

The summer of teenage anguish and the discovery of a mother's tortured Holocaust past

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In a wide-ranging *Jerusalem Post* article, entitled “A Literary Blank Ballot” Miriam Shaviv included conversations with a number of scholars about the disengagement of young authors in the 1980s and 1990s and their reluctance to touch on the ideological and political issues that resided in the public square. Quoted in the essay is cultural theorist Gadi Taub who remarked that, “This young generation does not want to be a spokesman for the collective...They shy away from the age-old Jewish role of Hatzofeh lebeit Yisrael (observer of the Jewish People) with a moral vision that he has a duty to share with his people.”¹ Taub expressed surprise that his contemporaries were so detached. Literary critic Dror Burstein opined that there is a deliberate avoidance of writing about the big picture. Rather, he noted, current authors were telling their own story, manifesting a startling loss of interest in moral and polemical stances. Burstein noted that “...in a culture without uniting stories, every person has to reinvent their whole world. Literature begins again.”² This, in many ways, pointed to the end of the melting pot conception and the ascendancy of sub-cultures in Israeli society. Calderon traced the prevailing disillusionment to the 1982 Lebanon War and the 1987 Palestinian uprising, events that shook people's beliefs in the country's founding myths.

¹ Shaviv, Miriam. “A Literary Blank Ballot”. *The Jerusalem Post* 30 March, 2001: 16

² Shaviv, “A Literary Blank Ballot”, 16

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Scholar Avraham Balaban sums up some of the reasons that brought about the intense departures from the traditional frontiers of Hebrew literature:

The Yom Kippur War created deep cracks in the Israeli consensus and gave birth to a new inspection of the aims of Zionism and the manner in which it was realised. The political revolution of 1977 was the pinnacle of the earthquake that began in October 1973 and reflected the fierce social shake-up experienced by the Israeli public... The former image of Israeli society as one with a strong centre and edges, changed without recognition. Lacking a consensus, the social and ideological divisions that up until then were kept at the margins of social and political activity moved to centre stage, including the tensions between Mizrachi and Ashkenazi.³

According to eminent commentator Dan Miron, central to understanding the major changes that emerged as dominant in the 1980s is the interrogation of the interchange between politics, society, and art. Miron explains that for about 30 years, many unresolved tensions in Israeli society were in the main unarticulated, and argues that in the late 1970s Israel underwent

Enormous social tremours that hoisted to the arena of public life forces that heretofore were oppressed and stymied. The entire Israeli public system that was shaped long before the state's establishment, and was stabilised and cemented in the 1950s, was shaken and cracks appeared right through it. Into those cracks poured in all the pressures that were once subdued. Those cracks widened and broadened into actual breaches. Parts of the

³ Balaban, Avraham. *Gal Acher Basiporet Ha'ivirit: Siporet Ivrit Postmodernistit*. Jerusalem: Keter, 1995. 31. Hand with this development, one should also mention Francis Fukuyama's argument that in the 1980s old ideologies reached their terminus and that, as a result, ethnic groups began to construct their own triumphalist histories for themselves and to assert their repulsion with the works of the founders (Fukuyama 1992).

system began to disintegrate; other parts changed their form. By the end of the 1970s the structure of Israeli society was about to change at its very core.⁴

What emerged therefore is a model of opposition, overturning all the accepted formulations and representational standards. Taking stock of the basic values of Zionism and stressing the mistakes of the past, Israeli fiction's continuing sense of engagement with the political currency of the state was increasingly subject to ambivalence, and avoided with an underlying hostility. As a result, one of the seminal tracks in Israeli fiction's ever shifting strata in the 1980s and 1990s was "openness—when the centre disappears and only the fringes remain, they begin to bloom. Social minorities, neglected communities...all these begin to create or become the subject of creation; literature becomes heterogeneous, fermented, more involved in life's actualities..."⁵ Nocke writes about the individualisation of contemporary Hebrew literature in the 1980s and 1990s:

...there is a noticeable emergence of sub-national identities and cultures, which are paying more attention to individual aspects of identity formation and indigenous culture...The heroes and characters are not reflected within a political or national framework, rather they are individuals caught up in their private worlds and trying to master the challenges of daily life. The collective 'we', characteristics of literary expressions of the *Dor Ba-aretz*, is now being replaced by the individualistic 'I'. Unlike their literary predecessors, this group, provided by their parents with relatively well-off economic means and the illusion of security, takes the existence of the state of Israel for

⁴ Miron, Dan. "Hirhurim be'eidan shel proza" in Zisi Stavi (ed.) *Mivchar Hasipur Hakatzar Mishnot Hashmonim Vead Shnot Hatishim*. Tel Aviv: Yediot Ahronot, 1993: 416.

⁵ Bartana, Ortzion. 1993, *Shmonim: Sifrut Yisre'elit ba'asor ha'hacharon*. Tel Aviv: Agudat Hasofrim Ha'ivrim be'Yisrael, 1993: 43. See also Shaked 1998:19-104.

granted. In addition, by the choice of their supposedly shallow topics, they are undermining the ideological values of the *Dor Ba-aretz* writers.⁶

Fixed traditions and models had broken down and had been re-fashioned in the 1980s and 1990s, giving way to shunned pockets of society that in some instances mobilised around ethnicity, the Holocaust, and “trivial” genres—to name the three areas this book explores. Israeli literature ripped open the oppositions that dynamised the aesthetic and cultural value system, including Mizrachi/Ashkenazi, Shoah survivors/native-born Israelis, high art/pop culture, female/male.

More significantly, it gave a platform to the less crystallised voices oppressed by the cultural elite. The master Zionist narrative went up in smoke in the implosion of difference. The one story became many, in a movement that saw the grand plot yield to those narratives that were once regulated by a normalising frame and pushed to the edges. As a result, a cluster of writers had gained prominence within the Israeli literary community. These authors were not interested in the national condition and were, to a great extent, disinclined to deal with ideological or political issues. They preferred to foreground obscure, marginal aspects. Rather than preaching and being messengers of a cause, the generation of new writers has re-fashioned the stable notions of yore into a flux of fragmented identities. In response, the door has opened to a more pluralistic and personal style of writing that is no longer male and Ashkenazi, or concerned with state and nation building issues. Instead, these new waves of fictions are unafraid to disengage from the Zionist superstructure and give expression to neglected landscapes.

⁶ Nocke, Alexandra. “Israel and the Emergence of Mediterranean Identity: Expressions of Locality in Music and Literature”. *Israel Studies* Volume 11, 1 (Spring 2006): 144.

Consequently, Israeli literature is now more welcoming to the fostering of otherness and to the needs of the individual, rather than to the destiny of the nation.

Another group showcased within the literary world of Hebrew literature of the 1980s and 1990s is that of Shoah survivors and their children, a minority whose voice has been projected with great resonance on to the literary scene. In the first decades of Israeli statehood, native Israeli viewed most European Jews as passive weaklings going to their death, and thus in sharp contrast to the core myth of the heroic Sabra). This attitude began to collapse during and following the 1961 Eichmann trial. During the trial, the survivors were urged to testify about their personal inferno, bringing a significant change to the prevailing mindscape in contemporary fiction, "...Hebrew literature began to show an awareness that Holocaust victims and survivors were part of the Israeli experience and had as much literary (and social) legitimation as the new 'Hebrews.'"⁷

And by virtue of this breach of silence, a new band of second generation writers appeared. Born after the war, they overcame the dual moral obstacles of describing a reality that they did not directly experience and making art of a subject that defies human comprehension. The reading public in the 1980s and 1990s witnessed the conspicuous and visible surfacing of a poetical direction known as "bearing witness" fiction. Moreover, the much-derided portrait of the Diaspora as the locus of oppression, persecution, and passivity was accommodated and incorporated into the arena of Israeli consciousness as a vital part of the country's persona.

Then and now, the hallmark of the sharp thematic changes in Hebrew literature is the fusion of the native Israeli and the old-world Jew, the hero and the victim—a true amalgam of the rich imaginative diversity exemplified in the canon. David Gurevitch, who wrote one of the first

⁷ Shaked, Gershon, *The New Tradition: Essays on Modern Hebrew Literature*. Cincinnati: Hebrew Union College Press, 2006: 44.

texts on postmodernism in Israeli fiction, correctly identifies the 1980s and 1990s as decades in which the central models of Hebrew fiction lost their dominion and exclusivity, clearing the way for new subject matters—immigrants, minorities and women. Referring to this period not only as postmodern, but also as post-ideological, Gurevitch observes that, “Postmodern Israeli literature re-examines the foundational myths of Israeli society and exposes a multiplicity of identities and differences.”⁸ Gurevitch puts it nicely when he writes that if Israeli literature was once likened to a town with a central culture and with suburbs, the literature of today is only composed of suburbs with no centre. Thematically, the postmodern protagonist belongs to a numerical or spiritual minority, turning against the official history of Zionism in a desperate attempt to travel a different highway. Appositely, Gurevitch maintains that:

The 1980s offer a real revolution in Hebrew literature—narratives of the statistical and “emotional” minorities of Israeli society...It seems that a wind of democracy and openness is sweeping from every direction, injecting fresh air into our cultural house. Israeli society is returning to its authentic dimension: a society of minorities, a society of immigrants, a multicultural society...History again is invited to say its piece. The Shoah and repressed memory are returning to young writers...who are repeatedly attempting to find techniques to deal with this great Israeli trauma. This openness is also flowing towards “minority” groups of Israeli culture... The Orientals are subject to an unapologetic representation...All these “minority” circles I have mentioned are fighting in their own way for the same cultural aim—against the myth that claims that one can understand the world through all-encompassing theories regarding literary

⁸ Gurevitch, David. “Chalomot memuchzarim: zramin chadashim besiporet Yisraelit achshavit”. *Iton* 77 March/April, 1992: 29.

historiography as embedded in the artistic text, literary poetics and the critical system that tries to interpret it.⁹

The motif of the wrenching relationship between the second-generation and their survivor parents is depicted in Gila Almagor's autobiographical novella *The Summer of Aviya*.¹⁰ Seen through the eyes of the ten-year-old eponymous heroine, it episodically traces one summer in Israel in 1951 in which she undergoes a journey of disenchantment and self-knowledge when she is taken from a boarding home by her mother to live in a dusty rural town. Narrated by the adult Aviya, it is a deeply poignant memoir about confronting pain, about being caught between an irretrievable past and a problematic future and about a survivor's attempt to integrate into a fledgling Israeli society. Gila Almagor, who was born four months after her father's death at the hands of the Nazis, and whose survivor mother died in 1988, remarked in an interview that:

I've always considered myself a strong person, but I felt in the mid-1980s that I was cracking up, because of emotions about my childhood that I was keeping inside. Writing was my way of letting it all out. The strange thing is, it didn't feel like writing. It was more like going into a trance and letting go for 10 days...I'm glad my mother was able to see the book's success, because it showed her how much I cared for her and understood what she was going through. There were times when it was tough, because it was as if I became her mother. But I was never embarrassed by her and never angry at her.¹¹

⁹ Gurevitch, David. "Chalomot memuchzarim: zramin chadashim besiporet Yisraelit achshavit", 38-43.

¹⁰ Almagor, Gila. *The Summer of Aviya*. London: Collins. 1991. First published in 1985 in Hebrew as *Ha-Kayitz shel Aviya*. Tel Aviv: Am Oved.

¹¹ Mietkiewicz, Henry. "Actor's searing autobiography, gem of Israeli Film Festival". *Toronto Star*, November 7, 1993: C2.

There are compelling multiple common threads to be found here with other Holocaust works discussed elsewhere in this book, threads that represent, to an appreciable extent, a sustained thematic matrix in the canon. For example, just as in Savyon Liebrecht's "Excision",¹² we read of an unpredictable swing in the mood and behaviour of a survivor that leads to a violent cutting of a young girl's hair. Indeed, the similarities are heightened by the fact that both women are named Henya. And like Liebrecht, Almagor, a child of Holocaust survivors who was a ward in an Israeli youth camp following her mother's nervous breakdown, is dealing with her own past, using the heroine as her surrogate. On one level, the book signifies the shift that occurred in the 1980s and 1990s to a more studied and complex representation of second generation ambivalence towards their victimised parents and their quest for identity. Notably, the book (first staged as a play) and the subsequent movie were enormous critical successes in the local and international markets, and laid the groundwork for the emergence and flowering of this genre.

The emotionally scarred and fragile Henya, a Polish partisan fighter renowned for her bravery, and a concentration camp survivor, has been released from a psychiatric hospital. She shows up unexpectedly at her daughter's boarding school graduation day. Incensed at finding lice in Aviya's hair, she immediately takes her home. We read that upon their arrival, the iron-willed Henya, heads straight to the bathroom. She has not uttered a word during the long walk from the bus station, despite seeing her daughter only once during the whole year. She returns with a basin of soapy water, which she places on a chair. The scene's close similarity to that in "Excision" is of such specificity that the reader cannot help but notice and suspect that they are being nudged towards conclusions that have to do with the survivor obsession with lice. Earlier,

¹² To be found in Liebrecht, Savyon. *Apples from the Desert*. New York: Feminist Press, 1988.

Henya had accused the counsellor of allowing her daughter to be infected with lice: “Lice on my daughter? What is this place, a concentration camp?”.¹³ Now, she lapses into one of her horrifying memories and without a warning Aviya is bent over:

Before I knew what was happening I caught a strong whiff of kerosene. I tried turning my head away, but my mother kept a tight grip on it and forced it back over the basin. As I was trying to hold my nose to shut out the nauseating smell I saw locks of hair drifting down into the basin. They floated on the water and I realised that they were mine. My mother was cutting off my hair and there was nothing I could do about it! She dragged me into the bathroom and rinsed my head with running water. “That’s the last of the lice,” she kept saying. “No child of mine will have lice. Oh, I know what lice are, I do”.¹⁴

Moreover, like the four-year-old granddaughter in Savyon Liebrecht’s “Excision”, Aviya is crushed by the loss of her hair: “Above the sink in the bathroom was a mirror with cracked sides and black specks all over it. I stood on tiptoe to see how much hair my mother had cut off. She had cut it all without mercy! I was bald! All that was left of me was an ugly face without a frame. ‘How could you do this to me? How?’ I shouted, bursting into awful sobs.”¹⁵ During the course of the summer, Aviya’s baldness becomes a point of mocking and merciless torment by the neighbourhood children. During a shopping trip with her mother, Aviya overhears two girls whispering “Baldy, baldy.”¹⁶ This contempt becomes, in Aviya’s words, her “Summer of baldness”.

Discerning readers, aware of Holocaust history, may have some sympathy for Henya’s manic and disproportionate response to finding lice, since in the camps lice were a deadly

¹³ Almagor, *The Summer of Aviya*, 18.

¹⁴ Almagor, *The Summer of Aviya*, 21-22.

¹⁵ Almagor, *The Summer of Aviya*, 22.

¹⁶ Almagor, *The Summer of Aviya*, 36.

affliction. For Henya, lice represent more than just a school nuisance—it is a chilling reminder of her former life. The Holocaust nexus and imagery is further amplified when we recall that the Nazis shaved the heads of Jewish prisoners as part of the process of dehumanization.

Typically, Henya's recurring bouts of madness reach a crescendo, which further underlines the reality that many survivors continually stood at the threshold of a complete breakdown. Certainly, mental disintegration is a common thread among the narratives examined in this book. Here, it is dramatised as the story ends. Preferring to sit in darkness, Henya begins turning off the lights in the house. Her eyes glazed, she sinks into a prolonged silence. Then, on a Saturday afternoon, she flies into a violent rage. Sending a glass of water flying across the room, she begins to scream at Aviya. She stamps on the medicinal pills rolling across the floor, until she is subdued by an injection administered by the local doctor. The book's coda sees Henya taken back to the psychiatric unit and Aviya return to the Kibbutz.

There are other parallels. Aviya shares with Momik, the central protagonist in David Grossman's *See: Under Love*,¹⁷ a vivid imagination, revealed during a trip to the home of the young ballet teacher Maya Abramson. After delivering the laundry done by Henya, the spirited Aviya is asked to describe a picture of a swan lake hanging above a piano. While the other girls disappoint Maya with their prosaic answers, Aviya spins a forlorn story of a woman who seeks death by jumping into a magic lake. The woman is transformed into a swan by her lover who saves her from harm and promises her that she will become beautiful and happy again. The teacher is moved by the tale, yet pays no attention to the girl who becomes enamoured with her. It is only later that Maya befriends the young girl who is ostracised by the townsfolk as the delinquent daughter of the mad seamstress.

¹⁷ Grossman, David. *See Under: Love*. London: Pan Books, 1991.

When the new neighbours, Mr. Gantz and his family arrive, Aviya's imagination again takes hold. After perusing tattered photographs of the father she was told had died in the war, and spotting a large wooden cupboard in the Gantz home that looks to her like the one in the photograph, she is soon convinced that Mr. Gantz (which in Yiddish means perfect) is her long lost father. Before long, she gives herself a past name, Maxi, illustrating a child's obsession with recreating the past rather than living in the present. While everyone is convinced that Mr. Gantz is a banker, Aviya follows him one morning and discovers, to her great surprise, that he actually works at a farm on the edge of town plucking chickens.

The motif of the absent father and Aviya's father-hunger figures prominently in *The Summer of Aviya*. First, there is no getting around Aviya's unusual name. It is a feminine version of the biblical name Avram, and means 'God is her father'. It also means 'her father' which strongly suggests that Aviya has been named as a 'memorial candle' for her father, a constant reminder of the loss the mother has suffered. This interpretive affiliation with the father is strengthened when we reflect that the clipping of Aviya's hair dilutes her feminine appearance, and thereby enhances her function as a substitute for the missing male figure. Also, as the book begins, we learn that immediately after giving birth, Henya was asked if she had a name for her newborn girl. "I never thought about a girl" Henya replies, "I only have a name for a boy."¹⁸ As the book draws to a close, the affinity between Aviya and her father is further inscribed. Hearing the sweet sounds of classical music wafting from a fancy-dress ball held in the neighbourhood, Henya recalls to Aviya what a skilled dancer her father was. Suddenly, Henya grabs Aviya, and "as if we were a pair of lovers" waltzes her around. Looking at Aviya, she remarks, "Your eyes" she said looking at me. "My God, his were just like them, big and dark".¹⁹

¹⁸ Almagor, *The Summer of Aviya*, 36.

¹⁹ Almagor, *The Summer of Aviya*, 76.

Significantly, Aviya questions her mother about the essence of her name. This reveals her keenness to understand her origins, but also to craft her own childhood narrative, and imbue the name with her own version and with her own life experience. She writes in her diary, “Maybe someday my mother will tell me more about him. I have to wait for the opportunity. There’s so much I want to know about him.”²⁰ One could also argue that the book uses Aviya’s identity crisis and her semi-orphan status to allude to the many fatherless children who arrived in Israel and were either ‘adopted’ by the state or raised in a single-parent household.

Almagor empathically reminds us of the painfully complex dynamic between children and their survivor parents, the children’s’ intense desire to know what traumatised their parents, and their yearning to discover how large a role this plays in their lives:

Though it was scary, it also made me curious, because I wanted to know what she was looking at. Once, when those big eyes of hers went out of focus again, I got up the courage to ask. “Mama?” I said. “Mama!” I shook her as though waking up from a dream and asked her to tell me what she was seeing, but she just muttered something that I couldn’t understand and added, “It’s nothing, it’s nothing.” That was all I could get out of her.”²¹

The ghosts of the past loom large. Henya suffers inwardly, living in a world of her own. She often stares into space, fighting not to go under. Constantly noticing her mother’s tattooed arm, Aviya is denied access to this world. Her mother is too immersed in her own trauma to shed light on the mystery Aviya yearns to solve, or to chronicle her wretched history. Instead, Aviya must rely on others to relate her mother’s biography—her bravery during the war and the way she managed to smuggle explosives used to blow up a train. From her Aunt Alice she learns that her mother was captured by the Nazis along with a group of partisans and tortured.

²⁰ Almagor, *The Summer of Aviya*, 77.

²¹ Almagor, *The Summer of Aviya*, 37.

This “hell on earth” has become an inseparable part of Henya’s identity. She often plumbs her own reality: “My mother never noticed when she was being talked about or made fun of. She lived in a world of her own, as if she were with us but not one of us. Sometimes her beautiful eyes, which were very big and dark, turned glassy and she stared off into space as if she saw things there.”²² Yet, so in awe is Aviya of the mother figure, that when Henya arrives unexpectedly during the boarding school's graduation play, the mere sight renders the young girl speechless and unable to perform on stage.

In line with other children of survivors featured in the narratives explored in this book, Aviya tries to understand what had happened to her grief-stricken mother who was damaged by the loss of her family. The ultimate tone of the book is Aviya’s extraordinary identification with her mother, and her maternal eagerness to protect and look after her. This is despite the fact that Henya humiliates Aviya with her disproportionate reaction to the threat of lice and harshly beats her after Aviya throws a rock that hits Maya Abramson in the eye and almost blinds her. It is noteworthy that both mother and daughter display a violent temper and capacity for violence that may imply the passing of the trauma and its after-effects from one generation to the next. For example, surrounded by the neighbourhood kids, Aviya is shoved by the screaming children and drops the folded washing she had been sent to deliver. Angered by the sight of the soiled linen and tablecloths and the kids kicking them around, she grabs hold of one of the girl’s hair and pushes her head and face into the wet sand. The children are shocked at the sight of such aggression. Even Aviya is startled by her own aggression, “I had never been so brutal to anyone.”²³

²²Almagor, *The Summer of Aviya*, 37.

²³Almagor, *The Summer of Aviya*, 64.

Of course, it is not only Aviya that is tormented and bullied by the residents of the village. The traumatized Henya is treated like a pariah, is ridiculed, and is constantly referred to as the “crazy *Partisunkha*.”²⁴ Her status as a courageous partisan does not summon the respect and welcome she deserved and needed. To cite two examples. After Maya Abramson is hospitalised someone daubs the words “Here lives the crazy *Partisunkha* and her no good daughter.”²⁵ on Henya and Aviya’s shack. And when Henya personally invites every single boy and girl in the neighbourhood to Aviya’s birthday party, only four guests show up.

The Summer of Aviya focuses on the viewpoint of the survivors’ children and allows their voice and perspective to carve out a new expanse of empathy for their troubled parents that transcends facile stereotypes. It is the second generation’s memory and gaze that defines and communicates the plight of the victim. Moreover, the book also positions the survivor, which up until the 1980s was culturally marginalised, in the centremost point of the narrative. This positioning attests to the new sensibility in Israeli society, a sensibility that led to the ushering in of an era of openness and awareness about the Seventh Million, the term historian Tom Segev used to describe the waves of survivor immigrants who came to Israel after the Holocaust looking for a safe haven. The book hones in masterfully on the spiritual and physical pain that did not evaporate when Holocaust survivors sought refuge in Israel. Almagor finds new ways of showing how the past was purposefully contained out of a desire to construct normalcy and a new identity and life. Almagor has observed that at times she feels as if the entire Israeli nation suffers from “survivor syndrome,” a legacy of anguish that was unwittingly transferred on to the children of the survivors

²⁴ Almagor, *The Summer of Aviya*, 63.

²⁵ Almagor, *The Summer of Aviya*, 58.

As the book's end reveals, Henya relapses into emotional and psychiatric instability and is unable to rebuild her shattered life. The book avoids delivering the happy, upbeat ending that so often typifies the mood of young-adult fiction. Yet there is no denying that despite the ordeal and anguish of the summer, Aviya (the second generation) has matured and has become more resilient. She recognises that Gantz, the father she imaginably 'adopted' was simply a young girl's fantasy. Moreover, having her ties with the viscerally paralysing past broken means that she finally accepts her world as it is and is able to go on without her mother's figure overshadowing her future trek. Having overcome the unbearably bleak summer of meanness by the village children and her mother's lapses into dark moments, Aviya will undoubtedly blossom in her new home.

Looking back, more than thirty years after its initial publication, *The Summer of Aviya* is still considered a classic in more ways than one. The novella was a best seller, was reprinted in more than 15 Israeli editions, and included as part of the required syllabus in Israeli schools. Almagor adapted the book into a one-woman play in which she starred in hundreds of performances.

A journey into the fractured mind of a survivor, *The Summer of Aviya's* carefully framed meditation on the long-lasting impact of persecution and the unwelcoming stance of Israeli society of the 1940s and 1950s represented a new mode of engagement with this subject matter. To be sure, *The Summer of Aviya* vividly brought home to Israelis an immersive experience of a faraway valley of misery and anguish that for too long was relegated to its own little acre within Israeli public discourse, but now was validated, and consequently steamed, into national consciousness, in a geyser of engagement that has still not abated.

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