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## KEREN GEFEN – Mind-Body Fertility

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### Activity Report: January 2018 – May 2019

Keren Gefen, established in 2014, is a non-profit organization that provides emotional and wellness support to fertility challenged women in Israel.

In Israel, fertility treatments and IVF are given at no cost, but the government does not provide the essential emotional and psychological support.

It is widely known that prolonged infertility and the strain of IVF treatment can cause acute anxiety, depression and trauma. Harvard University research shows that these stressful emotional states significantly lowers fertility potential. In spite of the miracles of IVF medicine today, the crucial factor is dependent upon each individual woman's ability to balance her emotional and physical wellbeing. For women who choose to engage in stress-reduction and Mind/Body activities during treatment, their chances to conceive are proven to be 30% higher.

That's where Gefen steps in. As the only organization in Israel addressing the psychological wellbeing of fertility challenged women in such a large scope - in tandem with their medical care - we are filling a critical need.

Our goal is to enhance fertility among Israeli women (and men) who are having difficulty conceiving by providing an array of wellness and psychological services to supplement their medical treatment at **minimal cost** to them.

Our principal programs consist of (1) Mind/Body Workshops (2) Fertility Yoga workshops (3) Individual Therapy for patients undergoing fertility treatments.

**Gefen is always renewing. The Gefen staff is continually creating new and innovative programs to reflect the needs of the Fertility-Challenged Community.**

Keren Gefen is funded almost entirely on donations including a multi- year grant from the Stanley & Joyce Black Family Foundation (Los Angeles), the Pratt Foundation (Australia) and private donations from individuals in United States, Canada and Israel.

We would like to highlight the impact of **The Gefen Center**, located on a quaint and quiet street in the German Colony of Jerusalem, which is the heart of Gefen activities. The serene setting and nurturing environment create a warm refuge for women wrestling with fertility.

Led by passionate and highly trained specialists, the Center is home to a myriad of mindfulness and wellness programs that target the full spectrum of psychological, emotional and physical challenges of IVF treatment.

The Gefen Center, a home for healing where fertility is encouraged and women are empowered.

### **Here is a review of our Activities over the last year:**

#### **Ongoing Activity:**

**1. Ongoing Workshops:** Keren Gefen continually offers Fertility Mind/Body workshops and Fertility Yoga workshops at minimal cost (for those who can). On average ten workshops take place weekly. Programs serve as support groups for women undergoing fertility treatment. We reach out to different communities and adapt our programs to their needs. Together they share and build a supportive community, learn relaxation techniques, and do cognitive restructuring to help challenge negative feelings.

**Fertility Mind/Body workshops (The Stanley & Joyce Black Mind/Body Program):** Each Mind/Body Group meets once a week for 10 weeks. Each group is facilitated by a dedicated team of clinical social workers, cognitive behavioral therapists, and fertility specialists. The purpose of the workshops is to share and build a supportive community, learn relaxation techniques, and engage in cognitive restructuring to challenge negativity, which understandably comes with the territory. Participation in the workshops not only increases coping strategies for what can be the most difficult time in a woman's life, but enables habit and mood changes that positively impact fertility. These workshops become a vital space for healing and support and have helped over 600 women to date. Within the framework of the Mind/Body program, we are constantly adapting and expanding the workshops to address needs. It is in this vein that we offer targeted workshops, the scope of which we are constantly expanding to fit the needs of the fertility-challenged community.

**2. Fertility Yoga workshops:** Yoga exemplifies our mind/body philosophy. Through breath work and body movement, yoga calms the mind and balances the nervous system, while increasing blood flow to crucial areas to support healthy reproductive organs. Yoga is recognized as an important part of many leading fertility clinics around the world, and is now being offered as an integral part of the Gefen program. We initiated a Prenatal Yoga workshop geared towards pregnant Gefen members, where we help them support a healthy pregnancy while teaching breathing techniques to reduce anxiety. Gefen is with our members at all stages of their journey.

**Individual Support: Transfer with Tranquility** This unique program is offered to women undergoing IVF treatment. Before embryo transfer and while they await results, we meet with them for a session of stress reduction and mindfulness. A relaxed body and mind allow for optimal conditions during the IVF procedure.

We learned from the women themselves that these sessions were instrumental in their relaxation process and some even requested a follow-up session after the transfer, which we happily created.

Here is some of the wonderful feedback we have received from these women:

“The relaxation helped me a lot, to relax and clear my head. I felt a change physically as well – the effects of the hormones were less disturbing.”

“I felt like it was an island of peacefulness in there. A place where I could come clean on the inside. It helped me go through the anxious period of waiting for the results of a pregnancy test (Beta).”

**3. Specialized Workshops for the Haredi Community:** Our specialized programs include Mind/Body/ Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) and Yoga Workshops designed specifically for ultra-orthodox men and women, adapted to be sensitive to their needs with the recognition that infertility in the ultra-orthodox world is highly stigmatized. In the workshop, the women learn and practice stress reduction and coping techniques in a discreet and supportive setting, with experienced therapists who understand the cultural needs and sensitivities of the group members.

**4. Fertility Preservation Workshops:** Our **Fertility Preservation** Workshops are created for women in their 30's who have not yet found their partner and are at prime fertility age. The purpose of these workshops is to empower women to make informed choices about their future by taking their fertility into their own hands. They focus on the decision-making process, understanding the medical procedure, social and economic implications, as well as emotional concerns. In each workshop, one session is facilitated by an IVF specialist physician, who explains the medical implications and chance of success.

We have successfully led nine workshops in Jerusalem and Tel Aviv (Hebrew & English). The positive feedback was overwhelming. The women were truly empowered by the group, many of whom started the medical procedure and claimed that otherwise they wouldn't have had the strength to do so. We now have a waiting list for future groups.

**5. Hevruta for Fertility:** Our Fertility Hevruta is a program of learning, discussion and support that is based on Jewish and biblical sources that are used to give inspiration and support for fertility challenged women. The workshop arose from the belief that the words of the Torah have the ability to reach out to a person's soul, help them discover new places and enlighten their hearts.

**6. Continuation Groups:** For those women who are still in the fertility process and feel the need for continual support, sharing, and tools to help cope with the long and stressful process - we are offering the **Continuation Workshops**. In these workshops, we learn to cope with the toll the long process takes on relationships, and how to deal with the continual vulnerability the women feel. The participants create a supportive group which gives them the tools and strength they need to persevere.

**7. Individual Therapy** We offer individual one-on-one therapy sessions with a Social Worker who specializes in fertility for those who prefer to share their fertility journey and be supported in private.

## New Programs:

### **1. Nishmat-Gefen Fertility Counselor Program**

Keren Gefen has embarked in a joint program with Nishmat: The Jeanie Schottenstein Center for Advanced Torah Study for Women, to train and qualify Yoatzot Halacha (advisers in Jewish law) as Fertility Counselors for fertility challenged women.

The Nishmat Fertility Counselors are now serving the need in our community. This service is now available at no cost at MIDRESHET NISHMAT and at the GEFEN CENTER.

Recent years have seen the recognition and training of women in a variety of fields. Today, the need for such a role is critical to advise and assist Jewish women undergoing fertility treatments regarding the halachic issues encountered in the course of treatment. The need for a religiously expert supportive female address has been recognized by Keren Gefen. The need has also been recognized by Nishmat, whose Yoatzot Halacha have been trained with basic knowledge of halachic-fertility issues; but who are limited in the extent of their assistance because of a lack of advanced halachic training this field.

Our program has trained a cadre of the most experienced and scholarly Yoatzot Halacha as Fertility Counselors.

We have created a synergist learning experience among the students, rabbis, psychologists and doctors – a joint learning experience which has allowed growth of the next generation of Halachic advisers.

The fertility counselors have undergone extensive training; with a demanding curriculum embracing all relevant aspects medical, Halachic and psychological aspects of fertility issues. Training has included frontal medical and psychological lectures, shiurim and independent learning, as well as role playing among the staff and students.

### **2. Gefen Fertility Partners Program**

The Gefen Fertility Partners program, based on the “Atlanta Jewish Fertility Foundation Buddy Program”, is a peer-support program which is based on building a trusting relationship. The purpose of the program is to connect fertility-challenged women, those who have been successful in their journey and those who are in the process, in order to give emotional support to women throughout their journey. A Gefen supervisor trains the women for this role and is there to guide and support them in this endeavor.

## **Research**

We have completed on a joint research project with partners from Bar Ilan University and Haifa University on the outcome of women’s participation in Gefen Mind/Body fertility workshops. We have explored and examined the unique characteristics of Gefen mind/body therapy in Israeli society in general and within different sectors in particular. We found statistically significant reductions in stress and depression following participation in Gefen Mind/Body and Yoga groups. We are currently submitting the article for publication.

**1. Poster Presentation - the Ayala (IFA/Israel Fertility Association) annual conference, May 2019**

In May 2019, we gave a lecture about Gefen and Midreshet Nishmat Groundbreaking Joint Venture Offering Support to Fertility Challenged Women from a FEMALE Adviser in Halacha (Jewish Law).

**2. Poster Presentation - the 5th Annual Jefferson Infertility Counseling Conference, May 2018**

In May 2018, we had the honor to take part in the 5th Annual Jefferson Infertility Counseling Conference in Philadelphia and present a poster on the topic of "Was I With You at Sinai?" The Influence of Fertility Challenges on Mother-Child Relationship: When the Halachic (Jewish Legal) Status of the Embryo/Child is Unclear.

**3. Poster Presentation - the Ayala (IFA/Israel Fertility Association) annual conference, May 2018**

In May 2018, we gave a lecture on the topic of IVF using Egg Donation: The Psychological effects, and showcased a poster presentation at the Ayala (IFA/Israel Fertility Association) annual conference on the topic of "Was I With You at Sinai?" The Influence of Fertility Challenges on Mother-Child Relationship: When the Halachic (Jewish Legal) Status of the Embryo/Child is Unclear.

**4. Poster Presentation - the Ayala (IFA/Israel Fertility Association) annual conference, May 2017**

In May 2017 we presented our research at the Ayala (IFA/Israel Fertility Association) annual conference on the topic of our Fertility Preservation Program.

**5. Poster Presentation – "2016 NASPOG" – Biennial Meeting, Spring 2016**

A poster presentation by the Gefen staff was given at the 2016 NASPOG Biennial Meeting at the New York Academy of Medicine in New York City. The results of a research study conducted on Mind/Body therapy groups was presented.

**6. Poster Presentation - the Ayala (IFA/Israel Fertility Association) annual conference, 2016**

In 2016, we presented our research at the Ayala (IFA/Israel Fertility Association) annual conference on the topic of the Gefen Rimon mind/body fertility model for the Ultra-Orthodox community. We also presented our research, "Gefen, A Unique Multicultural, Multimodal (CBT/Mind Body) Fertility Treatment Paradigm" at the European Association for Behavioral Cognitive Therapists conference.

**7. Poster Presentation – "45th Annual EABCT Congress", September 2015**

In September 2015, we had the honor to take part in the 45th European Association for Behavioral and Cognitive Therapies (EABCT) Congress. The Conference featured world-renowned CBT clinicians and researchers. We showcased a poster presentation, which described the unique program of the Rimon Center, and presented the work of Gefen-Rimon in a clinical round table.

**Staff Training:** Our staff mentors and supervises a new cohort of professional therapists in order to support them in becoming fertility therapists in the Gefen organization. This will allow us to meet the growing demand for our services. We are continually training psychologists and social workers in the Gefen method and the synergy and interactions of the staff leads us to grow and develop together. We are currently training licensed Yoga teachers to become fertility therapists in the Gefen organization, which includes leading Yoga workshops and Individualized Transfer with Tranquility sessions (one on one sessions with women who are going through the IVF process).

### **Program Development:**

Gefen staff is developing new protocols for the Mind/Body Fertility workshops, based on the CBT approach, using our vast experience working with fertility challenged women from different communities, each with its own challenges.

Since many of our programs are new and innovative, the Gefen staff is putting a lot of effort into creating new protocols and have begun to publish them on line and present them at fertility conferences. This way, other organizations may benefit from our work and expertise.

### **The Rimon Mind-Body Fertility Center**

One of the main projects that Gefen funds is the Rimon Mind-Body Fertility Center at Hadassah Hospital Mt. Scopus that was established in October 2013. The Center offers state-of-the-art stress reduction methods to fertility patients at no cost.

Gefen-trained staff is available in the IVF waiting area, allowing women at their most vulnerable point to benefit from the guidance and therapies provided at the hospital or at the Gefen Center.

### **Outreach**

#### **1. Yesh Tikva Infertility Awareness Shabbat**

Keren Gefen Mind-Body Fertility Organization has partnered with Yesh Tikva's Annual Infertility Awareness Shabbat which took place in over 200 Synagogues in the USA and Canada, and has brought the program to many communities in Israel. The goal of this Shabbat was to enhance communal understanding and facilitate empathy for those who have not yet been blessed with children or who are struggling to expand their families.

#### **2. Gefen Outreach to Communities in Israel and Abroad**

We are reaching out to partner with communities in Israel and abroad and share the Gefen Vision.

- We have initiated our first Gefen Yoga Training Program. Our Yoga Director, Kady Harari led a Fertility Yoga Teachers Training Program in order to perpetuate the Gefen Model.
- Gefen ran a "Day of Awareness" in Brooklyn, NY, with expert speakers and workshops on various topics relating to women's health and fertility as part of their educational awareness program.
- Gefen partnered in hosting the 1st National Israeli Conference for Fertility Awareness Method, in Jerusalem.

## 2018-2019 Highlights

May 2018 – Times of Israel - Dr. Karen Friedman is one of **70 extraordinary women of Israel**.

August 2018 - Gefen trained Fertility Yoga teachers in New York as part of their **“Reaching Out”** program.

October 2018 – Gefen partnered in hosting the 1<sup>st</sup> National Israeli Conference **for Fertility Awareness Method**, in Jerusalem.

Dec 2018 - Gefen ran a **“Day of Awareness”** in Brooklyn, NY, with speakers on various topics relating to women’s health and fertility as part of their educational awareness program.

March 2019 - Gefen had booth in The **Jerusalem Marathon 2019** where we advertised our activities as the runners came to Sacher Park. We also promoted Gefen before the Marathon at **The Sports & Health Expo**, one of the most prestigious health and sports exhibition in Israel at The International Convention Center (Binyane Hauma), Jerusalem.

March 2019 - Jerusalem Municipality and Naamat Jerusalem hosted a **Panel for International Women's Day** with Dr. Karen Friedman, Emily Amrousi, Shira Hadas Nakar and Moran Eisenstein. In the presence of Mr. Moshe Lion, Mayor of Jerusalem.

April 2019 - Gefen partnered for the second time in **Fertility Awareness Shabbat** with Yesh Tikva, both in Israel and abroad.

May 2019 – We were thrilled to host representatives from the **Jerusalem Municipality** at the Gefen Center and collaborate on empowering women in Jerusalem.

## **Past programs**

**Adoption:** Gefen offered an Adoption Workshop for Haredi women who realized their only option to become mothers was through adoption. The focus on the group was to empower them to embrace this legitimate option of becoming mothers. The group dealt with the stigma associated with adoption, and the challenges of integrating an adopted child into the Haredi community. The Gefen staff shared in the pain of these women as we realized that the chances for successful adoption in Israel are very slim.

**Two women from the group adopted children recently, two more are in the process of adopting.**

**Pagimoms** was an innovative program offered to new mothers whose babies are in the Premie unit. We help the new mothers reduce their stress so they’re better able to cope, with the hope that when they are less stressed they transfer this calm feeling to their babies.

This is some of the feedback we received:

“Before the sessions, I felt weak, tense, and worried about my baby daughter, who was born prematurely. After the sessions, I felt physically stronger, and more relaxed. I felt powerful, and able to cope with the difficulties that lay ahead. The sessions ended with relaxation methods that left me feeling calm and serene for the entire day and more.”

“An amazing thing happened, at the end the session, I went to nurse my baby, and felt my milk really start to flow!”