

Off The Pulpit

December 05, 2013

The Danger Of Doing

In Tolstoy's *War & Peace*, General Kutuzov exasperates his comrades by refusing to take action against Napoleon. "Maneuver," they urge him, "outflank, attack!" But the General, except for ordering an occasional retreat, insists on doing as close to nothing as he can. Napoleon on the other hand, is a frenzy of activity. As a result his supply lines are overextended, and the Russian winter devastates his army. Failing to lure the tsar's troops into a decisive confrontation, he is forced to withdraw, beaten, back to France. Tolstoy summarizes Kutuzov's philosophy as "the less you do, the less you err."

In a frenzied world that praises each active principle, Shabbat instructs us on the benefits of inaction. What would the world look like if occasionally we were Kutuzov, if we took Milton's counsel that they also serve who only stand and wait? Stopping is not indolent or lazy; it is taking the time to survey one's life, to step back, to gain perspective.

These days we seem to be doing nothing only when we are

thwarted — in traffic, waiting in line, sitting while the computer loads. But observing Shabbat is a deliberate nothing, a productive nothing if you will. Stop for a day. You will begin again differently, and better.