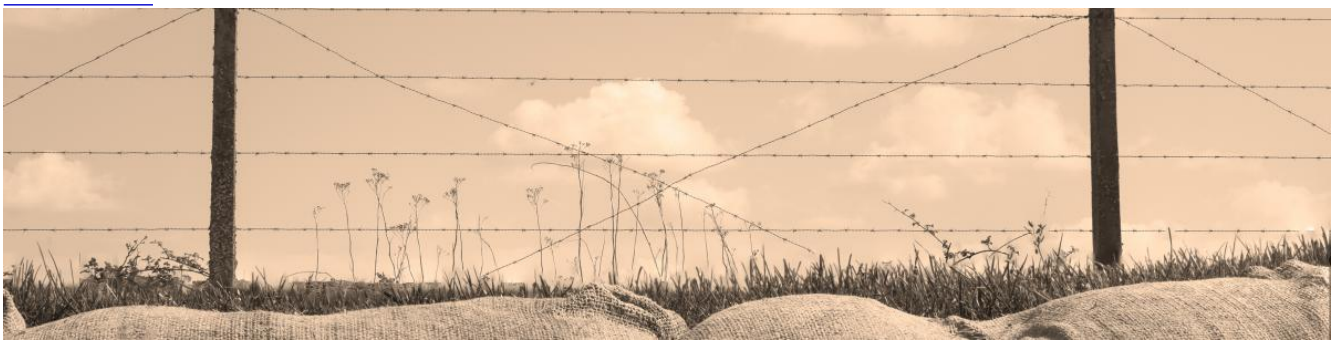
Wars, Power Struggles, Folly--Thoughts for Parashat Vayikra

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Angel for Shabbat, Parashat Vayikra

By Rabbi Marc D. Angel

We are witnessing a tragic war in the Ukraine. Hundreds of lives are lost; hundreds of thousands are fleeing the country in search of safety. The human and financial costs are staggering. It all seems so senseless. Even if Russia totally conquers and suppresses Ukrainian forces, how will it be able to govern a nation that hates it passionately? How will it be able to rebuild Ukraine? How will it be able to salvage the damage to its own economy and the suffering of its own people? Whatever little it may gain from this war will be massively offset by the losses it will endure.

But doesn't the leader of Russia see this? Don't his advisors realize the futility of this war?

Apparently, once the decision has been made to invade and conquer there is no backing down regardless of consequences.

In her powerful book, "The March of Folly," Barbara Tuchman studied the destructive behavior of leaders from antiquity to the Vietnam War. She notes: "A phenomenon noticeable throughout history regardless of place or period is the pursuit by government of policies contrary to their own interests." She points out: "Government remains the paramount area of folly because it is there that men seek power over others—only to lose it over themselves."

But why should people with political power succumb to policies that are wrong-headed and dangerous? Tuchman suggests that the lust for power is one ingredient in this folly. Another ingredient is an unwillingness to admit that one has made a misjudgment. Leaders keep pursuing bad policies and bad wars because they do not want to admit to the public that they've been wrong. So more people are hurt, and more generations are lost—all because the leaders won't brook dissent, won't consider other and better options, won't yield any of their power, won't admit that they might be wrong. These leaders are able to march into folly because the public at large allows them to get away with it. Until a vocal and fearless opposition arises, the "leaders" trample on the heads of the public. They are more concerned with their own power politics, than the needs and wellbeing of their constituents.

The march of folly is not restricted to political power. It is evident in all types of organizational life. The leader or leaders make a decision; the decision is flawed; it causes dissension; it is based on the wrong factors. Yet, when confronted with their mistake, they will not back down. They have invested their own egos in their decision and will not admit that they were wrong. Damage—sometimes irreparable damage—ensues, causing the organization or institution to diminish or to become unfaithful to its original mission. The leader/s march deeper and deeper into folly; they refuse to see the light.

Parashat Vayikra lists various sacrifices that are offered in the Tabernacle, each relating to specific individuals and sins. The Torah discusses "asher nasi yeheta", if the leader shall sin! Happy are those whose leaders are able to admit their own sins and errors in judgment. Impressive is that leader who is able to say: I have sinned, I have done wrong, I am bringing an offering to the Lord in admission of my shortcomings. I will do better in the future.

The Torah envisions leadership that avoids the march of folly by recognizing their responsibility to their people and to God. Such leaders are not ashamed to admit their shortcomings. Such leaders have the courage to change direction—to march not to folly but to real greatness.