

Yom Kippur Morning 5777**Repairers of the Breach**

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With the words of the Haftarah still ringing – and with all that is going on in our country right now – I would like to tell you about one of my local heroes. Her name is Lakeisha Phelps. She is a sergeant serving on the Nashua police force.

This July, I met Sgt. Phelps when I found myself by chance at a meeting of the Nashua Community Conversation on Race and Justice. This forum has been going on for about a year and a half, between the local police department and people from the African-American community. The meeting took place after the terrible weeks of shootings this summer, of African-American men by police officers and of police targeted by African-American shooters.

Sgt. Phelps is African-American. She said that when she hears about the shootings by police, she applies one standard: What would a Nashua cop do? And she says, a Nashua cop would never do that. If there were that kind of racism in the local force, she said, it would get handled in the squad room, and it would never get to the point of a gun drawn on the street.

Then in front of her boss, the Chief of Police, a couple other superiors, and several more of her fellow officers, Sgt. Phelps told more about her own story. She talked about being out of uniform one day, walking into a local convenience store with her white partner, and watching the staff there watch her, and follow her out to check if she had really purchased the thing she brought out – and her partner had to intervene. She talked about facing her children, two years old and fourteen, about what it's like when, in her words, people who look like me are killing people who dress like me, and vice versa.

And finally, Sgt. Phelps said: “This was a choice that I made to put this uniform on, and protect people who look like you, you, you, no matter what. I made that decision, and I made that

decision for Nashua.”¹

Sgt. Lakeisha Phelps is what Yeshayahu was talking about in the Haftarah: “Some of you will rebuild the age-old ruins, and raise up again the foundations from prior generations. And you shall be called repairer of the breach, restorers of the path for living.”²

How can we be repairers of the breach? Not just patching but fixing the broken links in our society that this election year has either revealed, or enlarged? I want to talk about what we are going to do, now through Election Day and right after, to take what is right here in this room and shape it up and use it for the repair, the *tikkun*, America needs from us. Because I have hope for our nation, in every sense I spoke about hope last week.³ And because we Jews in America have always risen to the occasion of being a blessing for this nation.

After all that happened this past June and July, I was, frankly, frustrated with my fellow clergy, who for months I have been trying to organize to get off the sideline. So I decided on my own that I would take a day and walk right into difference. Overstimulate and overwhelm myself by walking into every place of difference where I have entree. Since I'm a religious Jew, I decided I would use that as the difference.

I took a stack of *k'lafim*, mezuzah parchments, which have the *Shma* on them, to give out as gifts along the way. “*Adonai Echad*” – I figured that was in itself a nutshell of the issue and a conversation starter. “God is One,” but written in my language. Commonality, and difference. I didn't realize at the time that it's even deeper than that. The rabbis of the Mishnah understand the *Shma* and *V'ahavta* to say that difference is inside each of us. You shall love God *b'chol levavcha*, “with all your heart.” That “all” indicates that even an individual heart is divided,

1 You can hear Sgt. Lakeisha Phelps in her own voice in these two radio pieces by Emily Corwin of New Hampshire Public Radio: <http://nhpr.org/post/officers-and-residents-talk-race-and-policing-nashua> and <http://nhpr.org/post/black-blue-profile-police-sergeant-lakeisha-phelps>.

2 Isaiah 58:12

3 <http://www.rabbijon.net/files/rh5777day2.pdf>

into the part that wants to love God and the part that doesn't. We know division inside us, and have to work with it.

A few other clergy joined me at different points. I started at the Hollis Congregational Church, and asked my colleagues how they deal with me, as a person who reads the Bible but doesn't see in it what is obvious and central to them, the basis of their whole faith.

I went to the Hindu Temple, and asked whether they are offended when we talk about one God, because they have images and altars to many gods.

I went to the mosque, and saw that despite the fact that some 150 people come to pray and share a meal each Friday there, they are afraid of putting up an obvious sign from the road. That's exactly where this Jewish community was more than fifty years ago when this building was built, hidden away off the main streets. We talked even though right now there is so much conflict between Muslims and Jews in Israel.

I went to the New Fellowship Church, a largely black church, and realized how many preconceived notions I still have about who they are. It's because Rev. Newhall and I showed up there, that we were invited to the community conversation where I met Sgt. Phelps.

I thought of this as a publicity stunt, to reach beyond the usual activists and jolt some new people into action. Though I tipped off the Telegraph and public radio, no reporters came – so along the way, it was just Facebook, with you and members of my colleagues' churches.

I wasn't looking for ultimate answers, but to move the ball. I'm a pretty open-minded person, but I discovered a lot of my own ignorance. Each place was so gracious about my gift, and no one shied away from talking about my questions. In each place, we laid the groundwork for something to come – but which still has to come.

There are many divisions in society as a whole to worry about right now. But among us in this room right now, here is what worries me particularly: That a large part of the country will reject the result of the election, no matter which way it goes. That large groups of people like us won't be willing to say, "This is our president." To a degree we've never had before in any of our lifetimes, young or old.

And then we will have no national leadership to hold us together -- much less *bring* us together. In the face of all the hate speech, including against Jews, that has been unleashed and amplified. In the face of divisions of every kind that are not just about attitudes – they have taken lives. This is Yom Kippur; life and death are at stake.

And this matters beyond that, because there are problems that are even harder to solve than those of division and bigotry, problems that can't be solved by better dialogue and listening alone. The questions of Isaiah – about how we care for one another in our society, how we perfect the systems that make sure no one is hungry, or homeless, or uneducated, or abandoned when they are sick. We need as many people as possible in it together, from as many groups as possible, or we will never figure those out.

I worry that the day after the election, most people are going to say, "I'm glad that's over", and stop thinking about any of this. But it won't be over.

Someone like Sgt. Phelps maybe has a leg up, in that she is by definition on both sides of a divide, as a police officer and an African-American. But what makes her one of my role models is that she didn't claim to have *resolved* those divisions. She hasn't settled this by defining herself as someone different, standing a bit to the outside of either of her groups. She is fully an officer, and fully an African-American. The divisions bounce inside her, she lives painfully right in them, and she can talk about them. And at the very same time she goes to work, protecting the society of all those painful differences.

And my point is this: If Sgt. Phelps lives these divisions, and still goes out and puts her life on the line, then surely we in here can face the differences between Democrats and Republicans that has become so bitter in this election.

That's exactly what *we* have to do, as Jews in this community and as a Jewish community. We are positioned for that precisely because this is a room right now full of differences. We have gotten good at some of the differences: traditionally observant and not, believers and atheists, people who are Jewish and people who are connected to them but not Jewish. This has been hard-won, and very painful at times. In many places, that's not one community.

When it comes to our views of America, we do have a lot of common values and a lot of shared family experiences in getting to America and since we've been here. And, although it drives a lot of you crazy, what is going to make us *invaluable* for the wider world is the fact, that people here are voting for many different candidates, for president and on down the ballot.

We are, as I said here last year on Yom Kippur, Jewish liberals and Jewish conservatives and Jewish libertarians and Jewish socialists. Jewishly engaged, and politically engaged.⁴

We can deal with this by avoiding politics all together. Or by just sticking with the lowest common denominator – hunger in the world is bad. But I believe that right now, society needs *groups like us* to step out ahead in talking about things relevant to politics. In a time when leaders are scarce, groups that know how to do difference already are going to have to take the lead.

So I want to teach you something we can do from where we are, something we're able to do and that is proven to work. It goes by a deceptively simple name, coined by my colleague Rabbi Josh Feigelson, who calls it “asking big questions.”

4 <http://www.rabbijon.net/files/yk-morning-5777.doc>

Ask Big Questions⁵ is actually an organization that Josh founded that grew out of Hillel on college campuses. Campuses -- full of really smart, engaged people who can hardly talk to each other about society and the world. Josh's insight is to distinguish between two types of questions, which he calls Hard Questions and Big Questions.

Almost all of the political debate is about Hard Questions. How can the war in Syria be stopped? How should we provide medical care in this country? How can we stop the conflict between police and communities of color?

What makes Hard Questions especially hard are that they require expertise to answer, and very few of us have it. But that doesn't stop us from trying to talk about them. Hard Questions tend to be of interest to particular groups. We each want to persuade each other that our questions are the most important to talk about.

Hard Questions tend to hide other, unspoken questions. So you end up not really talking about what you think you're discussing, and that creates arguments, and then sides.

Big Questions, by contrast, are questions that almost everyone cares about, and *absolutely* everyone can answer – though there is no single answer. Questions like: Who are we responsible for? This is related to, but different from, how should we provide people with medical care, which is a Hard Question.

Through his research, Josh has come to see that Big Questions tend to bring people together and strengthen relationships, even when there is disagreement. Big Questions generate conversations. They elicit stories.

Big Questions are exactly the kind of things a community like this is built to talk about. The different vantage points we have are an asset. We discover surprising things about each other,

5 <http://askbigquestions.org>

commonalities we didn't realize and sometimes fascinating stories behind our differences.

Asking Big Question starts with the connections we already have and flexes them, and makes them stronger. Big Questions get us doing exactly what a congregation like this is set up to do.

Spending time on Big Questions then pays off when you want to work on Hard Questions, which we also have to do.

We don't do this as a group as often as we should, and we never have quite this many people in one place to do it. So I want us to take a couple minutes right now, right here, for an Ask Big Questions exercise.

Here's how we'll do it. I want you to take a couple minutes to talk around you, with one or two people, about this: *What is one of the most important factors that influences how you vote? What is the value or the priority that moves you the most?*

This has to be at least a sentence. If you're going to say “Republican” or “Democrat”, you have to explain why. And talk about where your value or priority comes from in your biography. Was it from a family member, a teacher, something that happened to you, something you read? If you are with children and think they already know these things from you, don't assume – it's quite possible you've never told them these stories. If you want, you can ask each other questions – not objections or criticisms, but just probing.

(We spent about two minutes doing this, nearly five hundred people talking.)

See? We talked about politics, in the synagogue, on Yom Kippur, and we survived.

Now for real, this kind of conversation requires more than a few minutes. But I hope even in this teaser you heard something interesting, and richer than the fact that some are voting for

Republicans and some for Democrats.

This afternoon during the break, we will continue this conversation, which is relevant to this election but really to any election.

And I think our society is hungry for talk about Big Questions. I have data on this. It's the more than 95,000 people who have watched just in the last two weeks a clip of a rabbi asking a Big Question to a candidate for president on on national TV.⁶ And the fact that eight months later, that exchange was mentioned in four of the nation's largest newspapers just in the past week, in the lead-up to the second debate. A question, by the way, I told you about here in my sermon last year on Yom Kippur morning.

So what do we need to do at this point, right now – specifically as a Jewish community, in the face of divisive rhetoric, violence and suspicion between groups, and the upcoming election?

We need to use the fact that this community does have political differences differences and make ourselves a model of asking big questions. I realize that should be one of the paradigms for Shabbat sermons and discussions that flow out of them. These should be the conversations we have around Shabbat dinner tables, from now to Election Day and after. We should flex our connections, and use them in these new ways.

If you're not working on one of the Hard Questions of this year, at work or volunteering or in political action – be a Big Question magnet. Take a lunch break or grab some coffee with a colleague of a different faith or from a different place. When you meet someone who is interesting and has a different background or expresses a different viewpoint, ask them the question we talked about. Ask where their political values come from.

6 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g9kMTOj8B9g>

This is also what you should do when you come to the CROP Walk on October 30.⁷ You and I will be together with hundreds of people from other faith communities around the area, raising money and awareness about hunger in Nashua and around the world. It is a tremendous opportunity to be in a friendly place of difference, to get in conversations along the walk with people you don't know about a Big Question. In fact, how about we pass one out, create a conversation piece for the walk?

In a week and a half, on the Shabbat of Sukkot, we're going to pick up one of the connections I made from my days of walking into difference. We will welcome a few leaders from the Islamic Center of Greater Nashua along with their guest teacher, an imam from Florida, so we can learn and ask questions about Islam, something most of us know very little about. I'll tell you more another time about why this is exactly what a Sukkah is for, in the model of Avraham and Sarah.

We need to start here, at the easiest points, points where similarity is easy to find and many people like each other, and begin to find ways of talking about difference that are also in the room. We have to use ourselves as a lab to explore difference. Then we can take that out, as I am constantly saying – to other groups and other relationships where the dynamic of similarity and difference matters. To questions around skin color, sexual orientation and gender identity, to questions around who comes into this country, to questions of anti-Semitism. To divisions between Democrats and Republicans.

And whatever you do, vote on November 8. Do not give that up. Do not let anything that is happening divert you from the miracle of our freedom, from the memory of ancestors who were denied their voice by tyrannies. Vote from excitement, or hope, or strategy – but vote. That booth, with its curtain and its room for one person, is like the Holy of Holies. And say a blessing in thanks for our freedom.

⁷ <http://nashuacropwalk.blogspot.com>

It will take us more than a few weeks to Election Day to do what I am talking about, and to build on what we have. This is a project for the medium term. It's not a substitute for the advocacy on the issues we're each passionate about. We must not breathe a sigh of relief after Election Day. Maybe for one day. So I am pledging, to you and to our city, that I will be somewhere on Thursday, Nov. 10, moving this further. Even if it is just me on the steps of City Hall. We must support the work of making this one community, and we need more voices to work on that as soon as the election is over.

People like Sgt. Lakeisha Phelps give me hope. Like her, we here have a profound power to link people together, through painful divisions. “Some of you will rebuild the age-old ruins, and raise up again the foundations from prior generations. And you shall be called repairer of the breach, restorers of the path for living.”

And as Isaiah also said:

If you do away with the yoke of oppression,
 with the *pointing finger*, and *malicious talk*,
 and if you *spend yourselves for the hungry*
 and satisfy the needs of the oppressed,
then your light will rise in the darkness,
 and your night will become like the noonday.
Then you can seek the favor of Adonai,
 and I will set you astride the heights of the earth
 And let you enjoy the heritage of your father Jacob

Ki pi Adonai dibber – For the mouth of Adonai has spoken.