

What Is It Good For?

By Rabbi Joshua (fearlessly known as The Hoffer) Hoffman

In the latter part of parshas Shofetim, we are presented with the laws that apply to a Jewish army when it goes out to war. This section begins with the general statement, "When you go out to war against your enemy you shall not fear them, for the Lord your God is with you, Who brought you out from the land of Egypt" (Devorim, 20, 1). We are then told that before the war begins, the Kohen who is especially anointed for this task approaches the soldiers and tells them not to fear, because God walks in front of them, and that He will battle their enemies for them and save them. Next, the officers inform the soldiers that if any of them has built a house and not inaugurated it, or planted a vineyard and not yet rendered it permitted through the four year process mandated by Jewish law or who has betrothed a woman and not married her, should return home from the battlefield. All of these circumstances, apparently, could generate a feeling of anguish or concern within the soldier, thus eroding his courage during the battle, and weakening the resolve of his fellow soldiers as well. All of these regulations then seem to be ways of preventing the soldiers from developing any feelings of fear before they go out to battle.

The Torah then adds one final declaration that is made to the soldiers before initiating their battle: "Who is the man who is fearful and fainthearted? Let him return to his house, and let him not melt the heart of his brothers, like his heart" (20, 5). Rashi on this verse mentions a dispute over its meaning. Rabbi Akiva explains it in its simple sense as referring to someone who is too terrified of war to be able to stand in the battle array. Rabbi Yosei HaGelili, however, says that it refers to someone who is afraid due to sins that he has committed. Moreover, all the other categories of exemptions, according to R. Yosei, are only cover-ups for the person who fears because of his sins. Someone who sees a soldier returning before the battle has begun will assume that he is returning because he built a house, planted a vineyard or betrothed a woman and did not complete the process. In this way, the man who leaves the battle front because he fears due to his sins will not be discerned as leaving for that reason, and will be spared embarrassment.

What manner of sin is it that the retreating soldier fears about? There is a dispute in the Mishnah over the identity of this sin. According to R. Yosei HaGelili, who Rashi cites on our verse, the sin is of the nature of speaking during prayer, between the prayer of 'Yishtabach' and that of 'Yotser', while according to Rabbi Yosei, the sin is of the type of a person being married to one of the categories of women to whom one may not be married, although the marriage, ex post facto, is halachically binding (e.g. kohein gadol married to a widow, etc.). The gemara then asks what is the practical difference between the view of R. Yosei and R. Yosei HaGelili, and answers that the difference is in regard to a rabbinic prohibition, such as speaking between the laying on of the tefillin shel yad, the hand phylactery, and the tefillin shel rosh, the head phylactery. According to R. Yosei HaGelili, a soldier would return from the front due to such an offense, while according to R. Yosei he would not return for such an offense. Although, as we will see, the Rambam brings, in his halachic compendium the Mishneh Torah, the opinion of Rabbi Akiva, this does not necessarily preclude the opinion of Rabbi Yosei HaGelili. We do, in fact, find it brought in the Code of Jewish law, the Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim, 54, 3: "One who speaks between 'Yishtabach' and 'Yotser' has a sin in his hands, and returns due to it from the battle front." The formulation of the Shulchan Aruch is a bit strange, because this compendium only includes halachos that apply to current times, and the laws of war are not in practice today, for reasons we will not enter into here. We would therefore have expected the Shulchan Aruch to write simply that it is forbidden to speak between 'Yishtabach' and 'Yotser.' Why mention that one would return from the battlefield for this sin? I believe that an answer to this question can give us a deeper insight into both the nature of war and the nature of prayer, as prescribed by the Torah.

As we have pointed out, the Torah begins its presentation of the laws of war with an admonition against being afraid during the war. The announcements for certain people to leave the front are also for the purpose of avoiding any circumstance that would lead one to fear during the course of battle. In fact, there is a prohibition of fear during battle, mentioned by those authorities who enumerate the six hundred thirteen mitzvos. The Rambam, in his Mishneh Torah, Laws of Kings, 7, 15, writes that once one enters the battlefield, all his thoughts must focus on the war, and he must not be afraid of anything. He writes further that anyone who fights with all his heart without fear and his intention is only to sanctify God's name is assured that no injury or evil

will befall him. Rabbi Eliezer Azkari, a sixteenth century kabbalist, in his work which enumerates the mitzvos, Sefer Haredim, cites a set of verses in parshas Eikev as the source of this prohibition of fearing during a war, and extends it to refer to life in general. We read in parshas Eikev, 'Perhaps you will say in your heart, "These nations are more numerous than I: how will I be able to drive them out? Do not fear them. (Devorim, 7, 17-18) He quotes from Rabbeinu Yonah that even if a person sees distress about to come upon him he should not fear, because God's salvation is near. Thus, just as a soldier at the battlefield is to place his trust in God as he goes forth to fight his battles, so too should every person trust in God in relation to his own private battles in life, and not fear.

In the context of the Torah's prohibition of fear during war as explained by the Rambam and expanded upon by Rabbeinu Yonah and the Sefer Haredim, we can understand why an interruption in prayer is singled out as a sin for which one would leave the battlefield. Although some commentators are of the opinion that it only for an interruption between Yishtabach and Yotser that one would go home, based on kabbalistic reasons, others write that any interruption during prayer is included, and the reason this particular example is given, perhaps, is because, at times, it is permitted to interrupt one's prayers at this point. The Sefer Haredim follows the second opinion, saying that even if one speaks at this point, it is a sin for which one must leave the battlefield. He then cites a midrash: Rabbi Eliezer the son of R. Yosei said, 'one time I was walking on the road and I found Eliyahu and with him were four thousand laden camels. I asked him what they were carrying, and he said, anger and wrath. Why? To take vengeance with anger and wrath from he who speaks between kaddish and Borchu, between one blessing and the other, between one section and another, between amen and yehei shmeh rabbah, between the blessing of redemption and the amidah. And not only that, but his prayer is not heard before God, as it says, "and Yaakov did not call me." And whoever concentrates in his prayer, his prayer is not returned empty, etc.' If one compares the words of the Rambam regarding the concentration one must have when going out to battle with the words of the midrash, brought by the Sefer Haredim as a support for his opinion regarding interrupting one's prayer, there seems to be a remarkable corollary. Add to this the extension of the prohibition of being in fear given by Rabbeinu Yonah, and we can begin to understand the formulation of the Shulchan Aruch that was mentioned earlier.

The Rambam says one must concentrate completely on the battle and not think of other things, but intend to sanctify God's name through one's actions during the war. The midrash as presented in the Sefer Haredim directs us to avoid any interruption in our prayers, so that our thoughts will be directed to God. A person who is not able to direct his thoughts to God during prayer, then, is lacking the proper orientation toward God that is required for one to concentrate his thoughts effectively on the battlefield. According to Rabbeinu Yonah, this concentration of thought applies to all of life's challenges. One must never fear that any trouble will overcome him, no matter how bad the situation appears, for God's salvation can come at any time. In this context life can be seen as a constant battlefield, on which man must develop an inner sense of trust in God. This sense of trust is cultivated through prayer. Someone who is distracted in prayer by the various elements surrounding him does not have the kind of single minded determination required for developing the inner sense of trust in God that is needed to succeed in life's many battlefields. Hence, the imagery of the Shulchan Aruch in saying that one returns from the battlefield for interrupting his prayers.

At the end of the section of the laws of war in this parsha, we are commanded not to cut down a fruit-bearing tree in the midst of a siege. Rabbi Mordechai Yosef Leiner, the Izhbizher Rebbe, gives a profound explanation of this prohibition in his work Mei Shiloach. He connects this prohibition to the words of King David in Psalm 171, that some Jews around the world began to recite today, the first day of the month of Elul, to continue through Shemini Atzeres. King David says: "Though an army would besiege me, my heart would not fear, though war would rise against me, in this I trust. One thing I ask of the Lord, that shall I seek: That I dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life" Rabbi Leiner explained that even in the midst of a war, a Jew should have that inner sense of dwelling in the house of the Lord, of trust in God, so that the aggressive efforts he concentrates on battle should not extend to anything else beyond it. Following our previous remarks, we can apply this idea to the battlefield of life, as well. By concentrating our thoughts only on God during prayer, we can develop an inner sense of trust in Him that can guide us through all of life's many battles and not be overwhelmed by any impending trouble may confront us.

The Clarion Call

Rabbi Joshua (bellicosely known as The Hoffer) Hoffman

In this week's parsha, we read of the battles that the Israelite nation was commanded to fight upon its entry into the Holy Land. An elaborate system of preparation is presented, including a speech delivered by the kohein, telling the soldiers not to fear during battle but to trust in God's protection. That speech begins with the words, "Hear Yisroel (Shema Yisroel), you are today approaching battle against your enemies" (Devarim 20 : 3). Rashi, citing the Talmud (Sotah, 42a), writes that the seemingly superfluous words 'Shema Yisroel' - Hear Yisroel - with which the kohein begins his speech to the nation, are an allusion to the prayer Shema Yisroel that is recited twice daily. The kohein, says the Talmud, by beginning with these words, is telling the soldiers that even if the only merit they have is the recitation of the Shema, they are worthy that God should save their lives during battle. Many commentators offer explanations of why this particular commandment was chosen as providing sufficient merit for being saved from the dangers inherent in battle. However, as I will demonstrate, these explanations do not speak to the heart of the issue, which is, why is the recitation of the Shema effective specifically in regard to the battles that are described in our parsha?

Rabbi Eliyahu Meir Bloch, in his *Peninei Da'as*, writes that the quality of listening is very important in one's service of God, as it appears from the verse immediately preceding the Shema, "and you shall hearken Yisroel, and you shall perform" (Devarim 6 : 3). Man's basic failing, he explains, is his failure to pay attention to the voice that is calling him and that he can perceive if he wishes to. To expand on his words, the rabbis tell us that a voice emanates every day from Mt. Sinai, bemoaning the fact that people neglect the Torah (Chapters of the Fathers 6 : 2). The voice heard at Sinai at the original revelation continues to be sounded, but not everyone tries to hear it. The Sefas Emes writes that the call to Abraham to leave his birthplace and follow God, "go you forth (lech lecha)," literally means, "go to yourself." God was calling to Abraham to find his true self by following Him. That call is issued to everyone, each day, but people do not always listen. The mitzvah of Shema, which tells us that God is One, means, according to Rabbi Yosef Dov Solveitchik, that God is unique, and that we, too, following in God's ways, must also be unique, and actualize the unique mission each of us has been put in this world to accomplish. If we listen to this voice, the Torah is telling us, then God will save us from any danger we encounter, even the danger of battle, so that we can fulfill our mission.

Rabbi Shmuel Borenstein, in his *Shem MiShmuel*, offers a different explanation of the allusion to the Shema contained in the words of the kohein. He notes that the mitzvah of Shema is described by the rabbis as the acceptance of the yoke of God's kingship. Why, he asks, is this considered a yoke? One who truly attaches himself to God is filled with love and delight, finding his true self. What burden is involved here? He answers by citing the dictum of Rabban Gamaliel, that we must do His will as if it were our own will (Chapters of the Fathers 2 : 4). Thus, our acceptance of God's kingship, heartening to His laws, must be done for His sake, not for our own personal fulfillment. When we are in distress, also, our concern should be the fact that God Himself is distressed when his children are, as the rabbis tell us. When soldiers go out to war, they are granted divine protection through the merit of their reciting the Shema, through which they identify their will with God's, and view their own distress as His. In this way, they are fighting God's war, and thereby merit His salvation from danger and distress.

While the explanations of Rabbi Bloch and Rabbi Borenstein are enlightening and inspirational, they do not explain why the

mitzvah of Shema is effective specifically in relation to the battle fought against the previous, wicked inhabitants of the Holy Land. I believe this question can be answered by taking note of Rashi's explanation of the first verse of the Shema, "Hear Yisroel, the Lord our God, the Lord is One" (Devarim 6 : 4). The verse, he explains, expresses our hope that God, who is at the moment recognized as the One God only by his people Yisroel, will, eventually, be recognized as such by all nations. Before embarking on a war in which we human beings will likely be killed, we must know that our motivation in doing so is not any hatred of humanity, but, rather, our love of humanity and our desire that they will join with us in our recognition of God's unity. The nations we are commanded to war against transgressed the seven Noachide laws, thereby ignoring the fundamental elements of morality, the natural law embedded within every human being's heart. As described earlier in the parsha, these nations would burn their own children in service of their idols. Before beginning these wars, we are in fact commanded to send an offer of peace, which, the rabbis tell us, includes an agreement to observe the Noachide laws. Although there is a dispute among halachic authorities regarding exactly which variety of war against the nations this peace offer applies to, there does seem to be a consensus that in all cases, if they accept these laws upon themselves, we do not go to war against them. Only if they insist on remaining in the land while at the same time transgressing the fundamental laws of humanity is war waged against them. To allow such nations to remain there and continue their inhumane, immoral practices will make our national goal of serving as a light to the nations and leading them to a recognition of the one God impossible to fulfill. This is the reason God commanded us to wage war against the seven nations of Canaan. The kohein, by alluding to the Shema in his message to the soldiers before they go out to battle against these nations, is reminding them of the reason they are going to war. If their motivation is directed by the message of the Shema, he is telling them, they will merit divine protection in their efforts.

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The Heart of the Matter

By Rabbi Joshua (heartily known as The Hoffer) Hoffman

In parshas Shoftim we are presented with laws pertaining to a Jewish king. Among these laws is included the requirement for the king to write Mishneh Torah. We are told, "And it shall be when he sits on the throne of his kingdom, he shall write for himself 'this Mishneh Torah' in a scroll.....It shall be with him, and he shall read from it all the days of his life, so that he will learn to fear God, his Lord, to observe all the words of the Torah, and these decrees, to observe them" (Devorim 17 : 18-19). What is the meaning of 'this Mishneh Torah' ? Rashi brings two explanations. First, citing the Talmud (Sanhedrin 21b), he explains it to mean a 'doubling of the Torah,' or two Torah scrolls. One of these constitutes the same obligation as that incumbent upon all Jews, to write a Torah scroll, and it is to be stored in his treasury. The second scroll is a special mitzvah incumbent only upon the king. He needs to have a Torah scroll with him at all times, to remind him that he is subject to the laws of the Torah despite his majestic leadership role. Rashi's second explanation is from Targum Onkelos, who translates the word 'mishneh' as 'an account,' according to which the king needs to have only one Torah scroll, just as others are commanded, the only difference being that the king must carry his scroll with him at all times, to remind him of his subjugation to it.

There are, however, other explanations of the term "Mishneh Torah" in our verse that do not explain it as referring to the entire Torah. The author of the medieval compendium Da'as Zekeinim MiBa'alei Tosafos, for example, writes that he heard that 'Mishneh Torah' here refers to the ten commandments, better coined the Decalogue. Since the text of the Decalogue, from the first word 'anochi' to the last word 'reiecha' contains six hundred thirteen letters, it is referred to as a scroll of the Torah. This explanation seems to reflect the idea, first found in the midrash and later expanded upon by authorities such as Rav Saadia Gaon and Ramban, that the Decalogue contains all of the mitzvos within it. Each one of the mitzvos in the Decalogue, according to this approach, represents a certain category of mitzvos, which contains many other mitzvos. Thus, the king must carry around this constant reminder of his duty to follow all of the mitzvos. Perhaps the reason it is written only as the Decalogue is in order to make it easier, physically, for the king to carry it around with him all day, or perhaps it is so that he realize that the mitzvos of the Torah constitute its central aspect.

There is yet another explanation of the term Mishneh Torah in our verse, found in the midrash Bereishis Rabbah, as well as in the Sifrei to parshas Shoftim. These sources explain the term as referring to the book of Devorim. Rabbi Yaakov Kamenetsky, in his Emes L'Ya'akov, explains that the book of Devorim contains many mitzvos that pertain to the way in which the community should be run, and therefore it is important for the king to have a copy of it constantly at hand. I would like to offer a different explanation of why the king should carry around a copy of sefer Devorim, one which touches on the very essence of the personality of the king as envisioned by the Torah.

In parshas Pinchas, when Moshe asks God to appoint someone to lead the people after he dies, he refers to God as "God of the spirits of all flesh" (Bamidbar, 27 : 16). Rashi there explains that Moshe asked for a leader who could relate to the personality of each person, just as God is able to. Rabbi Yosef Dov Soloveitchik, in an essay on kingship in Israel included in a recently published collection of some of his articles and talks, HaAdam VeOlamo, expands on this idea, referring to King Shlomo's prayer at the inauguration of the Temple. Shlomo refers to the Temple as the place where each person should come to pour out his heart to God and present him with his requests. The king, too, writes Rabbi Soloveitchik, should follow the lead of the King of kings and be receptive to the requests and needs of each person in his kingdom. It is partly in this sense, he writes, that the Rambam, in his Laws of Kings, refers to the king as the heart of all Israel. He must be a man who responds, or is prepared to respond, to the needs of each person over whom he rules. It is actually to the king's advantage to respond to each person in this way, because each person has his own unique contribution to make to the collective of the Jewish people, and the more the king is responsive to this reality, the more each person is able to make his own,

unique contribution to the people.

Taken in this context, we can understand why it is the book of Devorim that the king must carry with him. The rabbis point out that the section of blessings and curses in Devorim was said by Moshe himself. Some commentators, such as Ramban and Abarbanel, expand this idea to refer to the entire book of Devorim (for the varying opinions on this matter, see the introduction to the book of Devorim in sefer Sha'arei Aharon). This does not mean that Moshe wrote this book on his own. Rather he couched the divine message in his own language, and God later approved of the way he had presented what he did, and dictated to Moshe to write it down as he said it (see 'Explorations' by Rabbi Ari D. Kahn on parshas Devorim for a further discussion of this concept). The point here is that Moshe invested his own personality into the book of Devorim, and in this way served as an example for the rest of the nation to bring out their own unique personalities as well. It was the king's job to assist them in this endeavor, and therefore, he needed to carry the book of Devorim with him as a reminder of his responsibility to the people.

(For another, similar application of this idea of the nature of the book of Devorim, see Netvort to parshas VaEschanan, 5758, at the netvort archives, which can be accessed at heights.yucs.org).

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United We Stand

By Rabbi Joshua (unitedly known as The Hoffer) Hoffman

Parshas Shoftim as, indeed, the entire book of Devarim, contains a large number of mitzvos that were to be carried out by the nation once they entered the Holy Land. Still, our rabbis (Sanhedrin 20) tell us that there were three mitzvos that were incumbent on the nation to fulfill upon entry into the land: appointing a king, destroying the nation of Amalek, and building the Holy Temple. What did these three mitzvos have in common, more than the other mitzvos that applied only in Eretz Yisroel, that led the rabbis to single them out as being incumbent upon entry into the land? Many answers are given, but I would like to focus on two, which, I believe, are related, and actually complement each other.

Rabbi Shmuel Bornstein, in his Shem MiShmuel to our parsha, writes that these three mitzvos all serve to unite the Jewish people in Eretz Yisroel. The king, as the Rambam teaches in his Laws of Kings, is the heart of the Jewish nation. In his Sefer HaMitzvos, he writes that the king unites the Jewish people. The Temple also unites the people, because it is the central place to which everyone goes to serve God. Amalek, on the other hand, causes disunity. The rabbis, cited by Rashi at the end of parshas Beshalach, tell us that Amalek causes a break in God's name. The idea behind this is that by denying God's providence in the world, Amalek causes a rupture in His name, meaning, the manner in which God's providence is manifested in this world. The command to destroy the nation of Amalek is necessary, the rabbis tell us, in order to make God's throne and name complete, and is a prerequisite for the building of the Temple. Because the land of Israel itself is a unifying factor, it was necessary to fulfill these three mitzvos upon entry into the land, so that it could properly fulfill its function.

My teacher, R. Aharon Soloveichik, zt"l, offered a different explanation for the singling out of these three mitzvos. He said that all these three mitzvos require a special command through a prophet speaking in God's name before the mitzvoh is fulfilled. In regard to the mitzvoh of appointing a king, the Torah says, "You shall surely set over yourself a king whom God, your Lord, shall choose" (Devarim 17:15). The requirement for the king to be someone who God will choose necessitates the participation of a prophet in the appointment process, as the Rambam writes in his Laws of Kings. Regarding the requirement to build a Temple, the Torah tells us, "You shall seek out His resting place and come there" (Devarim 12:2). The Rambam brings this verse as a source for the mitzvoh to build the Temple. The Sifrei explains the words 'you shall seek' to mean that we should seek out the place for the Temple through the guidance of a prophet. Rambam, in the introduction to his Mishnah commentary, writes that the battle against Amalek requires a command from a prophet. Rav Aharon explained that this is so because in order for us to fight that battle, the deeds of that nation must be similar to their deeds when they attacked Israel in the wilderness, after they left Egypt. Such a determination can only be made through God as communicated through a prophet. Thus, all three mitzvos singled out by the rabbis require a special command from God as communicated through a prophet in order to be carried out.

As I mentioned above, I believe that the two explanations of the common denominator among these three mitzvos, that of Rabi Bornstein and that of Rabbi Soloveichik, complement each other. Rabbi Bornstein's explanation emphasizes the unifying factor of the land that the people were about to enter. Unity is a very important factor for the Jewish nation, because it has a function to fulfill as an organic, collective entity, to arouse the world to recognize God's rule over the world and to act with that truth in mind. Unity, then, is ultimately not a value in and of itself, but an element in our relationship to God. Therefore the three mitzvos that help unify the people when they enter the land can only be performed after a command from God is communicated to us, to assure that the unity we try to create is one which is centered around our awareness of God and our dedication to His goals for the universe. Unity as a goal in itself can lead to disastrous consequences, as we learn in the Torah's account of the generation of dispersion, which sought to build a tower reaching heaven in order, as the rabbis explain, to battle God. On the brink of entering the land and embarking on its historic mission, the nation was given three mitzvos that would help cement their unity. That unity had to be forged in a way that made the purpose of that unity clear. Therefore, those three mitzvos could only be performed upon a divine communication through a prophet.

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All the King's Men By Rabbi Joshua (cardiacly known as The Hoffer) Hoffman

The king is mandated to carry a Torah with him at all times," in order that his heart not be haughty to over his brothers, and that it not turn from the commandment right or left "(Devarim, 17: 20). The Ramban points out that this prohibition against being haughty over on to have ga'avah, it is certainly forbidden for Jews of lower stature, who have less to give them any cause to be haughty than does the king. The Ramban does not, however, try to explain if there is any intrinsic connection between the status of the king and the prohibition of haughtiness. I would like to suggest that there is such a connection, which is perhaps hinted to in the wording of this verse.

The Torah, as we have seen, mentions the king's heart in regard to becoming haughty. It is forbidden, we are told, for his heart to become haughty. Another purpose for him to carry a Torah with him at all times is to prevent his heart from turning from the commandments. Why is the heart referred to here? Rabbi Mordechai Ilan, in his Mikdash Mordechai, refers to the Rambam, in his Mishneh Torah (Hilchos Melachim, 3:6), where he says, in regard to preventing the king from turning his heart from the commandments, that the heart of the king is the heart of the Jewish people, and, therefore, Scripture connects him with Torah more than the rest of the nation. Perhaps the idea here is that since the Torah constitutes the essence of the Jewish people, and the king's heart is the heart of the Jewish people, he needs to make sure that he adheres to the Torah in order to maintain that connection. Rav Yosef Dov Soloveitchik explained that being the heart of the Jewish people means, for the king, that he must be receptive to the needs of each person in the nation. Perhaps we can add that he must view these needs from the perspective of the Torah, and respond accordingly. Still, what does this have to do with the prohibition of becoming haughty? Perhaps here, too, the idea is that the sages teach us that in order for Torah to be absorbed properly, one must be humble. In this way, the need for the king to be humble and the need for him to adhere to the commandments are brought together. How does this relate to the prohibition of haughtiness that applies to every person in the nation?

The Mishneh in Avos, in recording a debate as to which character trait is best for a person to adopt, decides in favor of the opinion that a good heart is the best character trait, because the other ones are included in it. The Vilna Gaon, in his commentary to Mishlei, writes that the worst character trait that a person can have is that of haughtiness, and that this trait leads to many other bad traits and sins. Perhaps, then by showing the connection between the heart and haughtiness as far as the king is concerned, this same message is being given to the nation as a whole, in prohibiting haughtiness. Haughtiness and its opposite, humility, are functions of the heart, as we learn from the example of the king, and in order to prevent the development of haughtiness, a person needs to work on developing a good heart, attuned to the needs of his fellow Jew, just as the king must do on a much wider scale.

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