



new london
synagogue



The Heifer and the Pit

We had a beautiful and meaningful weekend last week. We enjoyed a Shabbat kiddush in honour of our ba'al koreh, Lester Kershenbaum, a participative megillah reading with multiple readers and introducers, a wonderful and thoughtful banquet to raise funds for the Separated Child

Foundation (complete with musical offerings from Julian Dawes and Jaclyn Rosenfeld), and then a Cheder extravaganza in the morning (with kids from the BM cohort introducing the megillah, and a carnival for our youth). Phew! I hope you've all gotten some rest.

But this also means we are officially on the path towards Pesach. Last week's special Shabbat, Zakhor, led us into Purim; now, we have a series of special Shabbatot to bring us up to Passover. This week is Shabbat Parah, the Shabbat where we read about the weird and mysterious ritual of the red heifer, a purification ritual for *tumat meit* (impurity associated with death).

My favourite element of this Temple purification ritual is how it, quite bizarrely, impurifies everyone *else*. An impure person comes before the priests, and those who are involved in the process of changing the status of the impure person to "pure" become, themselves, impure until nightfall. It's a switcheroo. The same thing that purifies the impure, impurifies the pure!

It reminds me of a story about mental health. Please excuse me for not knowing the source, but the story goes like this: a man was stuck in a deep pit. He called out from the pit for help. A person heard him crying out and asked what was wrong. Upon being told he was stuck in the pit, she responded: "That's awful. I hope you can find a way out." A priest heard him crying out and asked what was wrong. Upon being told, he responded: "That's awful. I'll pray for you." Finally, a friend came along, saw their friend in the pit, and jumped in.

"What are you doing?" the man asked his friend. "Now we're both stuck here!"

To which his friend responded: "I know. But I've been here before, and I know the way out."

Sometimes, to engage with those in need of help, we have to negotiate with the darkness ourselves. May we all have the strength to know when to allow the pain of others to touch our souls, and may we all feel able to ask for help when we need it.

Shabbat shalom,
Rabbi Natasha