

GUIDE 1:22 DESCENT

This chapter concerns the word *bo*, which means come, arrive, enter (Judeo-Arabic: אַלבייאָה, Heb.: *beea*). It is situated in a group of lexical chapters devoted to positionality: to pass, to enter, to return, to go. Maimonides also revisits the term *descent*, treated in 1:10 and 1:15 as *yarad*, but now made a meaning of *bo*, and so *bo* carries the characteristics of *descent* enumerated in those chapters. This is because Maimonides uses the Arabic term *ḥulūl* (descent) for *bo* five times in the chapter (obscured in Kafih and Friedlander translations, noted in Pines and Schwarz). He uses it to mean the *descent of the Shekhina*, or God’s *descent to visit punishment*. We should recall that these were Definitions 4 and 5 respectively in chapter 1:10. In its most corporeal sense, the term *beea* is a euphemism for the sexual act (Jastrow, 159). Sublimated, it symbolizes the process of divine creation.

Even-Shmuel summarizes this chapter, placing it in the context of the next three chapters (my trans.)

“We see that though we cannot attain the [essential] attributes that are [one] with Him, it is possible to reach Him through His actions, which are considered like attributes (i.e., attributes of action). These many actions are immeasurable, but it is possible to arrange them into four groups. In the *First Rank* stands prophecy. The revelation comes to the superior man in a particular place (the ‘coming of the Shekhina’ to man). This is the closest revelation attainable: the revelation of the existence of God, and of His design (*takhnito*) in the world.”

Even-Shmuel proceeds, in the summaries of the next three chapters, to list the remaining ranks of the divine actions:

Second Rank—His action of continuous renewal in nature, i.e., God as *m’khadesh*, Guide 1:23;

Third Rank—His action of continual providential supervision in nature, i.e., God as *mashgiakh*, 1:24; and

Fourth Rank—His action of continual providential supervision of mankind, i.e., the acts of God manifested in history, 1:25.

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This is a lexical chapter. See explanation in Chapter 1:1, “Introduction to the Lexical Chapters of the Guide.”

BO: (TO COME IN)

1. As applied to a living being (*baalei khayim*, animal): its arrival to a certain place, or before a certain person.
2. As applied to a living being, to enter a certain place. Friedlander asks why there is a difference in this Definition 2, “entering” and Definition 1, “arriving” (footnote 1, p. 83, *ad loc.*), Kafih answers (note 4, *ad loc.*); that “even Onkelos” in his Aramaic translation of the Bible “distinguishes between arriving and entering.”
3. Future events, which are “to come.” These are incorporeal, since future events have no present reality.
4. This incorporeal meaning is then extended to *privations*, that is, terms of negation, or exclusion, which do not, according to Maimonides, refer to anything at all.
5. Further metaphorical extension to God—descent of His Shekhina, or descent to visit punishment.

Instance of Definition 1 Contextualized:

“And when Esau heard the words of his father, he cried with a great and exceeding bitter cry, and said unto his father, Bless me, [even] me also, O my father. And he said, Thy brother *came* (*ba*) with subtlety (*b'mirma*), and hath taken away thy blessing.” (Genesis 27:34, 35)

Esau learns of his brother Jacob's coming in disguise to their blind father Isaac to receive the blessing of the first-born. Commentators think that the seer Isaac “saw” through Rachel's plan for her son Jacob to win the blessing. (But see R. Abraham ben Maimonides, *Guide to Serving God*, 385-403, esp. 391, that Isaac could not in any case have been made a divine conduit for blessing Esau, only for blessing Jacob). This and the next two quotes represent the corporeal use of the term *ba*. But the actual physical *arrival* or *entry* seems beside the point. Thus, Jacob's arrival is not important, only his coming *subtly*. The *coming* is just a grammatical connective to that significant point. Jacob comes into his father's house as his intellectual progeny to implement the family purpose of creating the Jewish people. R. Abraham, in his commentary on Genesis (p. 34) agrees with Onkelos that *b'mirma* (“with subtlety”) means “with wisdom,” since Jacob realized that he was the more appropriate recipient of his father's blessing.

Instances of Definition 2 Contextualized:

“(23) And he (Joseph's steward) said, Peace [be] to you, fear not: your God, and the God of your father, hath given you treasure in your sacks: I had your money. And he brought Simeon out unto them. (24) And the man brought the men into Joseph's house, and gave [them] water, and they washed their feet; and he gave their asses provender. (25) And they made ready the present against Joseph came at noon: for they heard that they should eat bread there. (26) And when Joseph *came* (*va-yavo*) home, they brought him (*va-yaviiu*) the present which [was] in their hand into the house, and bowed themselves to him to the earth.” (Genesis 43:23-26)

Again, the “coming home” of Joseph is incidental to the passage. In fact, he did not come *home*, but rather went from the anteroom to the reception hall of his mansion (Rashi). More important is the brother's present to Joseph, not his coming. This is shown by the second use of a variant of the word *bo* in the same sentence for the *bringing* of the present. The Midrash reads another level into the passage: that the real point of the sentence is not the bringing or the entering, but the *bowing*. This is one of five instances of the brother's bowing to Joseph. These fulfill his youthful prophecy that they would eventually bow to him (*Genesis Rabba*, 84:10, p. 776, accord R. Abraham, *Comm.*, p. 68). By bowing to Joseph they bow to his Torah mission, and then only do they become intellectual progeny of the patriarchs. On still another level, coming home, i.e., coming into the *house*, is a further extension on the sexual euphemism of *beea* (house = wife, Jastrow 168, *Zohar* 1:22a), so that *form* (Joseph) enters into the “house,” the “place,” *matter* in the process of generation.

“(22) And ye shall take a bunch of hyssop, and dip [it] in the blood that [is] in the basin, and strike the lintel and the two side posts with the blood that [is] in the basin; and none of you shall go out at the door of his house until the morning. (23) For the Lord will pass through (*avar*) to smite the Egyptians; and when he seeth the blood upon the lintel, and on the two side posts, the Lord will pass over (*pasakh*) the door, and will not suffer the destroyer to come in unto your houses to smite [you]. (24) And ye shall observe this thing for an ordinance to thee and to thy sons for ever. (25) And it shall come to pass, when ye be come (*ta-vo'u*) to the land which the Lord will give you, according as he hath promised, that ye shall keep this service.” (Exodus 12:22-25)

The context is the command to hold a Passover service, once in the desert, and then every year in Israel. Here the coming is a *future event*, and so Maimonides should have listed it under Definition 3: it may be a bridge to the next definition. There is another incorporeal positional movement mentioned in line 23: the term *avar*, which Guide 1:21 defined as, “The appearance of the Light and the Divine Presence (Shekhina) which the prophets perceived in their prophetic visions.” There may also be some hint of Definition 5 from that chapter, in that the doorpost service effects a *substitution* whereby God punishes the Egyptians but not the Jews. There is also a *substitution* of His direct action for His Shekhina's visitation. See my comments on Exodus 12:23 in the last chapter.

Instances of Definition 3 Contextualized:

“And Manoah (father of Samson) said unto the angel of the Lord, What [is] thy name, that when thy sayings come to pass (*yavo*) we may do thee honour? And the angel of the Lord said unto him, Why askest thou thus after my name, seeing it [is] secret?” (Judges 13:17-18)

The context is the prophecy of Samson’s miracle birth. Since the prophecy is of a *future event* it is not real, certainly not corporeal, for past and future time have no actual existence. Time is the number of motion of matter, not in itself a thing. According to Definition 3 the term *yavo* here “descends” upon future events “which have no corporeality at all,” *v’hushal l’khalot* (Ar.: *ḥulūl*) *ha-davar asher aino guf klal*. Features of this passage interest Maimonides though he does not raise them explicitly here. The first is that the word comes to the wife of Manoah though neither she nor Manoah are prophets. “Also Manoah and his wife were no prophets: for the speech they heard, or imagined they heard, was like the *bat-kol* (prophetic echo), which is so frequently mentioned by our Sages, and is something that may be experienced by men not prepared for prophecy.” (Guide 2:42). In other words, since they were not prophets, the divine emanation produced only a *momentary* illumination of their imaginations. It was a divine emanation, and not merely a hallucination, because of the second interesting feature of this incident: *while in her state of vision* Manoah’s wife *draws* Manoah *into her* vision. Only then does he make his request “What is thy name.” Note further that Maimonides places this quote-shard in Definition 3, not in with Definition 5, which is the descent of the Shekhina in prophecy. Is that because the angel speaking to Manoah is not *his* vision but his wife’s? If so, the important feature of the vision surely is its *futurity*, since it did not “come” to Manoah himself. In other words, the content of the vision, its prognostication of the future, is more important than its occurrence. Another possible idea suggested by this quote-shard is the meaning of *name*. The name of a thing is its definition, and definition is essence. Neither Moses nor Manoah can learn the essence of their incorporeal visitor, but they can learn from that visitor what God will do.

“(1) Come down, and sit in the dust, O virgin daughter of Babylon, sit on the ground: [there is] no throne, O daughter of the Chaldeans: for thou shalt no more be called tender and delicate.... (12) Stand now with thine enchantments, and with the multitude of thy sorceries, wherein thou hast laboured from thy youth; if so be thou shalt be able to profit, if so be thou mayest prevail. (13) Thou art wearied in the multitude of thy counsels. Let now the astrologers, the stargazers, the monthly prognosticators, stand up, and save thee from [these things] that shall come upon (*yavo* ‘u) thee.” (Isaiah 47:1, 12-13)

Babylon was the home of astrological investigation. Maimonides opposed astrology, and wrote a famous letter against it, *Letter to the Jews of Marseilles* (p. 113, Leon Stitskin, *Letters of Maimonides*, Yeshiva, 1977). The context is that Isaiah prophesied bad things for the Babylonians, despite the good tidings they received from their false prophets, the astrologers. Contrast this false prophecy of a good future that will in fact turn bad, against the previous quote from Judges, a true prophecy of good future that really is good. What the astrologers foresee is not just a not-yet-existent future, but a future that will *never* exist. This truly is *nothing*, and prepares us for the next quote from Job.

Instance of Definition 4 Contextualized:

“(25) Did not I weep for him that was in trouble? Was [not] my soul grieved for the poor? (26) When I looked for good, then evil came (*va-yavo*) [unto me]: and when I waited for light, there came (*va-yavo*) darkness.” (Job 30:25, 26)

Maimonides quotes two separate fragments of verse 26. The context is disputable, since on its face it seems as if we should take Job at his word that he had in verse 25 been sympathetic to the oppressed. But the Talmud, *Sotah* 11a, has Job silent in the face of Pharaoh’s plan to oppress the Israelites, which, according to the Talmud, is why he was sentenced to suffering. Maimonides has a different explanation for Job’s troubles. Maimonides in 3:22 explains that Job’s piety was only based on received tradition, not intellectual investigation. These troubles would be dissipated by the acquisition or activation of intellect. Maimonides’ interest in quoting from the Job verse is its focus on evil and darkness. See essay below “The Unreality of Evil and Darkness.”

Instances of Definition 5 Contextualized:

“And the Lord said unto Moses, Lo, I *come* (*ba*) unto thee in a thick cloud, that the people may hear when I speak with thee, and believe thee for ever. (10) And Moses told the words of the people unto the Lord. And the Lord said unto Moses, Go unto the people, and sanctify them to day and to morrow, and let them wash their clothes, (11) And be ready against the third day: for the third day the Lord will come down (*vered*) in the sight of all the people upon mount Sinai.” (Exodus 19:9-11)

The context is the preparation for the initial giving of the Torah. See essay below on this passage, “The Descent Of The Word Of God.”

“Then he brought me back the way of the gate of the outward sanctuary which looketh toward the east; and it [was] shut. Then said the Lord unto me; This gate shall be shut, it shall not be opened, and no man shall enter in by it; because the Lord, the God of Israel, hath *entered* (*ba*) in by it, therefore it shall be shut. [It is] for the prince; the prince, he shall sit in it to eat bread before the Lord; he shall enter by the way of the porch of [that] gate, and shall go out by the way of the same.” (Ezekiel 44:1-3)

Maimonides says: “In these and all similar passages, the coming (Ar. *ḥulūl*, descent) of the Shekhinah is meant,” since God does not physically *come* through gates. The context is a prophetic vision of Ezekiel, in which he is shown part of the future ideal Jerusalem Temple. God’s spirit once came in the Temple through a gate now closed to the exiled Jews. It will be opened for the Shekhinah’s descent only when the Messianic prince reinstates the Temple service. The next several lines passionately describe this coming and explain the reason that the gate had to be shut:

“Then brought he me the way of the north gate before the house: and I looked, and, behold, the glory of the Lord filled the house of the Lord: and I fell upon my face. And the Lord said unto me, Son of man, mark well, and behold with thine eyes, and hear with thine ears all that I say unto thee concerning all the ordinances of the house of the Lord, and all the laws thereof; and mark well the entering in of the house, with every going forth of the sanctuary. And thou shalt say to the rebellious, [even] to the house of Israel, Thus saith the Lord God; O ye house of Israel, let it suffice you of all your abominations, In that ye have brought [into my sanctuary] strangers, uncircumcised in heart, and uncircumcised in flesh, to be in my sanctuary, to pollute it, [even] my house, when ye offer my bread, the fat and the blood, and they have broken my covenant because of all your abominations.” (Ezekiel 44:4-7)

How will the Shekhinah descend? That is the subject of the next prophetic text.

“(1) Behold, the day of the Lord cometh, and thy spoil shall be divided in the midst of thee. (2) For I will gather all nations against Jerusalem to battle; and the city shall be taken, and the houses rifled, and the women ravished; and half of the city shall go forth into captivity, and the residue of the people shall not be cut off from the city. (3) Then shall the Lord go forth (*v’yatza*), and fight against those nations, as when he fought in the day of battle. (4) And his feet (*raglav*) shall stand in that day upon the mount of Olives, which [is] before Jerusalem on the east, and the mount of Olives shall cleave in the midst thereof toward the east and toward the west, [and there shall be] a very great valley; and half of the mountain shall remove toward the north, and half of it toward the south. (5) And ye shall flee [to] the valley of the mountains; for the valley of the mountains shall reach unto Azal: yea, ye shall flee, like as ye fled from before the earthquake in the days of Uzziah king of Judah: and the Lord my God shall *come* (*u-va*), [and] all the *holy ones* (*k’doshim*) with thee.” (Zechariah 14:1-5, I substituted JPS 1917 “holy ones” for KJV “saints.”)

Maimonides divides this from the previous proof-text for Definition 5. The prior quotation from Ezekiel demonstrated the *descent* of the Shekhinah, while this passage from Zechariah describes the *descent* of the visitation of divine punishment. The Shekhinah descends upon the “holy ones,” who Maimonides explains are the *prophets*. Maimonides says that the phrase “The Lord my God shall come” is:

“Identical with ‘His word (*pkudato*, His visitation or decree) will come (Ar. *ḥulūl*, descend),’ that is to say, the promises which He made through the *Prophets* (*al ydei nviav*, by means of the prophets) will be fulfilled; therefore Scripture adds ‘all the *holy ones* that are with thee,’ that is to say, ‘The word of the

Lord my God will be performed, which has been spoken by all the holy ones who are with thee, who address the Israelites.” (my emphases. Kafih translates: *k'ilu amar, "u'vo davar hashem elohai al yedai kol kedoshim imakh, m'dabber im yisroel."*)

Even-Shmuel explains what Maimonides is doing with this passage (my trans.): “Here, not only [does Maimonides consider] that there is an ellipsed term in construct state (‘The Lord’ in place of ‘The word of the Lord’) but also an ellipsed preposition (‘all the holy ones’ in place of ‘by means of the holy ones’). The word *imakh* (‘with thee’) does not refer to God, as if it were saying that God comes with the prophets, but, rather, it refers to Israel; and the prophet Zechariah, ‘who address(es) the Israelites’ says to the people, ‘all the words that God promised will be established by means of the prophets (‘the holy ones’) that were sent to thee and settled ‘with thee.’”

How will the Shekhina come to visit punishment upon the enemies who destroy Jerusalem? How will the Shekhina cause (*raglav/feet* mean creative cause, Guide 1:28) mountains to move for the Jews? *Through the prophets*. God emanates knowledge through the mediation of his created angel, the active intellect, *descending* upon the potential intellects of the prophets in visions. With that creative causative knowledge they are able to establish the earthly kingdom of heaven.

THE UNREALITY OF EVIL AND DARKNESS

“(25) Did not I weep for him that was in trouble? was [not] my soul grieved for the poor? (26) When I looked for good, then evil *came* (*va-yavo*) [unto me]: and when I waited for light, there *came* (*va-yavo*) darkness.” (Job 30:25, 26)

Maimonides’ interest in quoting from this verse is its focus on evil and darkness.

Maimonides will explain in Guide 3:10-12 that evil and darkness are occlusions of the good emanating from God and in themselves have no real existence. In the Maimonidean-Aristotelian philosophical language they are *privations*. Friedlander defines privations (note 2, p 83, *ad loc.*) as “the name applied to that class of terms which do not denote a thing really existing, but merely the absence of their opposite, e.g., darkness, as the absence of light; evil, as the absence of good.” This is a different sense of the term than the *particularized privation* always associated with matter. That particularized privation, while in itself nothing, is nonetheless a potential for a new form to in-form its matter. By contrast, the evil and darkness that come upon Job are in themselves *nothing*, potentially or otherwise. At 3:10 he writes:

“In accordance with this view we explain the following passage of Isaiah: ‘I form the light and create (*borei*) darkness: I make peace, and create (*borei*) evil’ (Isa. 45:7), for darkness and evil are non-existing things. Consider that the prophet does not say, I make (*osei*) darkness, I make (*osei*) evil, because darkness and evil are not things in positive existence to which the verb ‘to make’ would apply; the verb *bara* ‘he created’ is used, because in Hebrew this verb is applied to non-existing things e.g., ‘In the beginning God created’ (*bara*), etc.; here the creation took place from nothing.”

This was a specific criticism that Maimonides had against Muslim theology (see 1:72, Proposition 7) since that theology conceived darkness and evil as real existences. Thus, the word *come* (*bo; va-yavo*) refers to privations as well as future events, neither of which have any present reality.

THE DESCENT OF THE WORD OF GOD

Let’s take a closer look at the key passage in our chapter:

“*And darkness came* (Job 30:26). Since the term had been thus figuratively applied to what is in no way a body, it was also figuratively applied to the Creator..., either to the descent (*hulul*) of His decree or to ...

[the descent] of His indwelling. It is in view of this figurative use that it is said: *Lo, I come unto thee in a thick cloud* (Exodus 19:9); *For the Lord, the God of Israel, comes through it* (Ezekiel 44:2). All passages similar to these signify the descent of His Indwelling (*shekhina*, Ar. *sakīnah*). The verse, *and the Lord my God shall come, and all the holy ones with thee* (Zechariah 14:5) signifies, on the other hand, the descent of God's decree or the realization of the promises made by Him through His prophets. This last notion is signified in the dictum: *All the holy ones with thee*. Scripture says, as it were, 'And the word of the Lord my God shall come through all the holy ones who are with thee;' the people of *Israel* being the one addressed." (Guide, Pines translation, p. 52)

Maimonides wants to explain Exodus 19:9, which is about God's preparation for the giving of Torah on Sinai:

"And the Lord said unto Moses, *Lo, I come (ba) unto thee in a thick cloud*, that the people may hear when I speak with thee, and believe thee for ever. (10) And Moses told the words of the people unto the Lord. And the Lord said unto Moses, Go unto the people, and sanctify them to day and to morrow, and let them wash their clothes, (11) And be ready against the third day: for the third day the Lord will come down (*vered*) in the sight of all the people upon mount Sinai." (Exodus 19:9-11)

He returns to Exodus 19:9 in two places, Guide 2:33 and 3:9. In 2:33 he says:

"It is clear to me that what Moses experienced at the revelation on Mount Sinai was different from that which was experienced by all the other Israelites, for Moses alone was addressed by God, and for this reason the second person singular is used in the Ten Commandments; Moses then went down to the foot of the mount and told his fellow-men what he had heard. Comp., 'I stood between the Lord and you at that time to tell you the word of the Lord' (Deuteronomy 5:5). Again, 'Moses spake, and God answered him with a loud voice' (Exodus 19:19). In the *Mechilta* our Sages say distinctly that he brought to them every word as he had heard it. Furthermore, the words, '*In order that the people hear when I speak with thee*' (Exodus 19:9), show that God spoke to Moses, and the people only heard the mighty sound, not distinct words."

In chapter 2:33, Maimonides continues to explain that though the Jews heard it, what they heard was not the articulation Moses heard, for they had not previously been trained as he had by perfection of intellect, morals, and imagination. Moses heard the commandments and then explained them to the Jews who heard only "the mighty sound," lacking articulation. Abarbanel and others opposed this view (a brilliant English language exposition of this material, including a translation of Abarbanel and an attempt to resolve the issues is Alvin Reines' *Maimonides and Abarbanel on Prophecy*, KTAV Publishing, 1971.)

Maimonides returns to our passage with a further explanation of why the people could not hear what Moses heard at Guide 3:9:

"The corporeal element in man is a large screen and partition that prevents him from perfectly perceiving abstract ideals: this would be the case even if the corporeal element were as pure and superior as the substance of the spheres; how much more must this be the case with our dark and opaque body. However great the exertion of our mind may be to comprehend the Divine Being or any of the ideals, we find a screen and partition between Him and ourselves. Thus the prophets frequently hint at the existence of a partition between God and us. They say He is concealed from us in vapours, in darkness, in mist, or in a "*thick cloud*" (Exodus 19:9): or use similar figures to express that on account of our bodies we are unable to comprehend His essence. This is the meaning of the words, 'Clouds and darkness are round about Him' (Psalms 97:2). The prophets tell us that the difficulty consists in the grossness of our substance: they do not imply, as might be gathered from the literal meaning of their words, that God is corporeal, and is invisible because He is surrounded by thick clouds, vapours, darkness, or mist. This figure is also expressed in the passage, 'He made darkness His secret place' (Psalms 18:12). The object of God

revealing Himself in thick clouds, darkness, vapours, and mist was to teach this lesson; for every prophetic vision contains some lesson by means of allegory; that mighty vision, therefore, though the greatest of all visions, and above all comparison, viz., His revelation in a thick cloud, did not take place without any purpose, it was intended to indicate that we cannot comprehend Him on account of the dark body that surrounds us. It does not surround God, because He is incorporeal.”

In other words, God is not in a “thick cloud,” we are. Because of this, the Jews do not understand the word of God at Sinai. There must be a mediator. Explaining this verse, Exodus 19:9, “I *come (ba)* unto thee in a thick cloud,” Maimonides in our chapter comments *ba* means: “the manifestation (Ar. *ḥulūl*, descent) of His presence (the Shekhina)” and, “In these and all similar passages, the coming (Ar. *ḥulūl*, descent) of the Shechinah is meant.” It is not God who *comes*, but his Shekhina *descending*, mediating between God and man. Man wrapped in his cloud of corporeality cannot ever directly see or hear God, but only through mediation of the Shekhina, the active intellect, which *descends on* his prophets.

Next, Maimonides makes the following important equation which is generally missed by the translators, “Since this term (*bo*) was figuratively applied to incorporeal things (Definition 4, privations) it was figuratively extended to [those non-privative incorporeal things which have real existence, Definition 5, like] God, *either to the descent of His word or to the descent of his Shekhina*” (my translation). Ibn Tibbon’s Hebrew comes closest to the original, especially in the important last clause: *u’l’fi zot ha-hashala asher hushal l’ma sh’aino geshem klal, hushal gam ken l’borei yitromam, im l’vo dvaro o l’vo shekhinato*. (Compare the Judeo-Arabic original of the last clause: סכינתה לחלול אמרה או לחלול.) It is a clear equation of the Shekhina and the Word of God, the Logos (Torah).

There is yet a further extension of this equation Shekhina = Logos evident in Maimonides’ original text. Commenting on the Zechariah quotation (which he takes as a commentary on Exodus 19:9), he writes (Pines translation) that *bo* “signifies, on the other hand, the descent of God’s decree or the realization of the promises made by Him through His prophets.”

Kafih’s Hebrew translation of this sentence has: *khalot p’kudato (d’varo) o kiyum yiudav asher hivtiakh bahem al yadei neviav*. (Compare the Judeo-Arabic original of the last clause: או תבאת מואעידה אלתי ועד בהא עלי יד אנביאיה: חלול אמרה). If the first passage equated Shekhina and Logos, this language goes further, especially in the original, to extend the equation so that Shekhina = Logos = the fulfillment of prophecy.

The divine emanation (Shekhina) descends upon the active intellect (Logos) acquired by the prophet, who, through his commands, effectuates the divine will in the world, or, through his prognostication, predicts the providential/retributive execution of that will.

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