

**BETWEEN PARENTS AND PRINCIPAL: SOCIAL DRAMA IN
A SYNAGOGUE SCHOOL**

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A common conflict between parents and a principal in a synagogue school is analyzed in terms of Turner's "social drama." The analysis suggests why synagogues are vulnerable to these conflicts, how these conflicts unfold and how the way stakeholders play their roles contributes to a cohesive or disharmonious outcome to the drama.

To understand the dilemma of the principal one must begin by recognizing that he views his role, as do many others, as implying leadership....The principal wants to be and to feel influential. His dilemma begins when he realizes that words and power, far from guaranteeing intended outcomes, may be ineffectual...When he encounters hostility and resistance to his ideas for change, he feels he has one or two alternative means of response: assert his authority or withdraw from the fray. The usual consequence of either response is to widen the psychological gap and to increase the feelings of isolation of those involved. (Sarason, 1971: 129)

Sarason is raising the dilemma of the public school principal awakened to the reality that for all the symbolic power invested in the office of principal, once the principal begins to exercise power in the service of change, resistance is almost inevitable. How he handles that resistance may become the best indicator of the principal's actual capacity to exercise leadership in the school.

The incident to be analyzed in this paper takes place in a synagogue and not a public school and involves not teachers' resistance to ideas for change, but parental challenge to established practice. Nevertheless, Sarason's warning that the principal who views her options as to either assert authority or withdraw from the fray is likely to cause damage to the school whichever of these options is chosen is most relevant to the thesis of the paper. This study is the story of choosing a third option, one that preserves the integrity of the school's policy while allowing the resisters -- the parents in question -- to have

their say and remain attached to the school, the host synagogue and the principal whose policy they have challenged.

Synagogue or congregational education differs from public school education not only in the content taught, but also in structural arrangement. While public schools are the creations of local municipalities, they are not literally embedded within the structure of a host organization. Congregational schools are housed within their host synagogues and receive not only their financial base from synagogue, but also their religious and educational direction from the clerical and lay leadership of that synagogue (Reimer, 1990). This embeddedness complicates the role of the principal of the congregational school. For when there is controversy over school policy, the temple educator ends up dealing with not only the parents involved but also the rabbis and lay leaders who have a great stake in the operations of the school within their synagogue.

This is a study of one such controversy that was initiated by a group of parents who sought a change in their synagogue's policy about the number of days a week that children were required to attend the school in the years before bar or bat mitzvah. They questioned, as parents often have done, the need for a more time-intensive Jewish education. The focus of this study is upon the dynamics of the controversy, on how the parties to the controversy, the principal, the parents, the rabbi and the lay leaders, each played out their roles in a "social drama" that arose from the initial parental challenge.

"Social drama" is a term borrowed from anthropologist Victor Turner (1974) to describe a certain type of dramatic conflict between members of a close-knit social organization that unfolds in a predictable sequence. It begins with a breach in the normative order of the organization. The breach sets in motion a crisis that spreads as other members of the organization are drawn into the conflict and take sides in the emerging conflict between those who defend the existing norms and those who have challenged them. As the prolongation and intensification of the conflict threatens the solidarity of the social organization, there arise mediating voices who seek redress and attempt a resolution to the crisis that will preserve the integrity of the organization while maintaining some balance between the opposing sides. How the attempts at resolution will succeed are hard to predict, for according to Turner, the social drama reaches its decisive, "liminal," moment at that point. The opposing sides could find redress to their conflict and actually move into a closer social realignment, or the failure to find redress could lead to more intense social conflict and threaten the viability of the social organization.

I join Myerhoff (1980) and Heilman (1983) in suggesting that Jewish organizations, such as synagogues, that sponsor family-like relations among their members are particularly vulnerable to the conflicts that lead to the "social dramas" that Turner has described. I further suggest that professionals, such as the temple educator, who work in these organizations are likely to find themselves caught up in these dramas which can leave them feeling both overwhelmed and undermined. Learning how to play one's role in the drama can be very helpful to both preserving one's sanity and helping the other players in the synagogue to have out their disagreements without permanently damaging the integrity of the organization.

METHODOLOGY

The observations for this paper were gathered as part of a two year ethnographic study (1989-91) that I conducted in a major metropolitan area of two Reform synagogues and their schools. The study focused on the intersection between synagogue and school: on the ways that the adult congregation supported and participated in the life of the school, and also on how the ambivalences about Jewish life that the adults exhibited found their way into and influenced the students' learning in the school.

I chose to look at one large, urban synagogue and one medium-sized suburban synagogue to get a sense of how the variables of size and location may influence the intersection of synagogue and school. However, in this paper I report only on Temple Hillel, the suburban congregation. In both sites I extensively interviewed the rabbi, principal and teachers of the school, but relied primarily on participatory observation in both the activities of the school and synagogue as my means for gathering data. As in the controversy to be described, I tried to capture the social life of the synagogue and its school as it unfolded in the observable routines of congregational life.

Temple Hillel: Temple Hillel¹ is a medium-size Reform congregation established in the late 1950's in a suburban community of a large metropolitan area. While this metropolitan area has a substantial Jewish population, this suburban town is not predominantly Jewish in population or character. Yet, it has enough of a Jewish population to support a Reform and a Conservative synagogue that draw members from this and surrounding towns. The town's reputation for having an excellent public school system is an important attraction for its Jewish population.

As of 1990-91 Temple Hillel had 660 members, most of whom are well-educated professionals, liberal in political orientation and supportive of both a strong Jewish educational program and, for a Reform temple, a more traditionalist-orientation in worship. Rabbi Ted Kates has served the Temple since the early 1970's, and for most of those years the congregation has also employed a full-time educator. More recently, they have added a full-time assistant rabbi to the staff whose primary responsibilities are youth work and outreach.

Sally Tessler, the temple educator, has been running the K-12 school for over a decade. The school has a population of 300 students and is structured so that children in grades K to 3 attend the school once a week while those in grades 4 to 7 attend three days a week. The high school, grades 8 to 12, meets one evening a week and is supplemented by an active synagogue youth group.

Tessler received an extensive Jewish education in her native New York and is currently serving in her second position in this area as a temple educator. Her primary responsibility is to be principal of the synagogue school, but she also more generally oversees the Temple's whole educational program. She enjoys a very solid reputation as educator both within the congregation and in the larger Jewish educational community.

Tessler also enjoys a close working relationship with Rabbi Kates and the younger Rabbi Birnbaum. Both rabbis teach in the high school and the family education program. She speaks with them on a regular basis, and from my observations, there is a high degree of mutual respect and informality to their interactions. There is very little evidence of the hierarchical work relations that one sees at times in larger congregations.

Under Sally Tessler's leadership Temple Hillel has developed an extensive family education program which begins in the kindergarten year and extends, though not continuously, through the 7th grade level. On almost any Sunday morning that school is in session one can see one or more groups of parents participating in a family education program. Some of these are focused on parents' Jewish learning and others on educational activities for parents and children. Participation is voluntary, but almost two-thirds of the eligible families have chosen regular involvement. Parent groups are organized by grade so that parents of 3rd or 4th graders study together and, once a month, have a joint family activity with their children who are in that grade.

Third grade is the first year in which parents come on a regular twice-a-month basis for family education. Rabbi Birnbaum teaches this group, and they as families attended a Shabbat retreat in

the Fall with Rabbi Birnbaum and Ms. Tessler. After the retreat a sense of closeness seems to have developed among the parents and between them and the professional staff.

The Controversy: Given this closeness, it came almost as a complete surprise to Sally Tessler when on a Sunday morning in January several of the involved third grade parents approached her with a request to begin a pilot two day a week program for next year's fourth grade. These parents were asking if some of the children could switch to a two rather than three day program in fourth grade.

I was not present for this conversation but heard about it the next day from Sally. She is usually an exuberant narrator of school events, but this time the pain in her voice caught me by surprise. This request was a blow to her pride. She felt that potentially "the school could be going down the tubes." Even though a principal in a nearby synagogue school assured her that in her school this kind of parental request comes up almost every year, Sally felt let down, disappointed. How could *these* parents be making *this* request? Is this the dividend that family education yields?

However, Sally did not act defeated. Having told the parents that three day a week attendance was a long-standing Temple policy, she referred them to Mort Horowitz, the lay chair of the religious school committee. That same day she called Mort, alerted him of this parental request and asked if this request could be placed on the agenda of the committee's next meeting. Sally then called her colleagues in other local synagogue schools to find out their policies and how they handle these types of requests. She learned that while it has become common practice in this metropolitan area for a great majority of Reform and Conservative synagogues to insist on three days of schooling for these grades, it was not uncommon for parents to prefer and advocate for fewer hours of instruction.

What she could not do, though she very much wanted to, was to consult with Ted Kates. One week before the parents approached Sally, Ted had left for a half-year sabbatical. Sally was certain he would have offered her the support she needed at this moment. She wanted *the* rabbi present, articulating with his unique combination of eloquence, firmness and gentleness the message that this congregation stood for a maximal Jewish education.²

In the absence of Ted Kates, Sally turned to Bob Birnbaum, the younger rabbi, to enlist his support. On that same Sunday morning in January, Bob had an unusually emotional session with the third grade parents in family education. The group had been discussing what expectations they as parents have of their children when the topic

turned to intermarriage. A number of the parents in the group are intermarried and began pressing hard for the rabbi to explain why he does not officiate at intermarriages.³ By his own account, Bob stood his ground firmly, but worried that he might have offended some people in taking a hard stand. He shared that anxiety with Sally.

The coincidence of these two events caused Sally further concern. If Bob Birnbaum was anxious that in taking a hard stand on intermarriage he may have offended congregants, would he be able to take an unambivalently firm stand on three days of schooling? Could Bob, as the assistant rabbi, be as effective in defending the current policy as she believed Ted Kates would be?

After this "bloody Sunday" in January a period of calm followed. Sally heard no more from these parents and three weeks later, when I spoke to Mort Horowitz, he had not yet received a request to put this item on the committee's agenda. As it turned out, the organizing parents were using this time to gather parental support for their proposal. A letter went out without Sally's knowledge to all third grade parents, and according to the leaders' report, 19 of 31 sets of parents indicated interest in the two day proposal. With that support in hand, they approached Mort and received permission to present their case to the Religious School Committee (henceforth, R.S.C.).

I spoke to Sally the day before the scheduled R.S.C. meeting in February. She had met with Bob Birnbaum and Mort Horowitz to plan a unified strategy for the meeting, contacted the other members of the R.S.C. to share her concerns and completed her research on the policies of the other synagogue schools in the area. Still Sally was feeling "very emotional about this issue" and viewed the proposal as "going backwards to become a lesser school." She even hinted she might not continue as temple educator if this proposal were adopted because it went against all she stood for.

I wondered how a mature, self-confident professional like Sally Tessler could be pushed to such disenchantment by these parents' actions. I had little doubt that she had lined up the political support she would need to counter the parental request and that the lay leadership would not approve a major shift in educational policy. Yet Sally did not *feel* secure, which I interpret not as a matter of her personal insecurity, but as a comment on the still precarious position of Jewish education in the synagogue. The principal and the rabbis had worked hard to draw the parents into the temple's value system; however, the bottom line was that some of the most articulate parents in this group saw the issue differently. That realization, coupled with Ted Kates' absence, was leaving Sally feeling insecure.

The R.S.C. meeting was the stage on which this social drama would be enacted (Heilman, 1983). These meetings were held monthly on an evening during the week in a large classroom in the school. This evening Mort Horowitz and the committee members, Bob Birnbaum and Sally Tessler were seated on one side of the classroom. On the other side, were the seven third grade parents, all mothers, who had come to present their case. Seated between the two groups was the president of the congregation who had been invited by Mort to attend this particular meeting.

I had asked Mort Horowitz if I could attend this meeting, but as I was not a regular observer in this context, he felt my observing presence might make a tense situation even tenser. However, a teacher in the school, who had been a student of mine, had been invited by Sally to attend. I spoke with her and she agreed to keep careful notes to share with me. The account that follows is based on her notes.

In presenting their case, the third grade parents' selected a spokesperson who stressed her group's loyalty to the Temple, their desire to see their children become bar or bat mitzvah and hence their wish for a Hebrew program.⁴ They were not threatening to leave the Temple, but making a request for flexibility, suggesting an experiment with a pilot two day program. The spokesperson identified herself as a psychologist and said a number of the group are in the field of mental health. As parents they are concerned with the pressure their children are under from public school and with their need for "down-time." Three days a week adds too much extra pressure on already burdened children. The committee needed to be more responsive to the families' needs and work with the parents to design a more manageable program.

The members of the R.S.C., most of whom are also parents of children in the school, responded with a passionate defense of the three day program. This school runs an educational program which has gained communal recognition for its excellence. The three days are needed for purposes of socialization, for the creating of a Jewish atmosphere in which children can feel nurtured and befriend one another. The children have responded very positively to the program. One member related with tears in her eyes how sad she felt that her child had not been able to keep up with the three day program. Her child has special needs and arrangements were made for a special program. However, she felt her child was missing so much for not being there for the regular three day program. How could these parents not see how much their children would be missing if they did not attend for three days?

The third grade parents persisted. The program was repetitive and did not need to be five hours a week. The children grew bored with that much instruction. In addition to citing their own experiences, they had received far less intensive Jewish educations and still grew to feel strongly identified as Jews. Are all these extra hours really needed to accomplish the goal of developing a strong Jewish identity?

Sally, who sat stonefaced throughout the exchange, spoke up in a neutral tone to explain that the five hours of instruction were for second language instruction in which there is a need for more contact hours and review of skills. Bob Birnbaum was more animated. He spoke of his experience with the teenage youth of the temple, who have a very positive assessment of their religious school experience. He cited the impressive statistic of over 90% of the seventh grade class continuing their Jewish education beyond bar mitzvah. He also mentioned that he had spoken to Rabbi Kates who was fully in support of the three day program.

The exchange continued for over an hour and a half with Mort Horowitz facilitating the discussion. Finally, a third grade parent asked: "Is there a chance that we will have a pilot two day program for our kids next year?" Mort responded that the synagogue board would have to approve such a change, and he did not think that would happen. Speaking as rabbi, Bob said "You are asking me to sanction less of a Jewish education and I can't do that." The parents asked the committee to be more responsive to their needs and Mort concluded: "If your only definition of responsive is for me to say we will have a two day program next year, then, no, we're not responsive. But you have valid and important concerns and I think we've begun an important process I'd like to continue."

The third grade parents left disappointed. The committee with Sally, Bob and the president remained behind for an additional hour to discuss the situation. Some of the committee members were angry, feeling these parents were only out for their own convenience. The president, who had not spoken through the meeting, said he had come with an open mind but had been convinced by the R.S.C.'s arguments. Mort stressed the process, not the complaint, and felt an important dialogue with parents had begun. With committee approval he planned to speak to the larger group of third grade parents at the next family education session to explain the committee's position and ask for more parental feedback on the school program. He also sought and, subsequently, received the backing of the synagogue board for the committee's stand.

Though there had been previous parental rumblings about the three day program, this was the first organized parental attempt in Sally's term to alter this policy. It came not as a frontal attack on Sally or even a challenge to the school's basic principles, but as a request to be responsive to the needs of loyal congregants, to be flexible and experiment with a pilot project for the next year. The spokesperson spoke in the discourse of social science and mental health about the plight of the dual career family and the hurried child.

What carried the day was the solidity of support for the three day program. Even with the senior rabbi away and the president initially neutral, Sally had lined up the R.S.C.'s support and Mort lined up the board's support. The solid support grew out of congregational tradition, but more primarily out of the on-going performance ratings of the school. When, on the following Sunday, Mort met with the third grade parents in the family education group, he could report that his children's enthusiasm for the school and their ability to come home from synagogue school and still do their public school homework had convinced him the program was well-conceived.

As principal Sally was shrewd enough to avoid a showdown between herself and the protesting parents. Had she played the hand of authority and ruled the parental request out of hand, she would have been violating the established processes of synagogue governance. The parents are members of the synagogue and have the right to be heard. Had Sally made this a personal contest between herself and these parents, she would have lost the credibility she had long ago established as a professional who is respectful of the lay leadership and its right to establish policy for the synagogue and its school. Had Sally refused to attend the committee meeting, she would also have lost face as someone with the maturity and distance to hear out even those petitions which she most forcefully opposes.

The third option that Sally chose was to do her political homework and quietly gather the support she would need so that at the crucial moment she could allow others within the synagogue structure to carry forward the argument for the three day program. Contrary to her initial fear, Bob Birnbaum rose to the occasion, invoked Rabbi Kates and firmly refused "to sanction less of a Jewish education." However, it was really the other parents on the committee, including Mort Horowitz, who carried the argument forward with the greatest passion. It was a case of the policy holding not because of a rabbinic or educator authority, but because of leadership support from the congregation. The principal and the rabbis had helped to make these values manifest in the congregational leadership so that when a crisis

arose, the board and the R.S.C. defended in their own terms the existent policy of the school.

SOCIAL DRAMA

How are we to understand why these parents at this time staged this "uprising" when they too must have known that Sally had the political support in the congregational leadership to defeat their proposal?

It is here that the concept of a "social drama," as developed by Turner (1974) and expanded upon by Heilman (1983) and Myerhoff (1980), proves helpful. For sometimes in social organizations, members may challenge the existent normative order not because they expect to change policy in the short run, but in order to dramatically represent a point of view or interest that is not being sufficiently heard within the organization.

In Turner's view, a social drama is initiated when one party challenges the norms or rules of the organization in a public way that initiates a crisis within the organization. In our case the parents clearly were not satisfied to talk privately to Sally and Mort and hear their polite, but firm "no." They took action by writing the clandestine letter and gaining broader parental support. Organizing behind Sally's back (as Sally saw it) was the challenge that initiated the crisis that had to be dealt with at the R.S.C. meeting.

Why do so? Neither Sally nor the most members of the R.S.C. believed the parents' stated motivation of alleviating the plight of their overpressured children. This suburban community is famous for its pressured public school system; people move there for those schools. Rather the assumption was that there was a covert parental agenda or set of agendas.

As I reread both the R.S.C. meeting and Mort's appearance before the larger group of 3rd grade parents, I hear a theme that does not often emerge clearly in school-parent dialogue, but which finds expression here. The mothers, referring back to their own experiences, admit candidly that they did not receive as intensive Jewish educations as Temple Hillel offers in its three day program: yet, in their view, they emerged as strongly-identified Jews. If that is the case, why should they be bending their schedules out of shape to get their children here twice on weekday afternoons?

The question is a serious one. Reform Judaism as a movement has, since the days these mothers were children, abandoned the position that a one day Sunday school education is sufficient and has often

instituted three day a week programs. They, as other movements, have placed greater emphasis on learning Hebrew and about the Jewish tradition. Yet, how do these changes, instituted by the professional and lay leaders of the movement, reflect back on the lives of the rank and file members whose personal goals for their children may be less Judaically ambitious? If what they want for their children is to become the kind of Jews that they are, is all this Jewish education really necessary?

This question becomes both more poignant and complex for the sizable minority of parents who are partners in an intermarriage. These parents have committed themselves to raising their children as Jews and are seeking the aid of the synagogue school in providing the necessary education, but may be wondering how to establish the right balance in their lives. The synagogue says it wants to provide their family with the same education as everyone else receives, but the question may arise (and not in these families alone) how much Jewishness is enough without being too much? Do the children need to become that much more Jewish than their parents are?

If this theme was being played out in the drama, Mort Horowitz may have been the one to most clearly address it. At the subsequent family education meeting, speaking parent to parent, he told the others that when several years earlier his family moved into this community, he too had reservations about the three day program and doubts about whether his children could comfortably carry the double load. However, his parental experience has won him over. Not only have his children done well academically in both public school and the synagogue school, but his child is the only Jew in his class in public school and looks forward to coming to the synagogue school where he can be with other Jewish children and "put his guard down and share in a different way."

Both Heilman (1985) and Schoem (1989) have noted the power of this theme of the synagogue school as the last ghetto, as the remnant of the old Jewish neighborhood that exists no longer in the suburbs these families inhabit. Perhaps it does remain a mystery to most parents why the children need so much Hebrew; however, they do understand that in a world that erodes ethnic and religious differences, their children may still need and appreciate the little extra time in the "old neighborhood" where their being different as Jews is socially affirmed by peers and significant adults. By speaking to this parental concern and linking the three day policy to the creation of a sense of neighborhood, Mort may have offered the redress that could win the

third grade parents back to the normative perspective of the lay and professional leadership.

What then got resolved by the social drama? Here Barbara Myerhoff (1980) is very helpful. While Turner is interested primarily in how social drama results in changes in social relations within the group, Myerhoff notes that a drama can also become a *definitional ceremony* -- an opportunity for participants to "review their commitments to their beliefs, their ties to one another and clarify their understanding of their identity *by having once more performed it*" (p.150, Emphases added). Her point is that performing a belief or commitment through staging a drama is different than consciously stating it. It is a way of acting out what members cannot state, but do feel and believe.

The social drama allowed these parents to first enact their differences from the normative structure. They have been sending their children to the school and have themselves been attending the family education sessions, but that does not mean they buy into the full normative order of synagogue policy. As Bob Birnbaum discovered that Sunday morning in January, some parents have real trouble accepting the rabbi's policy of not officiating at intermarriages. As Sally Tassler discovered, some parents have trouble accepting the need for as intensive a Jewish education as is being offered.

At the same time, the parents were demonstrating their attachment to this temple. They were not staging this drama as a prelude to leaving, but as a way of staying. Theirs is a very welcoming congregation that has made them feel at home. As Myerhoff and family therapists have noted, fomenting crisis in a family-like context can be a way of expressing attachment even while demonstrating distance and difference (see, Haley, 1980). The paradox here that caught Sally off guard was that as the parents were feeling more involved and closer to the synagogue authorities as a result of participating in the family education program, they felt both the need and permission to stage this drama. Social drama does not occur among strangers, but rather among people who feel attached to one another and yet experience a conflict in values that needs dramatic expression.

Purim, the festive Jewish holiday that celebrates the social drama of the Jews' narrow escape from the hands of the anti-semitic Haman, fell on the calendar one night after the R.S.C. meeting. A few days after Purim, I spoke with Sally who told me, now quite calmly, that she had sat during the *megillah* reading with the parents who led the opposition. Bob Birnbaum had asked how she could do that, and she responded, "Life goes on." She added to me that whatever the

parents may be feeling is now their business. Her calm, I believe, was a result not of winning a battle as much as feeling a potential for renewed commitment to the school. Perhaps it is as Turner describes: the last stage of the social drama is a social realignment in which the two sides either draw closer or move more irrevocably apart. In this case, having had their say through the drama, each side now felt free to move closer to one another.

CONCLUSION

After the events described, none of the involved third grade families either left the synagogue or stopped attending the regular family education sessions. By the summer one family, after close consultation with the rabbi, decided to leave for another synagogue that offered a less intensive Jewish educational program. The others were offered the option of a one day program for their children, but none chose it. Two of the spokespersons for the group expressed interest in and later joined as members of the religious school committee that had affirmed the three day policy.

Turner describes the period during which the social drama reaches its crisis as a "liminal moment" when the constructed social order is at risk. During this period no one can tell whether the drama will result in greater social consolidation or disharmony. How the actors play their role in the drama is one important factor in determining the drama's conclusion.

As an observer, I grew to appreciate Sally Tessler's capacity as principal to absorb the fury of the crisis and still act her role in the drama with skill and restraint. She was careful not to alienate while opposing. Rather than basking in the glory of winning, she was quick to seek social ties with the very parents who opposed her. As hurt as she was, Sally was able to put the good of the social organization above any personal need for retribution.

However, Sally could not have acted alone, for a synagogue school is deeply embedded within the culture of the host congregation. Both Mort Horowitz and Bob Birnbaum were key players in the drama. The rabbi needed to stand his ground firmly to keep the immediate crisis from spreading to the rest of the congregation. As long as it was clear that neither the rabbis nor the board would give much ground on this issue, the crisis could be contained within this one incident.

Mort as lay leader played the equally key role of redress. By coming before the third grade parents and speaking parent to parent, heart to heart, about the very real dilemma of balancing public with

religious school, secular with religious life, he helped turn a crisis into a conversation. His openness to continue the dialogue and bring the dissidents into the religious school committee allowed the potential rift in the congregation to be turned towards a positive social realignment.

NOTES

¹ All names used in this account have been changed.

² Several weeks later Mort Horowitz, the chairman of the school committee, would repeat this message to me in almost the same words.

³ Intermarriage is defined here as when one partner of the couple is Jewish and the other is not.

⁴ There is a one-day a week non-Hebrew which is an option at Temple Hillel, but has not been exercised in the last decade. This Sunday-only option would not lead the child's becoming a Bar or Bat Mitzvah.

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