

## **WALTER WHITE, ALEWITES AND DOING RIGHT**

One of the best shows on television is currently winding down it's last season. I'm referring to Breaking Bad, which details what happens when a mild-mannered high school chemistry teacher discovers he has terminal cancer, and decides to make and sell methamphetamine to make enough money in a short period of time to set his family up after he's gone. The road to Hell, it is said, is paved with good intentions, and in this case it leads our Hero to become the antithesis of a hero.

A perfect example of how far Mr. White, the protagonist of Breaking Bad has fallen is given in the first scene of this final season.

He sits at the counter of a Denny's, alone and looking like a man who has lost everything. He is celebrating his birthday. He is waiting to meet a man in the bathroom where he is going to engage in a transaction involving military grade weapons.

If you find yourself celebrating a birthday homeless and alone at a cheap diner counter, waiting to purchase black market weapons under an assumed identity using drug money, you've probably made some poor choices in life. What a way to celebrate a birthday. You know what's a

good way to celebrate a birthday? A trip to swim with dolphins.

Preparing to reenact the last scene in Scarface, or Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid, not so much.

So, speaking of Birthdays, today is Rosh Hashana, a new year of creation. Happy Birthday, world! May it be filled with peace and happiness and love. But first, let's talk about Syria.

I do so reluctantly, I promise. I much prefer to keep Rosh Hashana a little more joyful. Like 70 percent happy, 30 percent get your house in order. But it seems inescapable and frankly irresponsible for me not to address an issue that should matter a great deal to us as Jews, especially as American Jews.

I'm going to break this down as simply as I can.

First, pretty much everything in the middle east has been a mess for a century, thanks to European interests, Oil, and Peter O'Toole. That isn't to say it would be better if the Turks had retained control. It was going to be a mess anyway.

Since 1970, when a Military coup placed Hafez-al-Assad in charge, the country has been under the rule of that family. They are Alawists, which is a small, secretive sect of Shiite Muslims. They are not Islamists, but rather Arab Nationalists, specifically Ba'athists. Think of it as the Arab answer to Stalin and you get the idea. In fact, the other Baathist leader of note in recent decades was Saddam Hussein.

The greatest ally of Syria under the Assad regimes has been the Country Formerly Known as the Soviet Union. In fact, the naval installation in Syria is the last vestige of the former Soviet Union in the area, and so it is of sentimental and political value to Russia and Putin that they keep their ally and VIP customer, Assad, in power.

Among the other notable allies of Syria is Iran, and Iran's proxy terror organization, Hizb'allah.

Meanwhile, the Assad family has brutalized and oppressed its own people as well as the Lebanese for decades. The Alawites are elevated and given special privileges.

When the Syrian people began to protest and demand change in government like the Tunisians, Egyptians, Libyans, Yemenis,

Palestinians, Morroccans, etc, the Assad regime responded as they always have. Like brutal, conscienceless thugs.

First, the leaders of the protests were not-so-quietly kidnapped, tortured and killed. Then their family members, including a lot of children. They would just dump their bodies on the side of a road when they were done with them.

Eventually, the protesters started shooting back, and, inevitably it became an all out civil war. The political leadership of the rebellion is based in exile in Turkey, and they call their military union the Free Syrian Army. They have numerous groups under their general umbrella but as the situation has become more dire they have found themselves with some less than savory comrades-in-arms. Groups that we as Americans have no business supporting or aiding. Once Assad is gone, if he goes, what replaces him may be even worse. We've seen it before.

But even war has rules, and, despite the failures of the League of Nations and the sad punchline the United Nations has become, there is something to be said for the nations of this world agreeing that there are limits. No biting, no gouging. Fight if you must, but fight fair. And don't slaughter innocent non-combatants.

Assad regime and their Hizballah allies knowingly and purposefully just nerve-gassed 1,500 people, including 400 plus children. For no military reason other than to terrorize.

The Assad regime continues to assert that they are fighting Terrorists. And that's the problem. They're telling the truth. As the war has raged on and the resistance become more desperate, they find themselves allied with groups like Al Qaeda and the Muslim Brotherhood, who's Palestinian franchise goes by the name Hamas.

So, the Fascist Arab Nationalists and Shiite Hizballah backed by Russia are fighting Sunni rebels now joined by and supported by Al Qaeda, Hamas and other Salafist Jihadis.

From the Institute for the Study of War:

As the militias continue to face overwhelming regime firepower the likelihood of their radicalization may increase. Moreover, the indigenous rebels may turn to al-Qaeda for high-end weaponry and spectacular tactics as the regime's escalation leaves the rebels with no proportionate response, as occurred in Iraq in 2005-2006. Developing relations with armed opposition leaders and recognizing specific rebel organizations may help to deter this dangerous trend. (ISW via SOFREP)

Should we enter into this conflict in opposition to the Assad regime, we would be opposing someone very much in need of forced retirement. At the same time, we risk helping, well, some very scary and dangerous people.

Again, the Institute for the Study of War,

American objectives in Syria are to hasten the fall of the Assad regime; to contain the regional spillover generated by the ongoing conflict; and to gain influence over the state and armed forces that emerge in Assad's wake. (via SOFREP.com)

Now, as far as Israel goes, nobody on either side of the Syrian civil war is going to be sending Apples and Honey over the border at any time soon, and there is no doubt that if Israel gets dragged into the conflict the US will have no choice but to follow. So let's pray that doesn't happen for everyone's sake.

#### ISRAEL

Israel has also been placed on alert, with 1,000 soldiers in the Intelligence Corps, Home Front Command, and Air Force air defense units being mobilized. Missile defense units are on alert as well, with Iron Dome batteries being positioned in Haifa, Ashkelon, Eilat, Tel Aviv, and likely also in Jerusalem. Two additional batteries are being repositioned to a currently undisclosed location. Israel also utilizes Patriot and Arrow (Hetz) batteries, which are both being deployed in the north. The limited number of units called up suggests that this is a defensive posture, not a preparation for any offensive maneuvers. Cyber warfare units attached to the IDF have been placed on alert as well. (ISW via SOFREP.com)

I can only say that nobody wants Israel involved, certainly not Russia, the US, or Israel. So we hold our breath and wait for the rest of the world to do something.

While Assad drops sarin on civilians.

Anybody going to step in? Anybody? Russia, these guys are your friends, right? Do you mind getting your boy Assad in check? No?

Hey Arab League, anyone want to step up and take care of your own neighborhood?

My God, He's gassing children. Turkey? Do something! Oh, okay, you're letting the rebel leaders crash in your house while this gets sorted out. Cool. But he's murdering babies. Look, we can't just let this guy get away with this, can we? If we do, we may as well just start nuking everyone because this is the moment when you realize this isn't going to end well.

So let's assume you have to decide what to do. Since you are the first Jewish president, let's look to Jewish tradition for some guidance. Since there's really no good answer, you may as well seek a Jewish answer.

The obvious place to start is the idea of Shalom, of peace. The psalms tell us to "Seek Peace and Pursue it"

“Seek peace and pursue it” (Psalms 34:15). That is, seek peace in its place; pursue it when it is elsewhere (Jerusalem Talmud: Pe’ah 1:1

We use that verse a lot; especially when it suits our needs as pacifists and opponents of violence and war. Yet we should understand that verse in context. It speaks of the God of Israel fighting on behalf of the righteous, saving those who call to Him for help against evil.

Come, my sons, listen to me; I will teach you what it is to fear the LORD.

Shun evil and do good, **seek peace and pursue it**.

The eyes of the LORD are on the righteous, His ears attentive to their cry. The face of the LORD is set against evildoers, to erase their names from the earth.

They cry out, and the LORD hears, and saves them from all their troubles. The LORD is close to the brokenhearted; those crushed in spirit He delivers.

(Psalms 34, JPS)

Now, if you were here last night, or even if you weren't, I spoke about how God exists among us, and our tradition teaches that God works through us, through human beings when we consciously choose to be instruments of his will.

What do we do, when we are faced with two evils?

We must tread carefully, and we must not get involved as a combatant in Syria. There's no possible good outcome...things are Breaking Bad over



there. The best we can hope for is that Assad will fall and we will have some influence or at least goodwill with whoever takes over.

I understand why the President would be hesitant to get involved. I do. Among other things, his numerous political enemies would have no hesitation to cry out "He's supporting Al Qaeda! He's fighting on the side of the Muslim Brotherhood!

The disillusioned progressives that thought they had elected the Messiah will cry "He's starting another war!!! He's abandoned us! He's just like the last President!

So I don't think we can fault the POTUS for seeking international involvement, or national consensus, but he won't get it. He's going to ultimately have to lead. I don't envy him.

What I think we should be disappointed in is the way our response will be debated and second-guessed and put off until it will matter very little what we do.

If we are going to referee this civil war, and it seems like it might be the morally right thing to do, to step in and stand up for children and non-

combatants since we can do it without putting a single American at bodily risk, then we should act the way we would want God to act. Swiftly. Definitively and from the Heavens. Against either side.

From a purely selfish, Jewish point of view, think about the message this sends. If Assad and Hizballah will use chemical weapons against his own people, do you think for a moment they would hesitate to deploy them against Israelis? And the message the world is sending by inaction and disengagement is that they can do so without fear of reprisal. If you are Israel, the lesson is that the next open major war will likely be the last, and it is going to involve nuclear weapons, so you need to consider whether you want to use them first or as a response to a sarin gas attack on Tel Aviv.

That's the danger of inaction. It sets the stage for far worse things to come. If we do nothing, we may as well drive to Denny's and wait by the urinals.

In a place where there are no Human Beings, strive to be a Human Being. Never is that more urgent than in war.

How can we possibly justify supporting even in an indirect way people just as twisted and violent as the Assad regime? How can we even risk giving them the smallest amount of aid and comfort?

In the world's present state, it is permissible to flatter the wicked for the sake of peace (Midrash: Yalkut Shimoni, Vayishlach 133).

The Talmud also instructs us on what it means to pursue peace, not just seek it. You must sometimes do things that you didn't think were obligations, like taking care of non-Jews, even if they aren't your friends.

We must provide livelihood for the non Jewish poor as well as for the Jewish poor; we must visit non Jews when they are sick as well as our fellow Jews when they are sick; and we must attend to the burial of their dead as well as the burial of our own dead; for these are the ways of peace (Talmud: Gittin 61a).

We must recall the lesson of Maimonides who said "I will destroy my enemies-- by making them into friends".

Now, I am hardly naive about salafist jihadis. But we cannot concern ourselves with them. We need to concern ourselves with the widows and the poor and the sick who are in no position to advocate for themselves. over 100,000 dead civilians, 200,000 refugees and 500,000 displaced civilians.

I firmly believe that Assad's regime will ultimately fall, even if it doesn't happen quickly or bloodlessly. And there is little doubt that there will be some nasty characters involved in the next government.

And there are plenty of reasons to do nothing, compelling reasons. I still remain convinced that the right thing to do is for the nations of the world to react swiftly and forcefully when any combatant force crosses the line, thin though it be between the horror of war and mass-executions of non-combatants.

So should the US intervene? Yes. And No. And Yes. But any response should not be limited to the US and it shouldn't be the subject of political debate.

As we speak, the Assad regime, taking a play from the Hezbollah manual of operations has repositioned their military among civilian populations, and relocated their chemical weapons so that any US response will unavoidably involve civilian deaths. Remember what happened in Lebanon during Israel's 30 day war against Hizballah? The same thing will happen in Syria.

On the subject of wars between nations and needless bloodshed, [Rebbe Nachman] said: "Many foolish beliefs that people once held, such as forms of idol worship that demanded child sacrifice, etc., have disappeared. But, as of yet, the foolish belief in the pursuit of war has not disappeared." He used to ridicule certain scientists, saying: "What great thinkers they must be, what ingenuity they must possess to invent amazing weapons that can kill thousands of people at once! is there any greater foolishness than this to murder so many people for nothing?" (Chayei Moharan 546).

I fear we should have acted, but we missed our opportunity. But since there is little chance of this working out well anytime soon, we will have other opportunities to do the right thing. We just need, somehow, some way, to figure out just what that is. In the meantime, I am going to try to reserve judgement on those who have to make decisions when every decision is wrong, and pray instead that they have the strength and courage to lead. Let us rather look into our own hearts and pray that we have the courage to do the right thing and even more, to know always what that is.

God grant us all that blessing.