

THE SYNAGOGUE REVITALIZED

Challenges and Prescriptions

RABBI ELLIOT B. GERTEL
Congregation Rodfei Zedek, Chicago, Illinois

As synagogues face turf challenges from Jewish Community Centers, Boards of Jewish Educations, and federations, it is essential that they take stock of what they can do that no other organization can and that they improve their effectiveness in those areas, which include tying the individual to communal history and creating a unique style of Jewish learning. Doing so is the only way that synagogues can make a real contribution to Jewish life in the coming century.

Synagogues are facing challenges from other communal institutions and their members. This article presents suggestions for revitalizing synagogues in the face of both unprecedented changes and all-too-familiar stagnation.

THE JEWISH COMMUNITY CENTER (JCC)

JCCs have willingly been the loose cannon in the American Jewish community for almost one hundred years. Depending on the beholder, the JCC has been seen as a multi-headed monster threat or a potential ally up for grabs. In the 1940s, Mordecai Kaplan and his Reconstructionist Movement wanted JCCs to join their organization and thus be considered on a par with synagogues. Centers, however, were not interested in affiliating, even with the "Jewish peoplehood" branch of religious expression.

In 1962, the journal, *Conservative Judaism*, then under the editorship of Rabbi Samuel H. Dresner, published a symposium on "The Center and the Synagogue" that remains a classic. The most perceptive observations were made by Rabbi David Wolf Silverman, who was the only one to analyze in detail the writings of the JCC movement itself. He wrote:

Like a chameleon, the Center takes its constituency and environment at face-value. As they change, so it changes....Any institution must somehow meet the needs of its

members. But it also must direct those needs and perhaps substitute other, better needs in the process. The specific methods of operation employed by the Centers are drawn from the field of group work. The goal of group work, that is, the adjustment of the individual to the particular group, [is] both non-prophetic and passe!...The social worker can pledge absolute allegiance only to his own group-work method which fits in neutral fashion among all values, no matter what their contemporary connotations. It is true that truth, compassion, humility and the love of God are not Jewish inventions. But the understanding and force of these terms and attitudes within the Jewish tradition differ from their role in the Christian or Indian religion....The Jew loves God through Torah, not through yoga.

The Centers have maintained to this day the emphasis on meeting the perceived need of the public, however each community defines it. Some communities want the Center to be a place where Jewish youth can meet other Jewish youth. Some want it to be a place where Jewish youth can entertain non-Jewish friends on "Jewish" turf. Some want it to be a place where young Jewish families can bond, with teen programs only a side issue. Some emphasize the needs of the elderly.

One of the leading administrators in the Center field recently spoke about "products" and about being "consumer friendly." Little has changed in Center policies since Rabbi Silverman's comments. Determined to find

the right product for the right people with the right returns—whatever product the consumer may want—Centers are replacing social workers with MBA's and adopting aggressive corporate practices in hiring and firing personnel and in seeking customers. From the point of view of the Centers, there is nothing in all this action that betrays their consistent philosophy. They are even willing to hire some nonconformist "spiritual" types, as long as they help serve the needs of members and fit the right central casting image.

The Centers have not changed their philosophy since the 1920s, but the American Jewish community, which is now dominated by the Baby Boomer generation, has. It has adopted far more of an openly and unabashedly consumer culture. And so, if anything, the Centers have found the most willing audience for their approach. (Indeed, leading advocates of strategies for church growth in American Protestantism, such as Lyle E. Schaller and Roy M. Oswald, have proposed a model for church programs very similar to that of the JCCs.) Especially in newer communities, where there are not long-standing roots in synagogues, the Centers are finding ready and willing constituents for whom the JCC is their first choice and who are even willing to tolerate waiting lists.

At least one rabbi has decided that the ascendancy of JCCs in certain communities is a portent of the future with which synagogues must deal. Writing in the June 1, 1994 issue of the *National Jewish Post and Opinion*, Rabbi Rami M. Shapiro stated that it is time that synagogues become satellite arms of JCCs. Synagogues, he wrote, no longer have any hold over Jews except as a place to hold *Bar* or *Bat Mitzvah* ceremonies. The reported figure of 46% affiliation by American Jews seems "inflated," and the suggestion that 80% have belonged to synagogues at one time or another seems "optimistic." Meanwhile, the cost of keeping up synagogues and other Jewish organizations escalates, with only 12% of American Jewish families being two-parent homes with children and almost one-quarter of the Jewish population being over

65 years of age. With a shrinking number of wealthier nuclear families to bear the brunt of supporting Jewish communal life, the future of synagogues that duplicate what JCCs can do is bleak.

According to Rabbi Shapiro, JCCs can provide the Jewish public with what they really want—"Jewish community without Judaism." And synagogues are understandably afraid that if people can get Torah (or, better, a brief reference to Torah) with a cardiovascular workout, all under one federation-subsidized roof, they would sooner flock to the JCC. Shapiro even asserts that if JCCs could offer *Bar* and *Bat Mitzvah* training and ceremonies, synagogues would disappear.

Shapiro therefore suggests that instead of training rabbis to be in declining synagogues where a small group perpetuates itself and its agenda, seminaries should be developing ways of providing creative spiritual leaders to Jewish communal organizations, particularly the JCC. Rabbis should not be placed in synagogues, but rather be based in the community, to serve at the Centers and through them at any synagogues that stubbornly, or even artfully, preserve themselves. Their salaries should be paid by the community and be commensurate with that of local university personnel. Any synagogues that would survive beyond the JCC system, Shapiro suggests, would have to be unusually creative and responsive, with success defined by effectiveness at guiding people spiritually.

Needless to say, for most who are active in synagogues today, and for most rabbis, this notion of the synagogue as the JCC satellite is the scenario from hell. However, there was one time in American Jewish history when the responsibility for providing religious services was left to the Centers. That was during World War II when the Jewish Welfare Board, the parent body of the JCCs, sponsored chaplaincy programs for the tens of thousands of Jewish soldiers, producing a centrist order of worship for all branches of the military with the cooperation of chaplains from all streams of American Judaism. Interestingly, that arrangement paved the way for the immense

growth of the Conservative Movement in the post-war years, with the veterans learning to feel comfortable in a "middle ground" service. In addition, in some communities, both pre- and post-World War II, communal Hebrew schools and junior congregations have been run by JCCs with impressive results.

WHAT SYNAGOGUES ALONE CAN DO

Whether JCCs are perceived as a threat or not, *it is the task of the synagogue to take stock of what it can do that no other organization can do.* This is the only way that the synagogue can be prepared to make a real contribution to Jewish life as we enter a new century. Let me now suggest some functions that only the synagogue can perform and ways it can improve its effectiveness in these areas.

Tie the Individual to Communal History

The synagogue can best give constituents a sense of the panorama of Jewish history, for it is the oldest continuous Jewish institution next to the Jewish home and the Jewish school. Furthermore, the synagogue can most intimately bind the histories of families and individuals to its history and that of the Jewish people. I always give the centennial volume of our congregation to visitors to the synagogue with any family ties. They have accepted it gladly, regarding it as part of their family stories. Even one-generation members feel ties to their synagogues.

To tie individual to communal history more effectively, synagogues have to keep better track of alumni and former members and sponsor reunions and other opportunities to visit for those who are passing through the community. Most American synagogues would get some response to reunions of families or individuals who belonged even ten years or five years or less.

For those who remain affiliated, *B'nai Mitzvah*, weddings, baby namings, anniversaries, and other life-cycle events can provide opportunities during services to relate the stories of the celebrants and of other congregational families.

Needless to say, there have to be procedures to ensure that such events are not limited only to the same families or become an imposition on the "regulars." But taking such opportunities to relate stories and to celebrate achievements is always worth doing.

Create a Unique Style of Jewish Learning

Introduction to Judaism and adult *Bar or Bat Mitzvah* classes and *B'nai Noah* societies (programs for Gentiles who may not want to convert but are interested in what Judaism teaches about the Covenant with Gentiles through Noah) are programs that only congregations can do well because of the unparalleled power of good religious community to encourage and to anchor newcomers. Community-wide classes do not work as well. What is required is individual as opposed to group teaching, a culture that supports and encourages beginners, and introductory classes in a synagogue in various skills that engage and inspire new and long-time members alike.

Such education can only be provided if congregants give of their time and knowledge to helping others. Members who know Hebrew and who have never shared that knowledge with other members are holding out on their communities. Synagogue members are entitled to courses and lectures that expand their horizons, but are also obligated to give a good portion of their time to the mentoring of others. Most adult education committees consist of people who ought to be teaching as much as planning. After all, in the old prayer before the *Shema*, we ask God to inspire us "to understand and discern, to perceive, learn and teach." The Mishnah (Yoma 3:11) reminds us that it is *wrong* not to share one's knowledge of Jewish traditions, observances, and skills.

Each synagogue can create its own unique style of Jewish learning based on the interests of the rabbi and the expertise of its members. To this very day, people in the Orthodox community say they choose a synagogue because of the "learning" there. One hears this

comment in certain Reconstructionist and chavurah congregations as well. Why can't it be true of the American synagogue in general? Different styles of learning will appeal to different folk, but it is important for congregations to develop a *character* to their curriculum and educational program. Doing so is a matter of cultivating distinctiveness in style and quality.

In my first congregation at New Haven, there were marvelous samplers of the names of individuals involved in certain study groups, done by calligraphers early in the century. There were groups that studied Psalms, Jewish law codes, and Talmud. There was even—and how unusual and progressive for 80 years ago—a group of women who studied Mishnah together! Little wonder that the congregation became the largest Orthodox synagogue in the community. It had the active loyalty of both men and women—and no Hebrew School. The children were sent to tutors or to community Talmud Torahs. The *adults* chose a synagogue because of the meaning they found there in study and prayer, and this ultimately was the best lesson for the children.

There are individuals in every congregation who have some knowledge of Hebrew, Jewish history, culture, or music or who are expert in general fields and can be encouraged to explore those fields from the vantage points of Jewish history or Jewish thought. Dr. Ismar Schorsch, the chancellor of the Jewish Theological Seminary, has said that congregations should put less emphasis on bringing in the outside “scholar-in-residence” and regard the rabbi as the scholar-in-residence. Similarly the rabbi should be cultivating and welcoming local scholars to become key players in the curriculum of each congregation.

In addition to encouraging member participation in the synagogue curriculum, synagogues should be seeking the input and leadership of congregants in social action programs and in networking with community-based volunteers both in the Jewish and general community.

Of course, congregations will need to become sensitive to the interpersonal issues raised when using members for teaching and social action; for example, when people are knowledgeable but not good teachers. To avoid the problem of using the same small pool of individuals over and over again, congregations *should* aim to grow and change by continually attracting new members. If there are not a significant number of new people involved in worship and education every five years or so, then something must be done to make the congregation more welcoming to new participants and to potential educational talent. New people should be encouraged to share their knowledge within five years of joining. This will not happen unless the “regulars” see their role as not judging speakers or new members by whether a certain agenda is met. Rather, they must see their role as finding a way to make immediate contact and negotiation with newcomers with many different agendas.

Recently, Loren B. Mead (1993), a leading expert in Protestant Church growth, wrote that in the twenty-first century,

every congregation will need to develop itself into a training ground, capable of equipping each member with a new level of competence in education and formation.... [Congregations] must provide times and places in which members can present case material from daily experience and receive help in critically analyzing the theological and missional dimensions of those daily experiences.... [Clergy should function like a good seminary dean who] builds up the community of learning, sees that the curriculum is in place, seeks out able faculty, makes sure the fabric is intact, and occasionally teaches a course that is a personal specialty.... The wide acceptance of Elderhostel education for older persons gives a model of how some segments of the churches could structure opportunities for maturation.

For over 25 years, synagogue members, especially women and alumni of Jewish summer camps and the chavurah scene, have been

clamoring for greater participation and mastery of synagogue skills, such as Torah reading, Haftarah chanting, and leading services. It is interesting to see that church members are now demanding an environment of participation and across-the-board education that has always been the hallmark of the synagogue! Not only the struggles with the Jewish Community Centers and other Jewish organizations but also the parallel concerns of Protestant neighbors are prodding the American synagogue to find what it alone can do in the community and to do it well.

RELATIONSHIP OF SYNAGOGUES TO JEWISH COMMUNITY CENTERS AND OTHER INSTITUTIONS

The Jewish Community Centers will certainly force the synagogues to reconsider their role and to commit themselves to doing what they alone can do and what they can do best. This may well be the role of the Centers—not to take over other institutions, but to prod the community to respond to the needs of its members and to constantly search out new needs. Synagogues and Centers will have to work out their respective roles in each community. Often, the larger communities can learn from smaller communities about the extent to which the roles can be shared.

When I first came to the Chicago area eight years ago, synagogues in the Northwest suburbs were up in arms that the JCC was running a Jewish school program. The synagogues regarded Jewish education as their domain alone. But the truth is that synagogues have no exclusive rights to run Jewish schools. They usually do this badly. The good community-wide afternoon school does the job much better. A good day school can provide the best education of all and may even be better at running afternoon Hebrew Schools. In St. Paul, Minnesota, for example, the communal day school and Hebrew School are housed in the same building and share many staff members.

There have been articles in the Jewish press recently about the proliferation of Hebrew schools and home education programs

in several large Jewish communities. There is no stopping the development of these private enterprises. The role of the synagogue is to hook up with such schools, and a single congregation ought to encourage as many different programs as possible. People learn in different ways, and synagogues ought to foster different kinds of child and adult education programs geared to different personality types. Indeed, an effective synagogue adult education program would acquaint its constituency with such paradigms as in Miriam Adahan's (1988) fine book, *Appreciating People (Including Yourself!)*, that consider the Myers-Briggs personality type studies from the vantage point of traditional Jewish sources. For one of the most important lessons that Jewish education can inculcate in a Jewish community is *derekh eretz*, respectful behavior and tolerance of differences among Jews, within an institution or between institutions.

The national religious movements can alleviate many of the concerns about the proliferation of schools by enabling their constituent congregations to be open to diverse educational possibilities. Why not replace the measuring rod of required number of hours and specified school structures with more flexible ones? For children who cannot thrive in the traditional school setting, national movements ought to consider standardized measurements of Jewish literacy and other equivalency programs for pupils in alternate schools or tutorials.

ROLE OF FEDERATIONS

The arbitration of local turf issues between Jewish organizations requires a communal institution respected by all sides, and the federation, by virtue of being the trusted agency to collect and allocate funds for Jewish organizations and thus to advocate certain guidelines for their evaluation, has the moral and the political power to arbitrate on the local level. Only the local federation can exert sufficient muscle to intervene in community fights, especially in fights between synagogues and other organizations. The

power of social stigma and financial leverage is critical. The national synagogue organizations are actually less likely to be effective than the federations in local disputes. People are more apt to respect what a neighbor thinks of their local battles than what an outsider might opine.

Unfortunately, federations have avoided any arbitration role and instead have gotten into the grants business. Since the 1990 National Jewish Population Survey revealed a failure of Hebrew schools to inspire many Jewish youth, there has been a movement to have Boards of Jewish Education foster healthy competition with grants for "creativity" in Jewish education.

Talented educators are now spending a lot of time doing creative writing to explain why their programs are novel enough to merit special stipends. But how many "creative" programs can one invent? How many *ought* to be invented? Creative programs won't do any good if there is not enough money to support the countless basic, uncreative, day-to-day needs of a Hebrew school. How long are teachers and synagogue rabbis supposed to fill out grant forms to make everyday bread-and-butter programmatic needs seem like sublime pedagogical manna? The effect of such a system is bound to stifle real creativity under the avalanche of endless forms.

Hebrew schools are built-in deficits for synagogues. They always need to be subsidized. Day schools require even more funds, but they have the additional benefit of providing the family commitment to Jewish education that is missing in many of the Hebrew schools. Someone described the largest Los Angeles synagogues of all three denominations as "synagogues attached to a day school." One cannot even argue anymore that the *synagogue* is the spawning ground for Jewish schools. As mentioned above, there is a trend of schools growing first to train children in "Jewish culture" and then becoming synagogues, if for no other reason than to become better object lessons in Jewish synagogue culture.

Similarly, one can no longer say that syna-

gogues are the major spawning grounds of Jewish involvement. In many cases, people who have come up through the ranks of federation young leadership programs are seeking out synagogues because they have been taught by federation that doing so, at least for now, is the appropriate "Jewish" thing to do. When they find synagogues, however, they are disappointed by the overriding turf concerns, the self-perpetuating core groups, and the primitive fund-raising and administrative methods that are light years behind those of federations.

Although hardly the most insightful look at American Jewish life, Paul Wilkes' account of a New England congregation in *They Shall Be My People* (1994) did show that most congregations find it difficult to raise funds and are tempted to place an unrealistic burden on the rabbi in this enterprise. The reality is that dances and bazaars and plays and other time-intensive methods of generating revenue do not appeal to time-strapped families, and even where there may be an interest, there are just not enough hours in which to volunteer for or even to attend these programs. And grants are becoming as tedious a fund-raising device for staff members as some of the old programs are for congregants.

Instead of focusing on petty cost cuts, synagogues should be deciding, realistically, on their staffing and programming needs and pressing federations for assistance, not from the annual campaign, but by encouraging donors to endow synagogue programs, religious school staff, and day schools. Federations must lend synagogues their prestige, their fund-raising skills, and the authority of their assurances that funds will be properly used by synagogues and that synagogue disputes will be arbitrated with local guidelines.

Within the synagogue itself, such groups as sisterhoods and men's clubs should allot a portion of their budgets and programming to outreach, whether to former Soviet Jews or to independent chavurot or schools that might link up with a congregation. These outreach programs do plant seeds that grow, though no

one can know exactly when or even where.

The links between synagogues and federations, and therefore links with Centers, day schools, and other Jewish communal organizations, are going to become more and more integral to everyday financing and programming. One visionary in the Jewish community is Boston's Michael Hammer, whose concept of reengineering has already gained quite a following in corporations and Jewish federations. Hammer's method of restructuring organizations emphasizes aggressively enlisting the hard criticism of outside observers and remaining open to creativity "on the margins" of long-standing procedures (Schiffrin, 1994). Hammer likes to cite as an example the Elul organization in Israel that brings secular and religious Israelis to study texts together, and without which it would be difficult to heal the secular-religious rift in Israel and to create an authentic Israeli Judaism. Hammer also stresses that teamwork rather than hierarchies should prevail in the operations of Jewish organizations.

Among organization boards, as well, teamwork, rather than hierarchies, should prevail. Jerry Witkowsky, director of the Jewish Community Centers of Chicago, advocates that Jewish communities operate out of one board for decisions that involve the community as a whole.

One should not underestimate the vision of the rabbinate in formulating wise strategies for future Jewish communal life. Two Chicago rabbis presented the two most arresting agendas for improved Jewish communal functioning, one in the 1930s and one in the 1970s. Those visions remain classic texts in Jewish communal planning. The fact that both concepts grew out of Chicago pulpits may well underscore the fact that that Jewish community, though forever rife with contentions, remains a fertile ground for vision and action.

In 1976, Rabbi Samuel H. Dresner presented what he called an *Agenda for American Jews: Federation and Synagogue*, which was substantially reprinted in the pamphlet, *Federation and Synagogue: Towards a New*

Partnership (1994). In 1976, Dresner noted that the growing power of federations might not be bad if synagogues and federations can make a

declaration of interdependence, the federation by affirming a religious definition of the Jewish people and designating a significant role in their deliberations to the local religious leadership; the synagogue by accepting the federations as the central administrative agency of the Jewish community and offering full cooperation.

Dresner understood that, with proper guidance, federations could become the most effective arbiter of local standards and civility—what we might call *derekh erez*. Citing the weaknesses of national rabbinic organizations in enforcing even such matters as equality and simplicity in Jewish funerals, he envisioned federations stepping in to see that funeral costs are kept down and creating voucher programs so that the life-blood of a Jewish community, a good Jewish education, might be offered free to everyone, as was the case in the much poorer Jewish communities of medieval times. "Federation's expertise is process," Dresner wrote. "The synagogue's is substance. The two stand in dire need of each other."

One force that is encouraging closer relationships between synagogues and federations today is the growth of family foundations, such as the Wexner, Cummings, Steven Spielberg funds, and a host of newer endowments. They are bankrolling seminaries and research institutes and social service organizations to the extent that even the cumulative allocations of many large federations cannot surpass.

The foundations have, however, proved to be a mixed blessing, some of them choosing their causes in erratic and ultimately disruptive ways. The fear is that they may generate all kinds of organizations and schools that will drain the resources of the Jewish community for long-term maintenance. The breaking-away from the Jewish Theological Semi-

nary of its long-time Los Angeles branch, the University of Judaism, is blamed by some on the \$22 million in foundation grants it received. Long before the events in Los Angeles, however, such observers as Arnold Eisen (1994) rightly argued that "federations, foundations and other organs of the community now moving to fund synagogues will have to set careful guidelines for the use of these monies, attach strings, yet at the same time see this support as the synagogue's due rather than as a gift bestowed generously from on high."

SYNAGOGUE ORGANIZATIONS

The role of national synagogue organizations in revitalizing the synagogue *is now* more significant than ever before. Indeed, *they have not really come of age until now*. But their strategies will have to change radically now that synagogues, federations, Centers, and foundations are working closely on the local level.

The national religious movements will have to get out of the business of local and regional advocacy. As federations have taken more control of Jewish education, the Conservative and Reform Movements, where they have had strong regional or local lobbies, have raised a hue and cry over turf. The national movements left it to the locals to fight, thinking that it was better to settle disputes through on-site protest and grassroots organizing. Such policies are doomed even in the short run.

Federations will—and should—gain increasing power in arbitrating local arguments. It would be counterproductive for the national religious bodies to provoke such arguments. Rather, their role is to become *consultants and advocacy groups to communal structures* and to strengthen their local affiliate synagogues with *national programs* in which those congregations can take part. It is their role to make federations aware of the national guidelines and concerns of the religious organizations that ought to affect local community-wide decision making.

The United Synagogue has already

changed course by imitating the only group in American Judaism that has ever really understood how to build a religious movement, the Lubavitchers. The United Synagogue's most creative recent programs include the national "Shake A Lulav" campaign started by Rabbi Jay Rosenbaum, which trains congregations in Sukkot rituals through social and musical programming. Most promising, as well, is a minyan beeper program suggested by Ron Wolfson. The real strength of the United Synagogue over recent decades has been its publications on *mitzvot* and observance.

The national religious movements must transform themselves into consulting organizations for synagogues, Jewish Community Centers, federations, and foundations. They must work together with their rabbinical seminaries and university Jewish studies departments to develop curricula of Jewish education for all age groups and for conversion courses. The time for standardized tests for religious schools *has* returned, so that the emphasis will no longer be on hours and format of religious education, but on content and achievement (especially now with so many individualized computer courses available).

The proliferation of university Judaic studies programs presents an unprecedented challenge to rabbinical seminaries and national organizations. "Jewish scholarship" at seminaries and universities alike has taken some bizarre and irresponsible turns, such as defending Canaanite spirituality against the Bible and decrying the "savagery" of circumcision. For all this to happen in documented volumes in legitimate academic debates is to be expected. The religious movements should not try to censor scholarship, for that would destroy it. The foundations and individual benefactors who finance these projects bear the responsibility for what they choose to affix their names to. But the magazines of the religious movements will have the responsibility for airing debate on these issues so that congregants will be more discerning once certain theories trickle down. There should be a national curriculum in each of the reli-

gious movements offering a balanced though spirited critique of the writings of academics on Judaism, many of whom are now well paid by synagogues as scholars-in-residence.

This brings me to the vision of another Chicago rabbi, Solomon Goldman (1893–1953), one of the most brilliant early advocates of planning out the relationship of the synagogue to other communal organizations. In many of his letters and speeches, beginning in the 1930s, he suggested the establishment of a “National Synagogue” with Reform, Conservative, and Orthodox departments, so that local synagogues, like local Hadassah, B’nai B’rith, and American Jewish Congress chapters, might think of themselves not as isolated but as part of a national body advocating for the concerns of the synagogue. A local synagogue, he said, can only request dues. A national synagogue can lobby for *mitzvot* in local synagogues as well as in Centers and federations.

Goldman presented the most fully developed statement of these thoughts at the 1950 United Synagogue convention, three years before his untimely death. His words met with no response, but they were included by Rabbi Mordecai Waxman in his classic anthology on Conservative Judaism, *Tradition and Change*, which itself is one of the finest projects of the United Synagogue.

As we approach the years 2000, the age of the consulting firm, Goldman’s observations provide the best hope for synagogues and for synagogue organizations. If his words fall on deaf ears now, almost fifty years after he presented them at the United Synagogue con-

vention, the synagogue may well forfeit its most decisive historic opportunity.

For the synagogue to respond to today’s unprecedented challenges, it and its national organizations will have to be well prepared to advocate not only for the accumulated tradition of the ages but for the approaches to it that are cherished by the modern branches of Judaism

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