

# Keren Ohr: Rays of Light, Rays of Hope

Dreams, disappointment. Another attempt. Anticipation, anguish. Another failure. Hope, heartbreak. Again?

Words can't adequately describe the swinging emotions, the endlessness of the journey, the draining treatments, the whispered "maybe this time..." Until it all falls apart with one phone call.

This is the rollercoaster of life for those struggling on the path to parenthood. When their dreams shatter yet again, and their searing pain just won't go away. When the recovery is too difficult, and putting on a smile takes too much energy.

In the aftermath of a failed *shidduch*, a person wouldn't be pressured to start dating so soon.

Someone who falls off a high wall would never be told to brush himself off and scale the wall once more. But the journey of infertility waits for no one. Couples are expected to pick themselves up and start all over again. How can they go on when they've barely had time to catch their breath? How can they regain their strength when they're constantly getting beaten down?

Reb Shmuli Falk and his wife had these questions during their own turbulent journey to parenthood. The Falks waited seven long years before being blessed with their daughter.

Seven years of yearning, seven years of *davening* for their dream to come true.

They knew that they had to come up with a solution, a way to help other couples on this challenging journey, to recover and regain strength when the very idea seemed novel. The concept of healing between treatments is simply not discussed. Although the stresses of infertility can take a toll on the emotional wellbeing of a couple, their needs are shadowed by the importance of the ultimate goal.

The Falks wanted to create a space for recovery, where these couples could allow themselves the luxury – no, necessity – of being pampered and cared for.

They had a goal, and a dream started taking shape. What if couples could get away for a few

days to someplace peaceful, relaxing? Away from hospital corridors, curious neighbours and pram-lined streets, they would finally be able sit and talk. With each other. About anything but their troubles. Paying just a token fee for a luxurious suite surrounded by the most beautiful gardens, they would have the opportunity to recover physically and emotionally. Maybe even to smile, laugh and ignite the tiniest spark of hope.

Incredibly, with an abundance of *siyata diShmaya*, the Falks turned the seeds of possibility into reality. That peaceful setting, those beautiful gardens... they're real. And so are the smiles on the faces of so many couples as soon as they set foot on the grounds.

A couple has just heard the difficult news, and not for the first time. The recent treatment has failed and they just can't bear the thought of undergoing the draining process yet again. The pain in each one's eyes is just too much; they can hardly look at each other.

They arrive at the retreat, with their hope all but lost. The place is tranquil. The views are breathtaking. Each room is beautifully furnished, just like a hotel. The wife walks into the bedroom and finds a chocolate on her bed. Tears come to her eyes – there are people who care, who understand just what she needs! There is a magical feeling of being hugged, the relief to finally be looked after when all they've known is loneliness. The couple enjoys an incredible few days, savouring the simple luxury of pushing aside their worries. They play games and take a walk. They laugh, they cry and start to connect with each other through the pain, something they'd forgotten how to do. When they leave the retreat, they do so united, rejuvenated, and brimming with the courage to hope and dream again.

As one grateful couple said, "In our darkest hour, the *tzimmer* was exactly what we needed to heal."

Many couples fly in from overseas for the advanced treatment in Israel. While some are successful, others are forced to return home even more heartbroken than before. The *tzimmer* gives them the chance to rest up and

gather the emotional strength to face the world again. There are some who come in between treatments, and others who are unfortunately told it's the end of the line. On most weeks, the retreat accommodates *chutznikim* who have little family support nearby, however, Israeli couples also benefit from the services. Many don't share all the details of their challenges with their parents, and still feel alone in their struggles.

The *tzimmer* eventually began to serve other couples who had endured a different heartbreak – the loss of a baby. Despite undergoing a painful and emotionally wrenching journey, going to a Mother and Baby Home isn't an option for the grieving mother. The couple can't face returning home, either to a home full of children who need them, or to the brand new pram and crib still waiting to be filled. They need privacy in a relaxed setting, and the chance to cry and heal together. In the words of one couple; "Going right back into everyday life could have been disastrous."

Since 2019, the Falks have introduced recovery and rejuvenation into the lives of over 400 couples. Through just word of mouth, the demand for Keren Ohr's services has increased dramatically and their phone is ringing off the hook. In recent years, the Falks realised the need to open up new locations, so that they could accommodate more couples. Some wonderful people heard about the organisation and wanted to be a part of it; they had holiday places sitting empty for part of the year and generously offered their use for a minimal fee. There are currently retreats in Ashkelon and Tzfas, both boasting the most beautiful views Israel has to offer.

It's not just the places. In the past couple of years, Reb Shmuli Falk and his wife have been blessed with another child, and they broadened the scope of their services. They now send care packages, filled with everything that brings comfort, and they offer meals for couples recovering from treatment or at any other time of need. This is especially helpful for those who are unable to go to one of the

retreats.

But Keren Ohr gets 80 calls a month, and they can accommodate only 20% of those couples. It's agonising to have to turn down people who so desperately need the retreat at that moment. The most Keren Ohr can do is to send meals and care packages – but this is not ideal. Keren Ohr would love to partner with more homeowners who could provide their properties when not in use.

Keren Ohr's vision is not limited to Israel; many communities around the globe have expressed interest in setting up their own "Keren Ohr." It's not easy to find accommodations with halachic standards throughout, so each new find is a feat in itself. The Falks want to be able to provide that safe space for any couple who comes knocking, at any time that it's needed.

That is not the only dream. Imagine the burden that would be lifted from the shoulders of these couple if their transportation to treatment was covered. Imagine the feeling of love and support that would be felt from a package before the Yamim Tovim – the loneliest times of the year for many. Imagine if they could send fully catered meals to the retreats, especially for couples arriving directly from the hospital. Imagine if the Falks went to sleep knowing that if a couple called in the morning, they would have a place for them, available immediately.

*Imagine if we didn't have to imagine.*

No one should ever need Keren Ohr's services, but the Falks are always ready to answer the cry for help. Hundreds of couples are relying on Keren Ohr to be the Ray of Light that leads them out of the darkness. It's a lonely road that no one chooses, but every person can do their part to lighten the path just a bit. Each donation communicates that people care and want to support these couples on their journey.

The success of this campaign is dependent on each donation. Take a moment to think of the effect of your small act of giving. It can turn disappointment into determination. Anguish into acceptance. And heartbreak into healing.