, Harav Pesach Eliyahu Falk, *zt"l*, and Harav Osher Yaakov Westheim, *zt"l*. They, among other Rabbanim, expressed from experience in guiding couples facing this challenge, how crucial this project is.

At present, however, this incredibly important institution is running at a loss and cannot continue without your support.

Sunday and Monday prior to Rosh Hashanah, *Klal Yisroel* begin *Selichos* and enter the final full week before Rosh Hashanah, preparing to embark on a journey of “*B'Ohr Pan-echa Yehaleichun*” — to walk in the light of Hashem. On these auspicious days we will answer the call of the hour by trying to smooth the difficult journey of others and enable this vital endeavour to not only be a sustainable “Ray of Light”, but to thrive and expand, both in Eretz Yisrael and closer to home, too.

