

Purge the Shrine

Yom Kippur, 5785, Morning Drash
Rick LaRue, October 12, 2024

On the second day of Rosh Hashanah, Steve Feldman offered a beautiful drash, anchored around the story of concentration camp prisoners who made valiant efforts to produce calendars, from memory and materials at hand, that would capture the days, particularly the holidays, of the Jewish year. It was a moving example of the value we place on organizing and adding meaning to the short-term cycles of time in our lives.

Today, I am going to talk about long-term cycles of time. There are a few millennia involved, which I will touch upon slightly, but instead I will mostly search for a sustaining anchor for navigating humanity's ups and downs over lifetimes or a little longer. I do so by focusing on the phrase from Leviticus chapter 16, verse 16, then repeated subsequently:

"Purge the shrine."

I grant that this is not your usual Yom Kippur topic!

When I began my online research for "purge the shrine," I came up empty, excepting cites just to the verse. Then, when I googled "Yom Kippur morning drash," one from David Goldston came up in the first batch of results, which prompted me to go to the Divrei Torah section under the Learn tab on Fabrangen's website, where I saw another one from him. In both, he offered acknowledged asides on these very topics. I'll mention them, of course, even as I put the topics front and center.

"Purge the shrine" is the common or perhaps modern translation. Jonathan Saks offers "make atonement" rather than purge, and Everett Fox adds an unsurprising level of complexity and nuance by saying "effect-hyphen-purgation" instead. I am happy to relay that Norman Shore said any of these translations was defensible. I'll stick with the translation we see in our mahzor, Purge the shrine.

We easily see the historical reason for this phrase's use – recalling the shrine, the altar, the Tent of Meeting, and the holiest place at the holiest time of year that are at the heart of why we're here today. And the shrine is where, in theory, we get closest to God. It's the most special of places that warrants elevation, and so merits being sanctified, purified and cleansed. That's the purging.

Of course, we don't focus anymore on the space or location – the shrine. We focus on our own sins and behavior that need forgiveness. Once we've finally exhausted our own list, if we ever do, we are next more likely to move on to the sins of others who we want to hear an apology from. Only then, and not likely even then, might we express an interest in where we offer or hear the apologies, or witness or participate in forgiveness. We have no discernable shrine. And we surely cannot purge the space we find ourselves in at this moment, the New York Avenue Presbyterian Church, where we've rented its sanctuary for High Holidays for some 30 years. Although I suppose we could find a way to do it symbolically, much as we place sins on symbols

of Azazel the goat.

David's aside on this point was from 2020, during covid, when we were all at home for the first time for the holidays. He noted that we each had to determine how to make our usual places of work, entertainment or sharing and receiving news – at our computers – compatible with a dedicated, prayerful space. But then he moved on to the rest of his commentary.

How we use and define these two words, purge and shrine, remain important, but are highly problematic. Purging a place can also be rationalized to include purging different people, the "others" who live there. God also showed that even our own people, our own family, who made a mistake or did something by accident, exemplified in Nadab and Abihu, can be purged. (My own aside is that this demonstrates that God is like us, a sinner capable of mistakes or errors, some of which are grave.) And then there's the view too often expressed, "your shrine is in the way of my shrine, so I'm knocking it down, or at least want to knock it down." Humans have always been nasty and brutish over the millennia.

That has never changed and never will change. We don't have to accept it without trying to mitigate its worst manifestations, but we are always going to be in need of forgiveness for reasons large and small, both individually and collectively. So, while it may be presumptuous for God, which was David's aside from 2013, to want us to observe a "law for all time" (verse 29), it can be equally or more presumptuous to think we don't need it; we have ever-lasting reason to atone for our sins, our own positive purging.

Our challenge today is that our klal and our shrine continue to grow larger and larger. Our klal – our community, or really communities, that we touch and are touched by – not only include Jews uninterested in gathering together in a symbolic Tent of Meeting, but also include non-Jews as well. Today, we literally can interact with anyone around the world with an internet connection or even cell phone. We rub shoulders with them virtually, and our actions – whether physical pollution and violence or our spiritual or intellectual antagonisms – affect plenty of people who would not step into our Tent of Meeting. So our Shrine is now the entire world, which we need to cleanse and treat respectfully. We need help as well as atonement to connect our own behavior to our world and to what comes next.

Those of us, like me, who are optimists, are having a hard time right now. It's not easy to find solace in the notion that things have to or sometimes have to get worse before they get better. But that is the case. That is the human condition.

I am a believer in cycles in civilized behavior. But it isn't a pendulum, or an ebb and a flow, or even an arc that bends. In his pitch on Rosh Hashanah, Larry Garber astutely cited Robert Putnam's book, *Bowling Alone*. In one of Putnam's other books, *The Upswing*, which Larry actually recommended to me a few years back, Putnam articulates socio-political cycles that can last a century or more. Critically, in my opinion, he equates the cycles with a diagonal spring or spiral that curls upwards, improving our lot through each cycle. The last upswing began when we turned from The Gilded Age. It roughly peaked after the middle of the 20th Century, as rights were advanced and economic imbalances were being reduced, and has been in decline ever since the backlash to that progress began. I think, or hope, that he is right, and that we are in fact

nearing the next lowest, backward curve of the spring. I offer no prediction of when or how we will reach the next turning point, or even know when we have done so. But it is likely sooner rather later. We actually cannot afford for it to be otherwise.

Purging the world, our shrine, of its impurities may seem daunting if not impossible. But we have no choice. We would do well to think a few generations ahead, perhaps akin to how our immigrant ancestors did, who knew not instant gratification. They had or came here with nothing. Ellen's grandfather cobbled shoes in Boston, and mine started as a bicycle messenger in New York City. They may or may not have liked it. But they did it in order to give a better life for their family, and particularly their offspring. Immigrants today offer this same example, too, as they always have, and our leaders in business and in government would do well to adopt it as a guiding light. We've done it before and I'd like to think we can do it again. We may not be on the upswing yet, but we will be there before too long.

G'mar Tov.