

Her marriage seemed destined for destruction — until she summoned untapped reserves of courage, candor, and that inexplicable spark called hope, to begin the hardest rebuilding effort of her life. A true story

Rebuilt

FROM THE ASHES

AS TOLD TO RIVA POMERANTZ

If marriage can be compared to a flower, I would portray ours as a hardy, clinging vine. To this day, I marvel at the swirling, cataclysmic events that shook our marriage to the very core, dashing it against the rocks of no return, only to lead my husband and me on a path that many will find incredible. Here is my story, and although it is a somewhat tragic and painful one, my hope is that you will hear the message of hope and faith that skims through these heart-wrenching words, clinging like a desperate, drowning man to a precious life preserver.

There was certainly hope reflected in our bright eyes when we stood under the *chuppah*, more than twenty years ago. I, a shy, slightly immature young woman, he, an accomplished, excellent young man; we looked ahead to the future with the kind of arrogant certainty that sometimes blinds young people when they take on a prospect as enormous as marriage.

We were hard-working and determined as we began our lives together, but the seams that quickly began to fray had really been bursting even while we dated, though I had ignored all the warning signs.

It started subtly, at first. I was too wasteful, too clumsy, too messy, and the *cholent* was always overcooked. Why couldn't I be more punctual, less outgoing, and more refined? I tried to please him, I truly did. After all, what woman wouldn't want to please her new husband? But my sincere efforts never raised me in his eyes; instead,

I was met with a barrage of new demands, of new insults and retorts.

I thought it was normal. After all, my mother had taught me that men were demanding and couldn't be trusted. Surely my friends' husbands also critiqued them constantly, also controlled every penny in the slender family coffers. No? Imagine my surprise when one day, after a particularly painful tongue-lashing, I confided to my friend about my husband's behavior and she was shocked.

"It sounds abusive," she flatly declared.

Abusive? My husband?

Babies were born, but instead of casting a rosy glow on our tender little home, the problems grew and multiplied. Now, it wasn't small comments and it wasn't contained reactions. Instead, there was shouting and frequent bursts of anger. There was fear — in my eyes, in my children's eyes, and even in my husband's eyes as I tried to fight back. One night, in a blinding flash of clarity, I came to see the horrible truth: our marriage was an empty shell, devoid of all the dreams we once had had. Both my husband and I were angry, cynical, and utterly spent.

But that stubborn tendril of hope that never seems to wither kept me going. It would get better, I told myself, and finally I got up the courage to see a therapist.

Therapy was different than I had imagined it would be. We talked about my husband's negative behavior, his bullying and intimidation, his curt remarks, and raging fits. But at one point, my ther-

apist said something so horrifying and unexpected that I was tempted to get up and walk out the door without ever coming back.

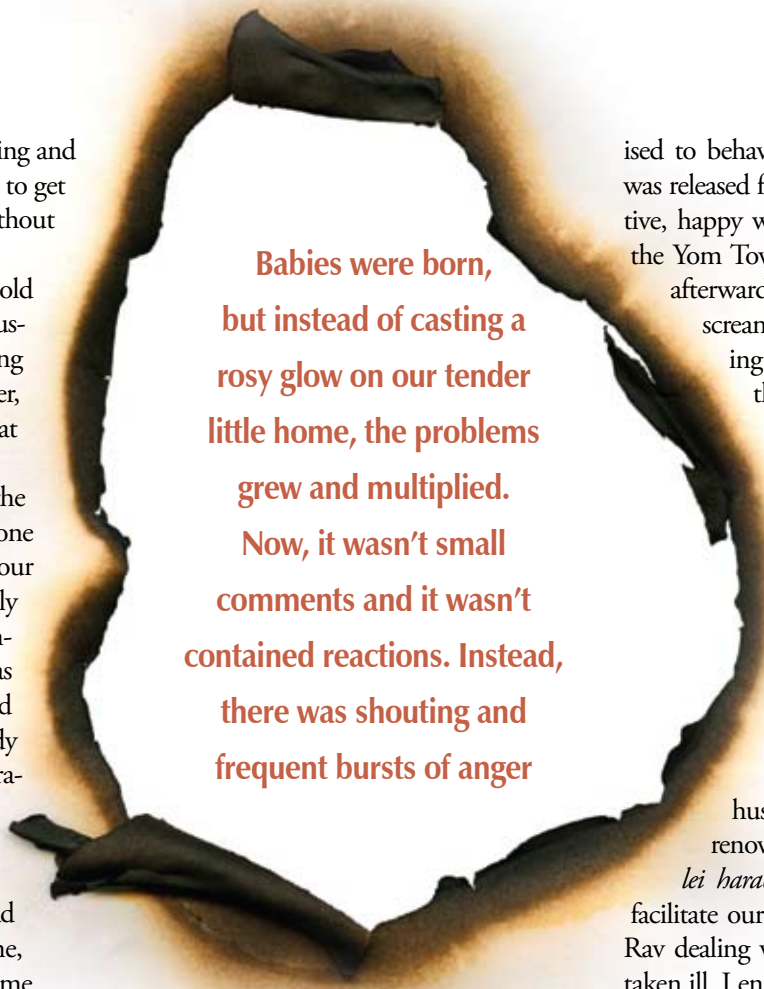
"You know, Sarah," she told me, "you're abusive and your husband's abusive. You're both doing this unhealthy dance together, feeding off of each other. What else do you expect?"

I cannot describe to you the utter shock of hearing someone blame *me* for the problems in our home. My husband was clearly the culprit, destroying our family. It was *his* behavior that was making my children edgy and afraid; our youngest was already beginning to act out, in desperation, from the stress of seeing her parents' agonizing interaction. From the get-go, it had been my husband who had tried to impose his will on me, stifling me and controlling me. What did the therapist mean by *me* being abusive? How dare she! I blocked out the therapist's words and continued, instead, focusing on my husband's evil nature, a subject I freely shared with all who wished to listen. Friends, siblings, uncles, and cousins, all knew about the horrors I suffered at the hands of my husband. Poor Sarah, they all said, shaking their heads with sympathy at the blow-by-blow details I e-mailed out on a regular basis. Of course, these virulent e-mails were circulated by their recipients, further vilifying my husband and his behavior, but I justified it. Didn't he deserve it?

Meanwhile, the verbal abuse began to take a chilling, physical turn. One Shabbos, my husband threw a book at my daughter. Further, escalating acts of violence left me bruised and humiliated. The situation had become, by all estimations, absolutely intolerable.

It was clear that divorce was our next destination.

We separated, but still saw each other occasionally, trying to keep up a front for the good of the children. The divorce proceedings were put into motion, with several devoted individuals working 'round-the-clock to free me from the bonds that tied me to this unhealthy marriage.



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Interestingly enough, my husband never really wanted a divorce. Indeed, he always told me, "If you'd only be a good Jewish wife and mother, our marriage would be better. If only you didn't sit at your computer for so many hours a day, our marriage would be better." But as he saw how his anger was spiraling out of control, he gave in and agreed to divorce me. I think at that point he saw there really was no other choice.

But something strange happened. As the divorce was being finalized, Shlomo took a long business trip overseas. When he called occasionally, to discuss a matter relating to the children, I perceived a change in his voice. He sounded ... calm, serene, healthy. Later, I would discover that he had finally made a decision to go to counseling, something he had long opposed. Hearing the new sound of his voice was shocking to me, and a niggling of doubt entered my heart. Maybe he was changing. Maybe things would get better.

With the *get* so close I could almost touch it, I hesitated. In that moment of hesitation, Shlomo appealed to me to give things another chance. I agreed. He bought me a gift, apologized, and prom-

ised to behave. Again, the bird of hope was released from its cage and beat tentative, happy wings against my heart. But the Yom Tov we spent together, shortly afterwards, ended in disaster, when a screaming fit ended in a frightening episode where my husband threatened me in an extreme way. That was when we both knew we had to call it quits. Things just couldn't work. My children had witnessed their father physically threaten their mother, and their increasingly defiant behavior spoke volumes.

Around this time, my husband and I approached a renowned Rav, one of the *gedolei harabbanim*, and asked him to facilitate our divorce, since the previous Rav dealing with our case had suddenly taken ill. I entered the meeting with high hopes of walking out with a *get* in hand, but instead, the Rav spoke to us gently and encouraged us to work things out. I was stunned and thoroughly disappointed, of course, but in the back of my mind I knew that Hashem was sending us a *shaliach*, a messenger, to bring us to change and growth.

I joined a support group for women experiencing domestic violence, which nurtured me from within but left me with lots of questions. Yes, my husband was violent and our life together was a disaster. Yes, a man never has an excuse to abuse his wife. But the words of that therapist, the words I had tried to block out of my mind with all my might, continued to haunt me. One day, a good, true friend confronted me with loving insight. "Take a look at your part in all this, Sarah," she counseled me. "Stop pointing a finger at your husband and look, instead, at your own role."

Her words penetrated my deep resistance. That very day, I took a deep breath and grabbed my unwitting self by the hand. Gently, painfully, I led myself down the slippery slope of fifteen years of heart-wrenching nightmare. And what did I see? I saw clarity. I saw how, right from the start, I had been critical of him,

unwilling to listen to his ideas or give in in any way. I saw how I had forced his hand, pressing his buttons so that he couldn't help but react. I saw how I had "given" as good as I had "got" and that my mother's "wisdom," long ingrained in me, about mistrusting men, had only served to exacerbate our unfortunate situation. I had embraced my children, my work, and my computer as my constant companions, totally shutting out my spouse, giving him the distinct message that he was unimportant and valueless. I saw that I had never treated my husband with dignity and respect; our marriage had started off on the wrong foot and it had hobbled downhill from there.

My revelation was both traumatic and freeing, and with it

came a sense of urgency to try to change and grow. For the first time in our lives, my husband and I spoke about our issues, about where we were coming from, openly and deeply. We acknowledged the unhealthiness of the "dance" we had been doing for so many years and became willing to try something new. Instead of blaming, we learned to take responsibility for our actions and make significant changes in our personal lives and in our marriage. For the first time, we took a decided step away from the brink of divorce and found ourselves safe, on the other side of a steep cliff.

To this day, I don't know which is more difficult—dealing with divorce and its shattering aftermath, especially on the children, or working through a diseased,

last-gasp relationship and trying to give it a total makeover. I know that the work we have done throughout these years has been decidedly rough, but very rewarding. Our children, who suffered terribly, have finally been given the respectful, safe home they deserve, and their attitudes and behavior have improved tenfold. I have learned to treat my husband properly and tread more carefully around the things that bother him, and the result is a happier husband who no longer feels threatened by his wife. I've learned to care for and nurture myself, getting outside help where I need it. I've substituted other wellness practices for therapy over the years, including massage, good eating habits, and regular *shivrim* on *emunah* and *bitachon*, which are my lifeline.

I'm not going to say it's been a picnic and tell you that we are on the other side of a bright, shiny rainbow. The specter of the dragon still hangs over us, though with every passing year it becomes more faded and less frightening. Yes, my husband still gets angry occasionally, and there are still aspects of his personality that are controlling. But I have learned to live with his faults and he has come to accept mine. In fact, we've reached a point where my husband often knows and understands me better than I even know and understand myself!

As we stood, together, under the *chuppah* of our son last year, my husband remarked to me, "You know, Sarah, at the end of the day I think we've come a lot farther than many couples married the same number of years as we are."

I felt fresh tears spring to my eyes—glistening on top of the tears I'd already shed at this emotional moment of marrying off my son. These were also tears of joy, of a different kind of joy. Because the truth is, I believe my husband is right.

Our story is perhaps unique. Many people question whether an abusive relationship will ever be able to untangle itself and become healthy and whole. All I can say is that I have infinite gratitude to the Ribono shel Olam, who is "*matir assurim*," frees the imprisoned, and "*zokeif kefufim*," raises the bent, and who enabled my husband and me to rebuild a *bayis ne'eman b'Yisrael*—from the ashes of a near-*churban*. ■

