

WHAT I THINK THE DILEMMA OF SYRIA SHOULD MEAN TO US

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Sometimes life imitates art.

This season's theme of HBO's *The Newsroom* revolves around a fictional alleged incident that occurred about three years ago. Already this is somewhat odd because virtually all of Aaron Sorkin's plot lines are based on actual incidents, things we've all been following in the news. (In truth, the plot is not entirely fictional being loosely based on a story-line from the Vietnam War era.) The running theme dramatizes the issues involved in reporting Operation Genoa, a purported incident of the use of chemical weapons by American forces in Afghanistan. It involves every member of the newsroom, from the President of the News division on down to the interns, researching the veracity of the claims. Did it really happen? Should the network act on the allegations? What are the ethics involved in such reporting, especially considering the potential consequences of making it public?

For those of you who have yet to watch the most current episodes, I won't spoil it for you. Nevertheless, as I'm sure you can all figure out by now, it stuck me as beyond coincidence that just as HBO is building up the tension as to what actually might have happened, all of a sudden we start seeing on television footage of actual chemical warfare. The real thing. Not a hypothetical situation, but actual images of the bodies of men and women and children, all non-combatants, being laid out on the floor, all victims of some neurotoxic weapon (very possibly the same sarin gas mentioned in *The Newsroom*). And precisely because their bodies showed no signs of trauma, no gun shot wounds, no dismemberment, no blood, just seemingly sleeping bodies, the images -- at least for me -- were even more disturbing. Especially the pictures of the children.

But the irony continued. Just as on *The Newsroom* dramatization, in our reality-based newsroom the principal players -- world leaders, The United Nations, news agencies -- all are immersed in a pursuit of the truth. Are these bodies truly victims of chemical warfare? What was it? And who did it? Who is responsible for the deaths of these innocents? Is it the Syrian government, as they desperately try to break the resolve of the rebels? Is it, as the Russians contend, the rebels themselves who have used the chemicals on their own people in a mind-boggling attempt to sway world opinion? And above all, how shall we -- the outsiders, the ones watching it from afar -- respond? What are *we* to make of all this?

It would make for great TV if it weren't so true. But, alas, it is true. And the similarities with Aaron Sorkin's TV show notwithstanding, I just can't in good conscience compare what's happening in Syria to art.

As a Jew it is hard for me to see these images and not think of the mobile killing vans and the gas chambers of the *Shoah*, taking people's lives by poisoning the very air they breathe. As a Jew I can't help but wonder if this isn't like early 1942 when news of The Final Solution made its way to the Allies? And as a Jew I can't help but wonder why it takes so long for good people to do something? Of course, just as life imitating art is a truism, so too history repeating itself is something that happens over and over again yet never in quite the same way. Each situation is unique with its own particulars. And this is hardly a holocaust. But even a genocide in

microcosm diminishes us all, no matter who or where: Cambodia, Kurdistan, Rwanda, Bosnia. It is not enough to be disturbed by the photos. It is not enough to be deeply troubled by the news. As Jews we are taught to respond as human beings. Being a by-stander is just as much a player as are the perpetrators and the victims. This may be the most important lesson we Jews have to give the world from Auschwitz. It's not just about them. It's also about us.

I remember about twenty years ago as the news of the atrocities in the Balkans started to make its way into our lives, as we became increasingly aware of the horrors of southern Europe. Sitting at the kitchen table with my brother and his wife Karen, Larry and I expressed our horror at the pictures on the front page of the New York Times. "This is horrible," one of us said. "Why doesn't anyone do anything?" the other of us added. My sister-in-law put down her cup of coffee, looked incredulously if not judgmentally at us and said, "Why don't *you* do something about it?"

And that, of course, is the question. How are *we* to respond?

To be sure, it is not necessarily the role of this nation to interfere in the business of another nation. Civil war, by its definition, is a local, even personal conflict. But when the damage is (as we are now wont to say) "collateral", when the victims are non-combatants, and more than simply being in the wrong place at the wrong time they are "targeted", and the casualties are in the thousands, then is it not immoral *not* to intervene? I am increasingly uncomfortable with those who embrace and proclaim a morality of justice, and yet then sit at the sidelines of history and watch. Indeed, as horrific as is the news of the chemical attacks, where have we been for the estimated one hundred thousand others who have died from conventional weapons?

No doubt there is much to be said for non-intervention. There are those who see this as another Iraq. Not that the situations are identical. On the contrary, we know for a fact that weapons of mass destruction not merely exist in Syria but have been used. Experts agree: Syria has the most advanced chemical weapons program in the Third World. According to the French government, their stockpile is estimated to be greater than 1000 tons. And according to British sources, there have been at least 14 chemical attacks perpetrated by the Syrian government since 2012.

Nevertheless some argue, a military option, no matter what it is, will likely result in a destabilized Syria and no one can say with even the slightest certainty what (or who) will emerge in the stead of the Assad regime. And with the Arab Spring continuing to feel more like "Stormy Weather" throughout the Middle East and North Africa, as David Brooks points out, this could easily turn into a pan-Arabic "devolution".

This is clearly one of those "pick your poison" scenarios. On the one hand we have an unscrupulous tyrannical despot who has no qualms murdering his own people, and on the other hand we have his opposition who is supported by religiously-based terrorist organizations. Peter Berger, CNN's National Security Analyst, writes:

"The country is de facto breaking up into jihadist-run 'emirates' and Alawite rump states. It is the scene of a proxy war that pits al Qaeda affiliates backed by Qatar and Saudi Arabia against Hezbollah, backed by Iran. Whoever ultimately prevails in this fight is hardly going to be an ally of the U.S. It's an ungodly mess that makes even Iraq in 2006 look good."

But is it moral to stand still? Can the ultimate impact intervention might make, including on our own nation, outweigh the commanding voice to stop the killing of innocents? In her

Pulitzer Prize winning book, "A Problem from Hell: America and the Age of Genocide", Samantha Power -- who is now the US Ambassador to the United Nations -- wrote about American tendencies in the past century when confronted with genocide:

"Despite graphic media coverage, American policymakers, journalists and citizens are extremely slow to muster the imagination needed to reckon with evil. Ahead of the killings, they assume rational actors will not inflict seemingly gratuitous violence. They trust in good-faith negotiations and traditional diplomacy. Once the killings start, they assume that civilians who keep their head down will be left alone. They urge cease-fires and donate humanitarian aid."

Mind you, Power made this observation ten years ago, but as Mr. Berger notes, "[Hers] is an almost perfect description of how the United States has acted [towards Syria] over the past two years..." And from where I sit, America is head and shoulders above the rest of the world when it comes to taking moral action. Whether we like it or not, this is who we are.

A "red line" has to be just that. As Max Fisher of the Washington Post wrote last week:

"The whole idea that there are rules to war is a pretty new one: the practice of war is thousands of years old, but the idea that we can regulate war to make it less terrible has been around for less than a century. The institutions that do this are weak and inconsistent; the rules are frail and not very well observed. But one of the world's few quasi-successes is the "norm" against chemical weapons. This norm is frail enough that Syria could drastically weaken it if we ignore Assad's use of them, but it's also strong enough that it's worth protecting."

I agree.

I have no doubt that the consequence of military intervention will create a whole new set of problems (and dangers). And, like so many of you, I too am conflicted as to what should be the appropriate action to take. A full-scale invasion would be a disastrous mistake, I believe. And even a very limited targeting of the Syrian government leaders, as was suggested by Bret Stephens of the Wall Street Journal, would I fear create more problems than it would solve. It would be great if someone could just go in and capture Assad and his leaders and put them on trial, as has Tom Friedman of the New York Times has suggested, and -- in a best case scenario -- destroy all Syria's chemical weapons while we're at it. Because, the truth of the matter be told, the real enemy here are the neurotoxic weapons themselves. For all of this, I readily admit, is something like a scenario out of Mission: Impossible. And yet, can the political challenges be so great as to stop us from doing what is morally right?

To be sure, America must be very careful not to confuse power with permission. Simply because we *can* doesn't mean we *should*. But when the evidence is irrefutable, how can we not (especially when everyone else is afraid to do something)? "With great power comes great responsibility," said Voltaire (and not "Uncle Ben" of *Spiderman* fame). By the same token, it was Thomas Jefferson who cautioned, "I hope that our wisdom will grow with our power and teach us that the less we use our power, the greater it will be." Indeed. But what then would be the correct time to use that power? "If not now, when?" To my thinking, power can only be considered "great" when it is employed in the service of those who cannot defend themselves, especially when they are victims of nations who abuse their power.

In short, this is not about political correctness or geopolitical expediency. This is a moral question.

Perhaps even more to my point, the issue before us is not just about them -- that is, what our leaders should do. Rather, how should *we* react? Are we just horrified by the events or do they evoke a genuine experience of pain? Might we feel differently if the chemicals were dropped on Israel? Does it make a difference that the victims might also be enemies of our people? Is it genocide only when it happens to us or to people we like or are even indifferent to? When it befalls our enemies, should we not care as well? The Torah commands us to assist the ox of our enemy when it has fallen on the road. Should we care any less for the children of those who hate us? It is worth pointing out that the preeminent mitzvah in Judaism that trumps virtually every other commandment is *Pikuach Nefesh*, the saving of life. And the tradition is unequivocal: It makes no difference if the life being rescued is Jewish or not.

And notwithstanding the risks this may necessitate from our own American military, well we know that no one faces greater danger as a result of military intervention in Syria than our people in Israel. As Prime Minister Netanyahu noted, Iran is watching all of this "very closely". How the world responds to mass murder in one place could have a significant influence on how Iran thinks about attacking Israel. Indeed, the last several days have seen thousands of Israelis standing on-line to get their gas masks. For well we know from the Gulf War experience and Saddam Hussein's "Scud" missiles, Israel stands to be a very potential retaliatory target. Iran has already threatened as much. Yet this does not change the resolve of Israel's population in the face of genocide. Etti Vashdi, who was visiting Jerusalem with a group of Orthodox Jews from the small community of Elyakhin, in the country's center, said:

"Enemy or not enemy, it's horrific. I hope they would feel the same about us, but I'm not sure."

To be honest, I'm not sure either. But, as our tradition instructs us, it shouldn't make a difference.

In tractate *Menachot* (37a) of the Babylonian Talmud there can be found a very odd halakhic question. As the story goes, a man named Pelamo approaches Rabbi Judah with the following question: "If a man has two heads, on which head does he place his *tefillin*?" Annoyed by what even this great sage thinks is a ridiculous hypothetical, Judah reflexively banishes Pelamo from the *Beit Midrash*. But, in typical Talmudic narrative style, no sooner than Pelamo leaves does another man enter and declare, "My wife just gave birth to a two-headed firstborn child. How much must I pay the Kohen for his *Pidyon*, his redemption: 5 *selaim* or 10?"

Clearly inspired by this halakhic scenario, the theme is carried over into the rabbinic commentaries. The Midrash presents a similar situation of a two-headed person (or persons) who has normal siblings. Following the death of their parents, the siblings argue that the conjoined twins should only receive one portion of their parents' estate equal to that received by any one brother; the conjoined twins, on the other hand, argue they are in effect two people and should receive two portions. The case was brought before King Solomon. (You remember, the king who is especially wise in discerning how to deal with competing claims). But even King Solomon was stumped. After praying for insight, he ordered that both heads be covered with hoods (so they couldn't see each other) and then to pour scalding hot water over only one of the heads. When he saw that both heads cried out in pain, he concluded that the two are in fact one because any stimulus applied to one would be felt by the other (*Beit Hamidrash*, Vol. IV, pp.151-152, Jellinek Ed.).

The lesson of this midrash has traditionally been applied to the connectedness of the Jewish people. We are an *Am Echad*, a unified people (even if we don't always act like it). We feel the

pain of the other. We are one body. But does not Torah teach us that we are also one humanity? We were created from a single human being to teach us that we are all connected.

When Hillel posed "If I am not for myself, who will be for me? But if I am only for myself, what am I?" I do not believe that he intended these two questions to be understood as opposite sides of the same coin? They are not mirror images of each other. The first phrase -- "If I am not for myself, who will be for me?" -- asks a *pragmatic* question. If I don't take care of my own, can I really count on others to do it for me? Survival of "self" has always taken first-place in the Jewish list of values. But, the second part of Hillel's dictum -- "If I am only for myself, what am I?" -- is an *existential* query. If I care only about myself, if my concern is only for myself and no one else, then -- and here's the operative phrase -- *mah ani* / what am I? What kind of human being am I?

In his book *The Altruistic Personality*, Samuel Oliner (father of our own David Oliner) sought to determine -- particularly in the wake of his own experience in the Holocaust -- not why people do evil but rather why they do good. Why would people take such risks, even that of their own lives, for the sake of others, even strangers. He concludes:

"What distinguished rescuers was not their lack of concern with self, [or their desire for] external approval or achievement, but rather their capacity for extensive relationships -- their strong sense of attachment to others and their feeling of responsibility for the welfare of others..."

And that is the point of the midrash. The question the midrash is posing is not whether we are like conjoined twins. That is taken for granted. Rather, the midrash is challenging us: Do we think of ourselves as being connected to others? Do we feel the pain of others as our own?

I believe that the ultimate *redemption* or *demise* of this world depends singularly on how we answer that question.