DVAR TORAH: BO
Rabbi Dan Moskovitz – based on a drash by Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks

This week's Torah Portion Bo contains a fascinating moment in the unfolding story of the plagues that should make us stop and take notice. Seven plagues have now struck Egypt. The people are suffering. Several times pharaoh seems to soften, only to harden his heart again. During the seventh plague, hail, he even seems to admit his mistake. *"Pharaoh summoned Moses and Aaron. "This time I have sinned," he said to them. "The Lord is in the right, and I and my people are in the wrong."9: 27). But as soon as the plague is over, he changes his mind. "He and his officials" says the Torah, "hardened their hearts" (9: 34).*

And now Moses and Aaron have come to warn of a further plague, potentially devastating, a plague of locusts that, they say, will devour all the grain left

after the hail as well as the fruit of the trees. And for the first time we hear something we have not heard before.

Pharaoh's own advisors tell him he is making a mistake:

Pharaoh's officials said to him, "How long will this man be a snare to us? Let the people go, so that they may worship the Lord their G-d. Do you not yet realize that Egypt is ruined?"

It's a powerful moment, it should be a tipping point. Pharoah's advisors who to this point have been willing participants in his folly and egomaniacal rule are now speaking truth to power. Potentially at great personal risk as that

openly challenge Pharoah's grasp of what is happening around them.

These words should immediately transform the situation, but they don't, and Pharaoh's ego, hubris and narcissism blind him to the sound advice of those that have the greater interest of the nation and not the pharaoh as their chief concern. Further though the text doesn't record it, our own experience in watching similar authoritarian rulers confirms. Those drunk on power are often surrounded by sycophants and enablers that are attracted to the powerful like a flower turns toward the sun.

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks in his commentary on this parsha which serves as a basis for this drash

makes a connection to historian Barbara Tuchman famous book called “The March of Folly”.

For those that have not read the Pulitzer prize winning book. “The March of Folly” chronicles a comprehensive array of examples of leaders who make bad choices in pursuing foolish goals. From Montezuma’s senseless surrender of his empire in 1520 to Japan’s attack on Pearl Harbor.

In her book Tuchman defines folly as the pursuit by government of policies contrary to their own interests, despite the availability of feasible alternatives.

The core thesis of the book asks the great question:

How is it that throughout history intelligent people have made foolish decisions that were damaging both to their own position and to that of the people they led?

By this she did not mean, decisions that in retrospect proved to be the wrong ones. Anyone can make that kind of mistake. That is the nature of leadership and of life itself. We are called on to make decisions under conditions of uncertainty. With the wisdom of hindsight, we can see where we went wrong, because of factors we did not know about at the time.

What she was talking about were decisions that people could see at the time were the wrong ones. There were warnings and they were ignored.

For Tuchman, folly begins with the most fundamental of things: an outsize and self-destructive will to power. Both the governors and the governed can overreach, convinced of their own correctness and righteousness. “Chief among the forces affecting political folly is lust for power, named by Tacitus as ‘the most flagrant of all the passions,’” Tuchman wrote. “Because it can only be satisfied by power over others, government is its favorite field of exercise,” or what she calls the “paramount area of folly because it is there that men seek power over others — only to lose it over themselves.”

In this light, today’s political headlines and drama, I leave it to you to geolocate which political drama my commentary on our parasha illuminates and informs. In this light, the power politics of today

are not something new under the sun but another chapter in the oldest of human dramas: the tension between appetite and the common good, between ambition and common sense.

One example she gives, and that Rabbi Sacks connects to this parasha is of the wooden horse of Troy. The Greeks had laid siege to Troy unsuccessfully for ten years. Eventually they appeared to give up and sail away leaving behind them a giant wooden horse. The Trojans enthusiastically hauled it inside the city as a symbol of their victory. As we know, inside the horse were thirty Greek soldiers who that night came out of hiding and opened the city gates for the Greek army that had sailed back under cover of night.

It was a brilliant ploy, but the Trojan priest, had guessed that it was a plot and warned his people, in the famous words, “I fear the Greeks even when they come bearing gifts.” His warning was ignored, and Troy fell.

Sacks urges us to read the story of Pharaoh and his advisers from this week’s parasha in this context. He sees it as one of the first recorded instances of the march of folly. How does it happen?

One lens is to look at Pharaoh not as an evil man but as a deeply conservative one, charged with maintaining what was already the longest-lived empire of the ancient world, and not allowing it, as it were, to be undermined by change.

Let slaves go free, and who knows what will happen next? Royal authority will seem to have been defeated. A fracture would appear in the political structure. The seemingly unshakable edifice of power will be seen to have been shaken. And that, for those who fear change, is the beginning of the end.

Under those circumstances it is possible to see why Pharaoh would refuse to listen to his advisors that council change or dialogue. They are weak, defeatist, giving in to pressure, and any sign of weakness in leadership only leads to more pressure and more capitulation. Better be strong, and continue to say No, and simply endure one more plague.

We see Pharaoh as both wicked and foolish, because we have read the book.

Some of his advisors who are experiencing all of this in real time can see clearly that he is leading his people to disaster, but he may well have felt that he was being strong while they were merely fearful. Leadership is only easy, and its errors only clearly visible, in retrospect.

Yet Pharaoh remains an enduring symbol of a failure to listen to his own advisors. And a failure to surround himself with differences of opinion to get to hear what he needs to hear not just what he already knows. One of the plagues Egypt and Pharoah endure is Hoshech – Darkness. His blindness was literal and phycological. Pharoah could not see that the world had changed, that he

was facing something new, that his enslavement of a people was no longer tolerable, that the old magic no longer worked, that the empire over which he was presiding was growing old, and that the more obstinate he became the closer he was bringing his people to tragedy.

Knowing how to listen to advice, how to respond to change and when to admit you've got it wrong, remain three of the most difficult tasks of not only being a leader, but of being human.

1. Knowing how to listen to advice
2. How to respond to change
3. Knowing when to admit you've got it wrong

Rejecting advice, refusing to change, and refusing to admit you're wrong, may look like strength to

some. But usually they are the beginning of yet another march of folly.

It seems to me there a great deal of folly in our world today, particularly amongst the political leadership around the globe, perhaps so much it appears to some that we are marching off a cliff. Our parasha councils that we can change course, learn the lessons of history.

Tuchman writes, “History, like humanity, defies clinical categorization. There are two ways in which that which came before can teach us lessons. “One is to enable us to avoid past mistakes and to manage better in similar circumstances next time; the other is to enable us to anticipate a future course of events,” Tuchman wrote. Her verdict: “To manage better next time is

within our means; to anticipate does not seem to be beyond our comprehension." That, at least, may be the beginning of wisdom and the end of folly.