

Dear Margie, Jenny, Donna, Fran and Lynn*,

(*names have been changed)

This past month as our nation was observing National Domestic Violence Awareness Month, I thought back to your struggles and your difficult decisions. It's been ten or even twenty years since you each faced the truth of being in an abusive relationship and I often wonder how you are doing. You were all part of the temple family I served in central Massachusetts and though your stories were unique, they were also so much the same.

Margie, you were divorced, a professional with kids off at college, and your new partner would back you up to a wall and scream obscenities in your face. And then apologize. You eventually left him.

Jenny, you were just out of college and pressured by your boyfriend's family to marry him. After that, he would not let you talk to your parents or sisters or see them. He checked all your phone records. He only let you go to work and come home. Your mom would sneak off to the mall to see you at work. She cried a lot in my office. She tried to get you to go to a women's shelter. Last I heard, you were still with him.

Donna, you told me how your husband made you hang up the phone the minute he walked in the house. He kept all the money and credit cards and gave you a weekly allowance for food that was never enough. One time you needed a dress for a family celebration and he drove you to the store on the way to the party, handed you money, and gave you fifteen minutes to get back with whatever you could find. You were afraid to leave him because you had never supported yourself financially, but you did leave and raised two wonderful daughters on your own.

Fran, you called me from your mother-in-law's house one night. Your husband had threatened you, so you put the children in the car and left. That took great courage. He was a community leader from a prominent family. He went into counseling and got help, life changed for the better, and last I heard your oldest just graduated high school.

Lynn, your husband would belittle you and put you down whenever he got drunk. He had the children in tears and the police were at your door frequently. This went on for years. He threatened to get you committed and take the children away. He seemed so nice to everyone else, as is often the way with abusers. One night he threw a lamp against the wall inches from your head. The police came and you filed charges. He moved out and luckily, moved far away.

You were all Jewish women. You were all intelligent, well-educated, yet unprepared to believe what was happening in your relationships. Because of you, I took domestic violence training in Boston to understand and reach out to women and men in these difficult circumstances.

It is my prayer that your stories will inspire others to learn the warning signs of domestic abuse, which can include : partners who check up on you constantly, taking away the car keys, punishing the children to punish you, restricting access to money, humiliating you publicly or privately, attempting to separate you from family and friends, blaming all his problems on a bad childhood, and more.

I'm in New Jersey now. We have a wonderful group called Project S.A.R.A.H. which educates the Jewish community about domestic abuse. They have a website (something we didn't have back in the 80's and early 90's) and counselors to take calls from those who think they are being abused or know of others who may be suffering from domestic violence.

It saddens me that we need a Domestic Violence Awareness Month. Yet I am so glad that this is no longer a hidden shameful secret in the Jewish community.

The Jewish family is an institution built on dignity, love, and holiness. I hope you each have found that dignity now, and know that healthy kind of love. You each deserve it.

Sincerely,

Rabbi Debra Hachen

To learn more about preventing abuse, recognizing the signs of abuse, teen dating violence, and more, go to <http://projectsarah.info/>

If you or anyone you know needs help, please call 1-973-777-7638. Or call me for a confidential conversation or referrals.

Rabbi Debra Hachen