

JewishTimes

VOL. XVIII NO. 24 – SEPT. 11, 2020

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EGO & TERROR

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JewishTimes

THE JOURNAL ON JEWISH THOUGHT

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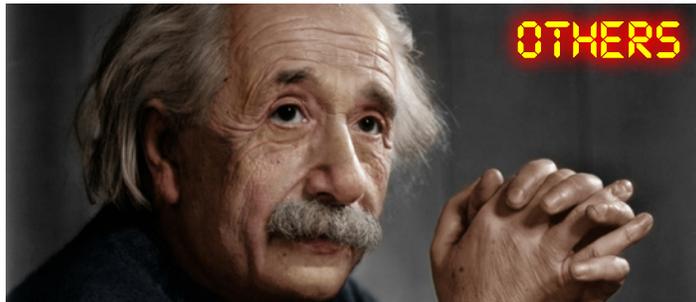
RABBI REUVEN MANN

Rabbi Mann draws on a unique Holocaust account to expound on the weekly parsha.

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RABBI MOSHE BEN-CHAIM

911 wasn't new. In the Tower of Babel story, God addressed the psychology behind man and monuments.



"A hundred times every day I remind myself that my inner and outer life are based on the labors of other men, living and dead, and that I must exert myself in order to give in the same measure as I have received, and am still receiving."

ALBERT EINSTEIN

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Almost 20 years later, victims and first responders who were murdered and forfeited their lives, still live on as a vital, eternal lesson.





EGO & TESHUVA

ME

PERFECTION: Divorcing from our egos is the key to being forgiven and finding happiness



RABBI MOSHE BEN-CHAIM

Rosh Hashanna and Yom Kippur are precious times designated to recognize God as Master of the universe, and of our lives. Hearing the shofar daily, we are to awaken ourselves from our year of sleep, immersed in less-than-perfect attitudes and earthly pursuits. It is also a time for atonement, which requires us to seek forgiveness from others, make amends, and plot a new course for higher goals.

Talmud Rosh Hashanna 17a: “One who forgoes his feelings and tendencies (maavir al midosav) is forgiven for all his sins.” This refers to one who was wronged by another, but withholds his tongue and does not seek the justice he rightfully deserves. He forgoes his own feelings. What is the great quality of such a person that entitles “all” his sins to be forgiven? This week’s parsha says, “When one hears the words of these curses, he may secure himself immune to them, thinking, “I shall have peace (be safe), for I follow the counsel of my heart” (Deut. 29:18). Man dupes himself into believing “What is true—how reality works—is determined by what my heart feels.” Man’s ego propels him to be convinced that the world revolves around himself.

The “me” has been the source of innumerable tragedies since man existed. Cain killed his brother Abel as Abel’s sacrifice earned God’s favor and generated jealousy in Cain. Cain found his tarnished self-image intolerable. His solution should have been to accept blame and improve himself. Instead, he took the path of many other ego-driven people and attempted to “change reality” to conform to his subjective world view. Cain murdered Abel to remove the problem. This need for approval finds alternative expressions:

(CONT. ON NEXT PAGE)

Saul succumbed to the people, instead of following Samuel's directives from God. In stark contrast, "And Moses was a very humble man, more so than any other man on the face of the land" (Num. 12:3). Moses possessed the most accurate assessment of the human being: man is nothing compared to God. And Moses had no remorse for his accurate low self-estimation. For Moses' focus and ultimate joy was found in pursuing God's wisdom, not the self. God designed man to attain happiness only through directing his wellspring of energies towards wisdom. All other pursuits frustrate man, as he either finds little or no satisfaction in short-lived pursuits, or there is pain associated with such pursuits. But wisdom is endless, it is an area in which man can expend all his energies, what we call "satisfaction" and bliss.

Torah enters only into the person who is humble and low. "All who are thirsty, go to the water (Torah)" (Isaiah 55:1). Torah is equated to water: just as water seeks the lowest depth, Torah enters one who is low. Why is this? It is because ego and knowledge of God are mutually exclusive. Only when one abandons the pursuit of the self, will his energies be free to focus on God's Torah. Maimonides cites a case of a wise man who recollected his happiest day. He was on a ship, when some low life urinated on him. The wise man felt no need for revenge. He sensed no pride, although grossly mistreated. He was elated that he finally reached a level where he possessed a state of such humility.

Ego propels many of our actions and feelings. Whether we cut off another in traffic, cheat in business, have the last word or be the first to talk, interrupt others, or slander. We have learned to place ourselves over all others. Of course, when many do this, conflict arises and relationships are torn, or worse.

What is Torah's perspective? It is to view God and His wisdom as our primary value and focus. In this manner, nothing else matters. We realize the uselessness and destructive-

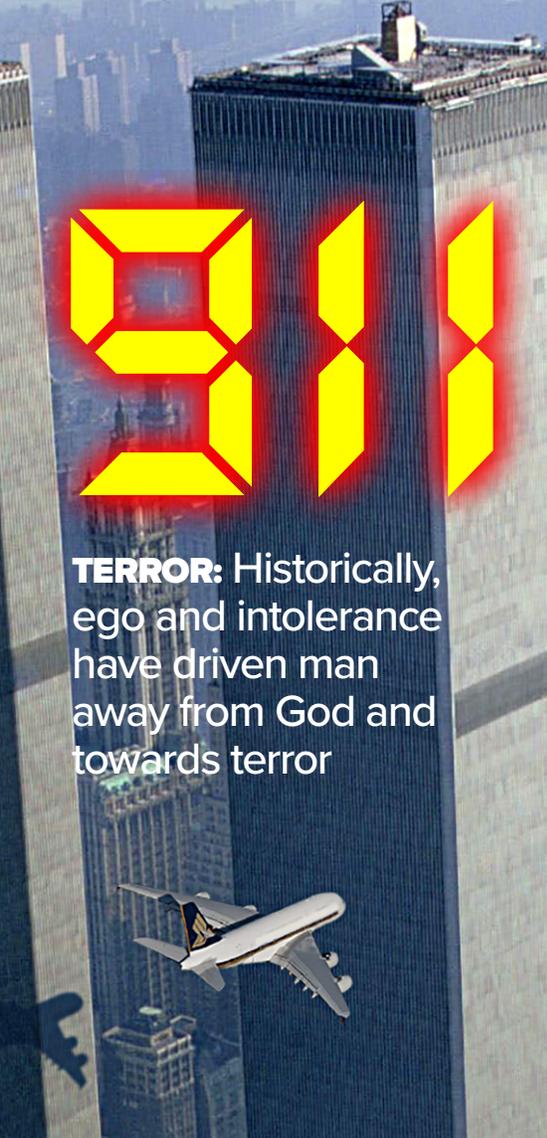
ness of petty values. Competition with others is only a game we play in our heads, to "win"...in our heads. Much energy, and lifetimes are wasted in seeking to bolster our self images.

The problem for most is stepping outside the "me" framework. As most people have not experienced this perfected perspective, and as society teaches only ego and fame, how do they make the move? One method is to study how all attempts to gain ego do not contribute to happiness. We might temporarily feel high. But our lives are not improved, as we see we must sustain future attempts at the same vanity. This method must go hand in hand with the greater method: Torah study. Once enamored by Torah's brilliance, all other pursuits pale in comparison. When one finds a treasure chest, his few dollars are meaningless. So too, when one appreciates Torah brilliance, personal matters are viewed with disdain.

"One who does not act on his feelings and tendencies (maavir al midosav) is forgiven for all his sins." One who develops such appreciation for Torah and its Author, is no longer attracted to the self. His critics don't ruffle his feathers, as he no longer values anything but wisdom. He is not compelled at all to defend himself from accusations. He no longer lives in the world of the social, but in God's world of beautiful ideas. His eyes light up with every new discovery. Wisdom is his life. As such a person has removed himself from the self, from social concerns and competition, he has abandoned the primary drive of his previous sins: focus on self-worth and the intolerance of passing on lusts or aggression towards others. One's demand to satisfy one's desires (ego) causes sin. But one who is removed from the self has abandoned his ego—the cause of his sins—and is no longer in need of God's corrective punitive measures. He is forgiven. May we all attain this level. ■

One's demand to satisfy one's desires (ego) causes sin. But one who is removed from the self has abandoned his ego—the cause of his sins—and is no longer in need of God's corrective punitive measures. He is forgiven.





TERROR: Historically, ego and intolerance have driven man away from God and towards terror

RABBI MOSHE BEN-CHAIM

Much can be learned from history and from an intelligent analysis of the Torah and psychology.

"And they said, 'Let us build for ourselves a city and a tower with its top reaching the heavens and let us make for ourselves a name, lest we be scattered upon the face of the entire Earth (Gen. 11:4).'"

Babel's Tower builders sought to make a name for themselves that would also survive their own generation, as they said, "Let us make for ourselves a name" (Ibn Ezra, Gen. 11:3). Man constructs monuments to attribute eternal value to his beliefs or values. Man thinks that just as a monument will stand eternally, so too will the subject of its testimony. But man errs thinking his beliefs might be validated through a structure. Man is correct to value only that which is real. But something false is not rendered true by building a testament.

"With its top reaching the heavens"

This expresses man's desire to create something unsurpassed by others. In other words, "Ours will be noticed more than others." Man doesn't change. Today is no different as countries erect structures taller than others, as if the tallest structure "wins." Sadly, too often the sentiment heard about 9/11 refers to the towers, not loss of life, thereby validating man's awe of structures.

The vicious attack of Americans in the towers—beacons of democracy—displayed the terrorists' need for human recognition, just like Babel. If erecting a monument gains recognition for the builder, destroying that monument is a rejection of those values and proclaims the terrorists' values. But if God were truly man's sole concern, human recognition would be irrelevant. Islamic extremists are clearly preoccupied with man, valuing a social agenda over the Divine.

The tower builder, and destroyer—the terrorist—both, are insecure individuals where opposition is intolerable. This intolerance is a denial. It is generated by the unanswered questions other religions pose to one's own religion. One thinks, "If other views exist, perhaps my view is invalid, and maybe even rejected by God." The terrorist's solution is "might makes right." The terrorist murders, since reason will not validate his views. As he does not follow a life of reason that will allow him to abandon his beliefs when shown to be false, he is propelled to preserve his view as right by silencing all opposition.

But this self doubt exists only in the minds of those who follow unproven views. In contrast, the Jew is not threatened by any number of religions and philosophies. He has proof. He knows all other religions are impostors. The Jew is calm, content and confident. The only times the Jew kills, is in defense, for punishment, or to remove irreparable cultures that would mislead others. But even in war, we extend peace before using force. And all that we do is based on God's commands. These commands are all validated by Revelation at Sinai. This one time in history, God revealed a religion. It is from here that the Jew derives his complete conviction in Torah, and realizes all other religions are false. God proved which religion is His; human opposition is futile.

An additional insecurity is displayed in the phenomenon of "culture." What causes so

many people to follow a singular path, even though outsiders clearly see the flaws of such a culture? The desire for social acceptance propels people of all cultures not to deviate from their neighbors or their ethnicity. The ego is powerful, and most people act on it daily. If others like us, this satisfies our egos, so we follow others to gain their applause. Throughout time, men and women of all generations followed their peers to attain and maintain a pleasing self image. Mankind has thereby forfeited the pursuit of truth, in place of the pursuit of the self. This is why most cultures exist. What adds to the phenomenon of culture, is the trick of the mind that whichever culture I am part of, must be correct; "all others are wrong." This is another reason why the builders of Babel's tower said, "Let us make for ourselves a name."

"Lest we be scattered upon the face of the entire Earth"

Babel's builders ascribed to "strength in numbers." The fear of being scattered expressed their dependence on masses. The insignificance of the individual is bothersome. But the Jew understands that truth is worth following, regardless of few adherents. Babel's culture was attached to people, not truths. Thus, if scattered, they felt this compromised their philosophy.

From the opening chapters of Genesis, God has long ago revealed the workings of the human psyche. Monument building and destruction present nothing new to the Torah student. When misguided and living based on emotions and not intellect, man will act today as he did back then. Building the tallest monuments, man strives to eternally validate his beliefs and culture. Following the pack and never questioning the religious status quo, he derives his much needed self image. And since such men cannot reason and are propelled emotionally, when confronted by other views, these cultures will continue to execute innocents, unprovoked, in the name of "proving" themselves right.

We await the prophet's words, a day when truth is sought over all other considerations. When this occurs, when intelligence is invited to religious discussions, it will naturally emerge that God created only one mankind, and only one religion...a religion that never needs an update. History proves this is so, and intelligence says it must be. ■

Never Lose Hope

RABBI REUVEN MANN



This week's Torah portion, Nitzavim-Vayelech is very relevant to the High Holiday season that's just around the corner. Rosh Hashanah initiates the Ten Days of Repentance. Because this is a time of judgment when all of mankind come before Hashem, it is most propitious to examine our ways and do Teshuva.

Yet many people have a low opinion of themselves and despair of their ability to improve. Parshat Nitzavim, however, is optimistic and assures us in no uncertain terms that the Jews will be successful in their quest to return to Hashem. "It will be when all these things come upon you—the blessing and the curse that I have presented before you—then you will take it to your heart among the nations where Hashem, your God, has dispersed you; and you will return unto Hashem, your God, and listen to His voice, according to everything that I command you today, you and your children, with all your heart and all your soul." It is therefore essential that we always retain an outlook of hope and self-confidence.

The Rabbis reinforce the mindset of never giving up in physical and spiritual matters. They say, "Even if the sharp sword is on one's neck, he should not despair of divine mercy." Most of us have heard many accounts of Holocaust survivors and their experiences under the Nazis. The other night on the History Channel, I heard a unique story that illustrates many profound teachings of Judaism. I was not able to get all the details, especially the name of the storyteller, whom I will refer to as the Survivor.

This person, while still in his teens, was carted off to Auschwitz. The harsh conditions took their toll, and he soon became ill. During that time, word went out among the camp inmates that there was to be a "selection." This always caused great fear, as all the prisoners had to line up before the Nazi "doctor," who would determine who would live and who would die.

In this instance the "physician" making the call would be none other than the infamous Joseph Mengele, the ultimate doctor of doom. The Survivor stood in line until he faced the "angel of death", who took one look at him and waved him to the left, which everyone knew meant the gas chamber. As he started to walk in that direction he could not reconcile himself to his fate and determined that he must do some-

thing, anything, to alter the outcome somehow—tiniest chance though there was.

Bear in mind that the chances of anyone surviving a Nazi decree of death were essentially non-existent and required an immensely unlikely miracle. But that is precisely what can happen when the "sharp sword" is pressing, and you retain the courage and determination to take action, no matter how desperate.

The Survivor stood once again before Mengele. He pleaded with him, saying that he was young and could still do much work for the Germans. Then, without having any idea why he did so, he blurted out that his father was a great scholar and journalist who had written significant books. (He would later say that he could not explain what motivated him to tell Mengele about his father. Why would that Nazi be impressed or care about his father's stature, and how would that nugget of information help keep him alive?)

Suddenly, however, Mengele leaned back and concentrated. Sitting next to him was a Jewish doctor who served as his assistant. He turned to the Jew and asked him, "Do you know this man's father?" In point of fact he did not know that prisoner or his father, but he understood what was happening. He turned to Mengele and told him that of course he knew about his father, who was a very significant scholar.

Mengele then sat back and gave the matter more thought. He asked the Jewish doctor that if he were inclined to give him the Jewish prisoner as a gift, would he want him? The assistant responded enthusiastically in the affirmative. The generous Angel of Death then graciously turned over the inmate to his Jewish assistant as a "gift." The sharp sword was removed from the condemned Jew's neck through an amazing miracle. The Jewish doctor took care of the Survivor, and both managed to survive the Holocaust. Many years later, the Survivor attended a medical conference in France where his Auschwitz savior was present. The doctor recognized the Survivor immediately, although his appearance was completely changed from the Auschwitz days. The two had a tearful and joyous reunion.

The Rabbis say that if one saves a single life, it is as though he saved

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an entire world. That is also true when it is your own life that you save. This story illustrates that we must never give up and always make efforts, no matter how remote and hopeless they appear.

This also applies to the spiritual realm. "Even if a person has been a sinner all his life and does Teshuva at the end, it is effective." We should be concerned about ourselves and others at this time. If we are trying to bring someone back to Judaism, we should never give up or say that we have done everything possible and now it's hopeless.

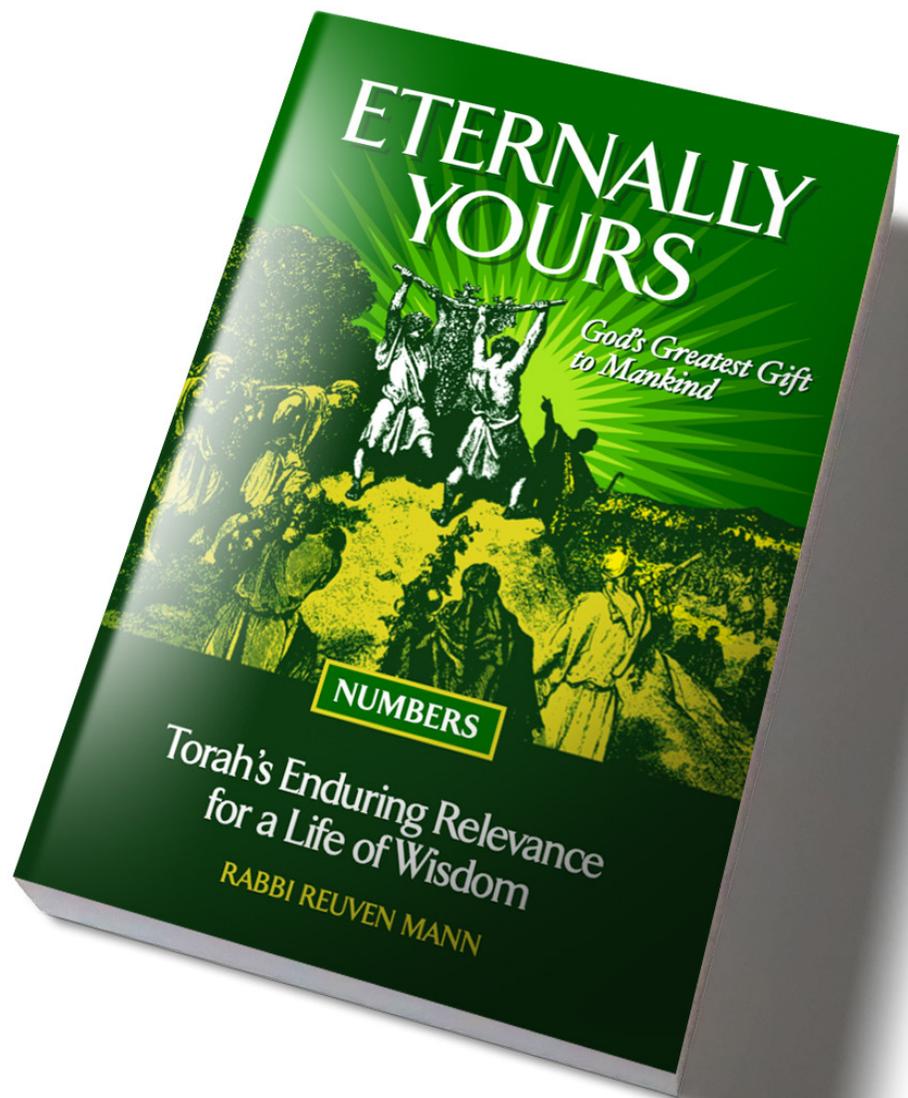
We must make that extra effort even when we feel the sharpness of the sword upon our necks. For the mercy of Hashem is always there for those who seek it. May we merit to achieve it.

Shabbat shalom. ■

Dear Friends,

In this time of "social isolation," we should seek ways to avoid boredom by staying occupied with meaningful activity. The world of virtual reality allows us to stay in touch with friends and attend all kinds of classes available online.

But that can only take you so far. Comes Shabbat and Yom Tov, and you need books, especially on the parsha. I personally recommend Eternally Yours on Genesis <http://bit.ly/EY-Genesis> and Exodus <http://bit.ly/EY-Exodus>, and my newest one on Numbers <http://bit.ly/EY-Numbers2>. They are easy to read, interesting, and thought-provoking conversation starters. I am especially interested in your feedback and hope you can write a brief review and post it on Amazon.



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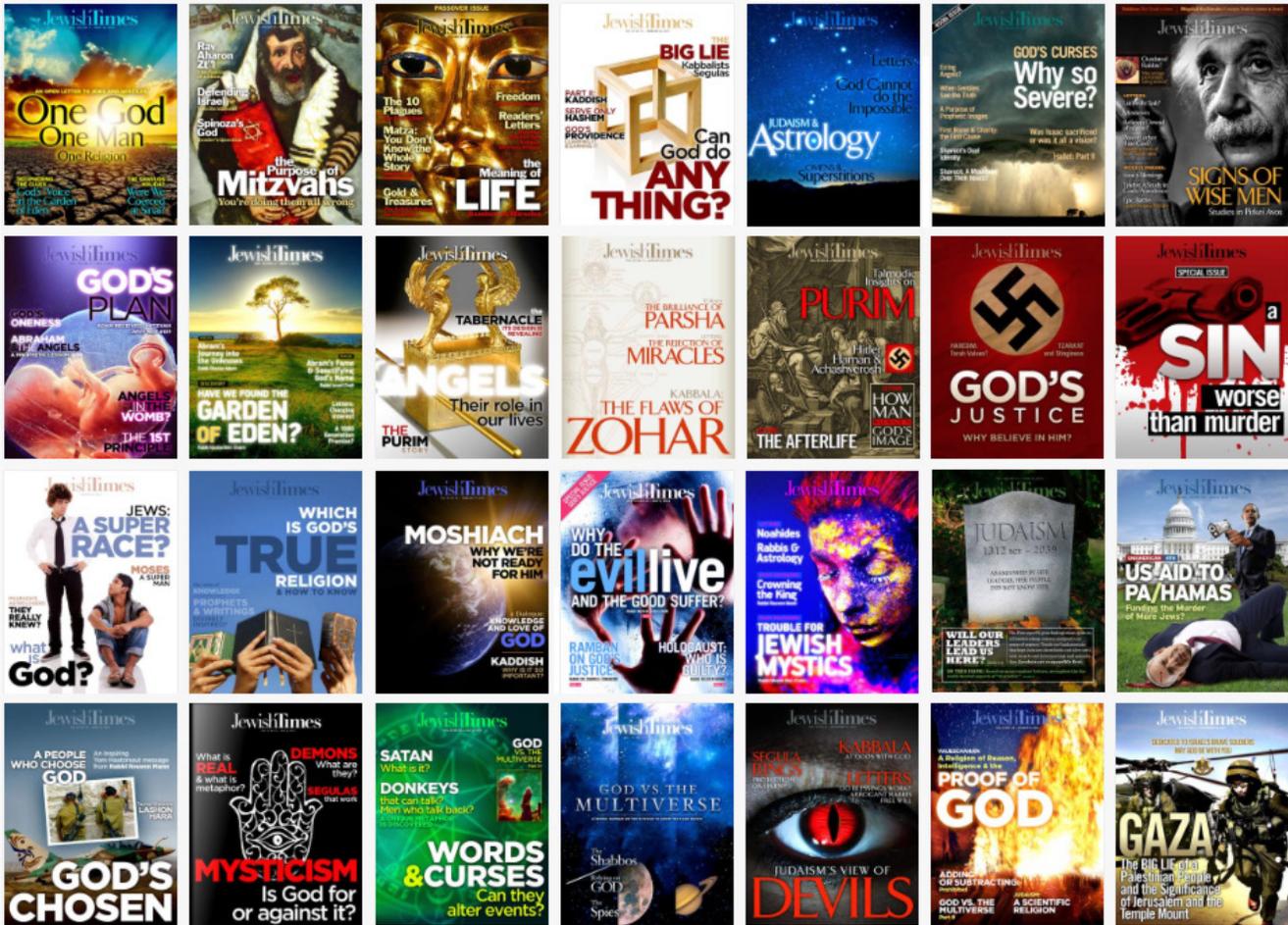
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