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### Planned Obsolescence

Recently Apple admitted that iPhone software updates caused the phone to intentionally operate at a slower speed in order to preserve the lifespan of the phone's aging battery. This admission launched a renewed look into something that is referred to as planned obsolescence. Planned obsolescence is an artificial and intentional limited lifespan in order to increase repeat sales. If my iPhone is designed to work efficiently and effectively for fifteen or twenty years, then I will only buy a new phone after fifteen or twenty years. But if performance is notably compromised after two or three years, then I might buy several phones in the course of a decade.

Although planned obsolescence is mostly discussed in the context of computer technology, the term goes back to 1924 when General Motors, struggling to remain profitable in a nation already saturated with cars, realized that they could introduce new models each year of every car they made with minor changes in features and performance. This too was a way to encourage more sales and to encourage advances in automotive technology as well.

Obsolescence, planned and unplanned, occurs in the history of ideas as well. Professor Haym Soloveitchik has noted that Rambam, writing in Egypt, completed his Mishneh Torah, a perfectly crafted recapitulation of the entirety of the Oral Torah and halakhah, intended to almost carve into stone for all time a systematic and comprehensive and perfectly clear cut halakhah – at the very same time that, unbeknownst to him, the Tosafot in Northern Europe were exploding that conception of halakhah through their application of dialectical reasoning to Talmud study. Mishneh Torah was obsolete as soon as it was written.

Rambam never intended his magnum opus to become obsolete but there is an intentional obsolescence in this morning's Torah portion with implications that extend to every facet of Jewish life.

In our parasha this morning, on the cusp of the exodus from Egypt, God showed Moshe the new moon in the sky and gave the Jewish people our first mitzvah, the mitzvah of noticing and marking the new month.

**הַחֹדֶשׁ הַזֶּה לָכֶם רֵאשִׁית חֳדָשִׁים רְאשׁוֹן הוּא לָכֶם לְחֹדְשֵׁי הַשָּׁנָה:**

This month shall mark for you the beginning of the months; it shall be the first of the months of the year for you.

There had been mitzvot before. The first people were commanded not to eat of the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge. And Avraham was commanded to circumscise his family. But this mitzvah was the first one given to the Jewish people and was a precursor to a system of six hundred thirteen mitzvot that both secure our Jewish identity and serve as the salient content of that destiny. Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik wrote with great force about the dignity and stature that are inherent in being a commanded being. A mitzvah creates a relationship between a finite and mortal human, and his or her Divine Commander. Even the more so does a system of mitzvot bind the Jewish people in relationship with God.

And this growing system of mitzvot, spreads from its humble beginning in the observation of a sliver of moon in the Egyptian nighttime sky. This occurs in the midst of the ten plagues and ultimately supplants the ten plagues as a foundation for Jewish faith.

Rav Yitzhak Hutner pointed out that the ten plagues serve as a bridge between the ten Divine statements with which the natural universe came into existence, and the Aseret HaDibrot - the so called Ten Commandments - that introduced God's moral order to the world. The ten plagues serve, within this scheme, as proof of God's continued involvement and direction of creation and that creates a framework for the Aseret HaDibrot.

This is a compelling model, but I want to suggest something different this morning. For all that the ten plagues dominate the story of Yetziat Mitzraim, for all that they may have prepared the Jewish people for God intruding into their lives just seven weeks later at Sinai, the plagues were eclipsed in Jewish religious consciousness and were therefore eliminated when Moshe told the story of Yetziat Mitzraim to the next generation of Israelites in Sefer Devarim, the Book of Deuteronomy. The ten plagues are not mentioned once in the Book of Deuteronomy.

After forty years of life with Moshe in the desert, and after forty years of regular mitzvah observance, the plagues faded in their importance as a foundation of faith. The normative life of Torah and Mitzvot created a relationship with God that was more stable and more secure than one based on wondrous miracles and awesome and awful punishments.

This is a demonstration of a dynamic that Rambam describes in his "other magnum opus" his Guide for the Perplexed. You're only supposed to have one "magnum opus." There are two types of Jews - those who think Mishneh Torah was Rambam's magnum opus and the who think it was the Guide. I say he had two.

In the Guide, Rambam explains that the Torah is valid for ever, but the Torah also had to be relevant and comprehensible to the audience that first received the Torah at Sinai. Why was the Torah not given in English? Because none of the Israelites at Sinai spoke English! Why does the Torah include animal sacrifices? Because, Rambam writes, every religion worth its salt back then had animal sacrifices and our ancestors would not have taken the Torah seriously if we had received a religion without animal sacrifices. God doesn't "eat" the sacrifices or "enjoy the smell" the way the Greeks believed, but elements were put into the Torah just to accommodate our primitive faith when we received the Torah.

The elimination of the plagues from Sefer Devarim is a proof from within the 40 year timeline of the Torah itself that this dynamic operates, but it can operate far beyond the realm of sacrifice and plague.

One of the challenges that contemporary Jews face when engaging seriously with the Torah is accommodating ourselves to ways in which the Torah's rules seem antiquated. For many of us gender dynamics is the most glaring example of this phenomenon. The Torah describes and legislates a patriarchal society in which women are presumed to be under the authority of their fathers or husbands. And then, the Torah itself and later generations of Jewish women celebrate counter-examples of assertive women who shape Jewish history like Miriam, and Devorah, and Avigail. And then the Talmudic rabbis legislate adjustments to Jewish law, each time for the sake of greater security and greater dignity for women. And then, one thousand years ago, Rabbenu Gershom outlawed polygamy. Two hundred years ago there was not a single school anywhere in the world in which Jewish girls were taught Torah. Today, every segment of the Orthodox community, from the most progressive to the most insular understands that girls must be included in formal Torah education of some kind.

This broad sweep of Jewish history is not a betrayal of the Torah, but a fulfillment of the potential that was within the Torah all along. The Torah is eternal, but also had to be relevant to its original audience. It is our job to figure out what form the Torah will look like in our generation. The plagues taught our ancestors about God's power and God's concern for them. And then we didn't need them anymore as a central focus of our religious identity.

We still need to answer why the plagues demand so much attention in the Torah if their importance to our faith began to be eclipsed even before they had ended. To answer this question, I return again to the words of Rabbi Aharon Shmuel Tamaras, who reminded us that God is not a magician or performer who makes signs, wonders, and miracles in order to win the applause of an audience. Rather, all of God's actions that are recorded in the Torah have an educational purpose. The purpose of the ten plagues was to demonstrate, once and for all, that the systemic oppression that our ancestors suffered in Egypt is unacceptable and unjustifiable. God hates slavery so much that God intervened into history and overturned God's own laws of nature to prove that fact to humanity. Our ongoing relationship with God is fostered and maintained by a life of Torah and mitzvot that began with the first mitzvah in Parashat Bo. Our knowledge that our struggles on behalf of freedom are undertaken with God's endorsement comes from the example of the ten plagues.