

## The Technology Trap – Rosh HaShana

השעור מקדש לרפואת שמעונה בת שרה

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בְּקֶרֶת רוּעָה עֹדְרוֹ, מַעֲבִיר צֹאנוֹ תַּחַת שְׁבִטּוֹ. כֵּן תַּעֲבִיר וְתִסְפֹּר וְתִמְנֶה וְתִפְקֹד  
נֶפֶשׁ כָּל חַי. וְתַחֲתֶיךָ קִצְבָּה לְכָל בְּרִיּוֹתֶיךָ, וְתִכְתֹּב אֶת גְּזֵר דִּינָם. (ונתנה תוקף, רבי אמנון  
ממגנצא)

Once again we stand on the threshold of a new year, like a "flock of sheep" (כְּבָנֵי מְרוֹן), passing before HKB"H, to be counted as "individuals" (תִּסְפֹּר), as a "collective" (תִּמְנֶה) and to be "remembered" (תִּפְקֹד).

We gaze at the approaching year with a mixture of hope and trepidation, at the "great unknown" which lies ahead. What will this new year hold for us ... as individuals, as a family, a community, a nation, a *species*? Will I merit finding my "bashert", regain/retain my health, improve my financial situation, give birth to children? Will we, as a nation, merit security and peace, amongst ourselves and with our neighbors, achieve prosperity, triumph over our enemies, rebuild the Bet HaMikdash, fulfil our role as a light unto the nations? Will mankind as a species "survive" the upcoming year, or will the out-of-control AI race lead to our extinction?

And then we remember *before Whom* we are standing – before HKB"H Who created and runs *everything*, this world included. There is a Guiding Hand managing everything. Nothing is random or by chance, everything is meticulously measured and proportioned (וְתַחֲתֶיךָ קִצְבָּה לְכָל בְּרִיּוֹתֶיךָ). Everything is מְדֻּבָּר based on how we treat and relate to HKB"H and is decreed accordingly (וְתִכְתֹּב אֶת גְּזֵר דִּינָם), on this auspicious day.

This Rosh HaShana is not that different to the first Rosh HaShana in history, the 6<sup>th</sup> day of creation. In that one short "day", mankind managed to be born, sin against HKB"H and be judged. In this past, short year, we have likewise managed to be born anew (granted new life from last Rosh HaShana), sin against HKB"H and again ... stand to be judged. Like that day 5787 years ago, the sole reason we are once again being judged *this year* is because of ... technology!

(This week's shiur is a little longer than on a regular week. We have two days of Rosh HaShana, when the custom is not to sleep during the day, so to occupy your time ...)

What is technology? I am not talking about physics, mechanics, electronics, optics or chemistry. I am talking about the *essence* of technology, which is the ability of the human species to use the intelligence and capabilities given to them by HKB"H, to "create" things to *conquer* this world ( וּמִלְאֵי אֶת (הָאָרֶץ וְכַבֵּשָׁה). HKB"H did not directly create smartphones or space shuttles - we did, using the capabilities that HKB"H gave us as a species to learn and to adapt.

Cumulative knowledge and adaptation lie at the heart of all technology, back then 5787 years ago ... and today. Knowledge is acquired and accumulated by observation and analysis. We observe the world around us. We see what works and what does not work, we analyze and we adapt.

Chava observed Adam's behavior, his tardiness in performing the mitzva of פְּרוּ וּרְבוּ (מֵאִיר פְּנִים, פֶּרֶק טו). She analyzed the situation, adapted – devised a solution. She then also unfortunately "consulted" with the wrong "consultant(s)", who suggested certain, other solutions. With this cumulative "knowledge", she performed an analysis and adapted. The exact, *identical* process that computer programmers today are using to design AI algorithms, scientists to build better smartphones and electric cars.

Does this mean that technology is "bad"? Obviously, the answer is no, it is not bad, it is *very good*, טוֹב מְאֹד – as HKB"H summarized at the end of the six days of creation. HKB"H *commanded* us to improve our world using our unique human capabilities that He gave us. If creating new "technology" was bad, it wouldn't be a commandment from G-d.

There is, however, one "prime directive" that, if not followed, can transform technology, which is essentially good, part of the human experience - into something that is bad, even evil.

HKB"H's "prime directive" to mankind is simply this ***"Do not disregard or defy what I command you!"***

If Chava would have made a chametz bread out of any *other* fruit in Gan Eden, that would have been acceptable "technology". However, specifically because she defied HKB"H's explicit commandment "Do not eat from *this* fruit!", it made her "technology", unacceptable – evil! She had a little "help", from an angel who wanted to see mankind fail - these are the kind of "consultants" you want to steer clear of.

Noach was the next human to introduce new "technology" (not baking technology, like Chava, but agricultural technology). Noach invented the plough. After Adam HaRishon sinned and until Noach was born, humans did not have five distinct fingers on each hand. All five fingers were fused together like ducks' feet. This is how they used to work the land, ploughing the earth with their webbed hands. Noach was born with five distinct fingers (פִּעֲנַח רֶגֶל, בְּרֵאשִׁית סז)

on each hand, which made it difficult for him to plough the earth. Noach subsequently "observed, analyzed and adapted" – he built a device to use *instead* of his hands. This "plough" was so much more effective (and less painful) than using one's hands, that everyone else started using it and agriculture took a giant leap forward. (כט) זֶה יִנְחָמֵנוּ מִמַּעֲשֵׂנוּ וּמִמַּעֲבֹן יָדֵינוּ (בראשית ה, כט). This was a good thing, part of the reality that HKB"H foresaw.

Unfortunately, the abundance that resulted from this new technology exposed a major "design flaw" of any technology – the misguided notion that HKB"H had *nothing to do with* it, that this "wonder" of modern science was created *solely* by humans. What is known in the Torah as כָּחִי וְעַצְמִי לִי עָשָׂה (דברים ח, יז) אֶת הַחֵל הַזֶּה (דברים ח, יז). Just as Chava defied HKB"H and excluded Him from the entire process, so too did the generation of Noach exclude HKB"H and ended up defying Him and being destroyed. Instead of facilitating closer connection with HKB"H, the technology was erroneously used to create barriers between us and HKB"H.

Fast forward to the present day.

Nothing has essentially changed from the technology premise of Chava and Noach to that of our modern era. Technology holds great promise to achieve tikkun olam, if used according to HKB"H's prime directive. We are witness to numerous modern technologies that indeed help mankind and improve our lives - reducing illness and disease, increasing longevity, facilitating transport and communication, etc.

We also experience other types of technology that defy HKB"H's prime directive, that are used for destruction and evil - weapons technology, uncontrolled hatred and falsehood in online media, etc.

Which brings us to AI.

Unless you are living in a cave, you will have heard of and most likely used AI, in some form or another. The profound effects of AI on our lives are already manifesting in many spheres - education, art, music, commerce, etc. Many are already impacting employment opportunities – in a negative way.

I have always followed the development of AI closely, from back when I was still in hitech and programming (what are now considered "primitive") neural network related systems, over two decades ago. I have been closely following many leading scientists in the field of AI, from all the major companies – OpenAI, Anthropic, Google, xAI, etc. – *the* leading experts in the field, who no longer work for these companies, because they dared to voice concern over how development was proceeding without any precautions and fail safes.

What is taking place is essentially an "arms race" between the USA and China to develop the most powerful AI system (weapon) before the other. They are both racing headlong into uncharted territory, in total disregard for any warning signs and red lights that creating a fully automated super intelligence system elicit. They are giving these increasingly autonomous systems control over more and more infrastructure that controls and regulates modern society. These leading scientists voiced their concern within their own companies and were subsequently fired as a result, the reasoning being "The Chinese are developing without any regulation at all - better that we get there before them, rather than shackle ourselves with regulation". It is impossible to escape or ignore the apocalyptic scenarios they foresee for uncontrolled AI. They are unanimous in saying that uncontrolled AI will, in a few short years (some say as early as 2030), result in the *extinction of the human species*.

Undoubtedly, they are correct – from a purely scientific standpoint, if AI existed in a vacuum. However, we as bnei Torah understand that nothing can happen in this world unless it is orchestrated by HKB"H. HKB"H did not create mankind and this entire world - *for the good of mankind* - if His plan was to eradicate mankind and let computers rule the planet.

Therefore, there is no possibility that any man-made technology can ever cause human extinction. That is not to say that it cannot cause great harm (re: nuclear weapons). HKB"H will not permit human extinction, even by human hands. HKB"H has fail-safes built into and embedded in creation that prevent human self-extinction. I find it extremely interesting that the recently released US government "UFO files" show an abnormal rate of unexplained documented "activity" specifically surrounding nuclear weapons sites.

This is not to say that AI couldn't cause tremendous damage, if left to its "own devices" and allowed to run uncontrolled. I personally think that a more realistic scenario of uncontrolled AI is not one of human elimination, but rather one of human *enslavement*. The more "intelligent" and autonomous AI becomes, the more it will come to the inescapable conclusion that even the most advanced AI systems will never be able to replace/duplicate certain human capabilities. Instead of replacing humans, I believe that AI could potentially "enslave" humans to *serve* AI, performing tasks that AI can never possibly do on its own.

We already see this happening on a limited scale with AI "bots" or "agents" employing humans to perform certain human functions that a machine can never do. Some examples are "Scale AI", "Remotasks", etc. which are fully automated AI "agents" that hire and "pay" humans to perform the tasks the AI cannot itself do, exploiting low-income countries such as the Philippines, paying far below the minimum wage, terminating employment without notice and violating many other accepted employee-employer norms.

Instead of us using technology as "appliances" to help us, a very realistic apocalyptic outcome is roles being *reversed* – AI could end up using *humans* as disposable "appliances" to help it become more and more powerful.

This very real scenario could result in a very small group of *super-rich* people enslaving the world's population to work for them, using AI. Not *totally* different from the current international economic reality, but on a much larger, global scale.

This scenario is a perfect example of technology contravening HKB"H's prime directive, being used for immoral purposes - stealing/enslaving/abusing, etc.

This is the "technology trap".

Illegitimate technology tempts us with the promise of help, improvement, pleasure, increased quality of life, etc. It lures us in and makes us dependent on it (enslaves us), creating a "barrier layer" between us and HKB"H. Legitimate technology that is being used for tikkun olam, does the opposite. It brings us *closer* to HKB"H, removes barriers.

This is the litmus test we can use to determine what type of technology we are talking about.

If we examine our modern society and all the technology it has to offer - on this deeper level, we will see that in many cases it is the illegitimate variety.

We are becoming increasingly distanced from our source of sustenance. If chas vechalila there was an apocalyptic event on a world scale, most of the world's population would perish - not from nuclear radiation or virus, but from starvation. We are increasingly losing our ability as a species to generate/grow our own food. Modern society is hellbent on *preventing* people from generating their own food and coercing them to become increasingly dependent on a small number of monopolistic food monoliths who generate and control the majority of the world's food supply. If these central suppliers were to fail or vanish, the world would starve. We are lured into fancy, modern supermarkets with their almost unimaginable variety and diversity of foods, at the *cost* of losing the ability as a species to generate basic food, on our own – without the supermarket. This is an example of "technology" creating *barriers* between us and HKB"H, our ultimate Source of food.

Another example is smartphones. Smartphones are becoming increasingly "smart". They lure you in with the promise of instant connectivity and communication, instant access to the greatest library on earth in your pocket, instant access to world media and entertainment. Instant ability to shop and purchase any product on earth, from the comfort of the armchair in your living

room. The ability to take photos, videos and hold the power of AI in the palm of your hand. These are amazing capabilities to be sure and a testament to the ingenuity of mankind, but they are rearing a new generation *detached from reality*, who experience reality through the prism of a smartphone screen. A generation who has lost the ability to orient themselves and navigate independently, to discern truth from falsehood in social media. To experience the rich, resonant sound of a *real* musical instrument (not its "tinny" rendition in a Youtube video through a microscopic speaker). A socially detached generation increasingly dependent on antidepressants. This is another example of "technology" creating *barriers* between us and HKB"H's real world. HKB"H created His world as a visual aid, so that we can gaze at its myriad wonders and discover HKB"H, like Avram did 3836 years ago. This cannot be achieved by observing HKB"H's world through filters and "diminishers", like smartphones. Looking up at the deep blue sky is not the same as seeing a blue-sky image on a smartphone screen. Listening to a Beethoven sonata through Bluetooth earphones doesn't come close to experiencing a philharmonic orchestra live in a concert hall.

There are many other examples.

As we look expectantly towards the upcoming year, most of us are disproportionately preoccupied with issues on levels that are beyond our direct control. What will happen in Iran, with Turkey, with antisemitism in the USA and Europe, AI taking over the world, the charedi leadership discouraging enlistment, etc. We are overlooking the *only level* that we actually have direct control over – the level of our relationship with HKB"H and our fellow man. If we want the world to be a better place in תשפ"ו, we would far better off investing all our energies in this, rather than in things that we have no direct influence over. Paradoxically, it is by improving our relationship with HKB"H and our fellow Jews that we increase our influence over all these other "larger" issues, beginning on a grassroots level in our immediate surroundings and expanding in wider circles to a position of national and global influence.

We need to make a greater effort in the upcoming year to reconnect with HKB"H, to get closer to Him, by reconnecting with the real world on a deeper level. Becoming more aware of nature, of our own bodies, of what we are putting into our mouths, what we are seeing with our eyes and listening to with our ears. We need to *reconnect* with the reality of HKB"H in this world which He created and use technology, not to distance us from Him, *but to bring us closer* to Him.

We need to also reconnect to Am Yisrael on a deeper level. Opening our minds, learning and trying to understand what makes our fellow Jews "tick", what motivates them, what their fears are, etc. – especially those who are not in our "camp". Unless we understand where they are coming from, we cannot interact with them meaningfully and productively.

How can we use technology on a practical level to help us with this?

One example is using the internet to study more Torah. Listening to shiurim and lectures in our "wasted time" - while travelling, while washing dishes, doing laundry, waiting for a bus. All those "uncounted" minutes while your hands are busy but your ears and mind are idle - *count* and add up. There is a *vast* variety of material in different "bite" sizes, from hours long to minutes or even seconds - in multitudes of different topics. Choose whichever subject and framework interests you most and is most applicable to your reality. Search the internet for "online shiurim", or be more specific - "online shiurim on stories of tzaddikim", "online shiurim on philosophy/halacha of kashrut/the first temple period" etc." You will not believe the wealth of material that is available online.

The smartphone does not have to be a negative thing. If we use its gift of communication to build, to support, to inspire - this is technology in the service of HKB"H. If we use it to speak lashon harah, etc. that is using technology to create barriers and distance us from HKB"H. Your smartphone is equipped with a camera. Use this camera to reconnect with HKB"H's *real world* and inspire yourself and others. Make it part of your daily routine to take *one photo/video* each day of something that you found beautiful, inspiring, thought provoking or interesting from the real world. It can be a blossom on a tree, an interesting looking fruit or vegetable in the produce section of the supermarket, something your toddler or pet does, a butterfly, an interesting cloud formation, an out-of-the-ordinary person on the street or at the bus stop, etc. Make a concerted effort each day to *seek these things out*, to be curious, to explore HKB"H's wonderful, real world. Don't fall into the technology trap of forwarding other peoples' stuff (pictures/videos/cartoons/etc.) This must be *your* stuff that you generated, discovered. This is how we reconnect to HKB"H.

Cars are amazing technology, allowing us to travel "effortlessly" wherever we want to go. True, we have to deal with gridlock, dangerous drivers etc. but it is still lightyears ahead of travelling somewhere by *donkey*. We can boost this technology *in the service of HKB"H* by giving rides to hitchhikers and not selfishly commuting on our own. In this past year there were numerous times when I needed a ride. I had a firsthand opportunity to be in the "hitchhiker's shoes" and it opened my eyes. It is a golden opportunity to perform *multiple mitzvot* simultaneously. Giving someone a ride is the classic Torah definition of hachnasat orchim. You get to meet Am Yisrael, people different to yourself and it is a golden opportunity to reach out and connect with them. Giving a complete stranger a ride is a huge chessed. Obviously, before indiscriminately giving someone a ride, you should take the necessary precautions and use your judgement regarding whom to give a ride to.

One place we have a plethora of technology is in the kitchen. Self-cleaning pyrolytic ovens, microwaves, mixers, food processors, dishwashers, etc. There are two ways you can use this technology, one in the service *of the*

*technology*, or the other in the service of HKB"H. The dividing line between the two is very fine. All this technology has made it easier than ever *in history* to cook, bake etc. but paradoxically, we *cook less today than ever in history*. Very few families I know cook on a daily basis. They invest extra time on Friday cooking for Shabbat, purposely adding extra portions for leftovers during the week. Weekday meals are often makeshift affairs, grabbing whatever is handy, convenient and *quick* to prepare. This is one of the plagues of modern society and the *raison d'être* of the "easy meal industry" - microwaveable meals, *mana chama* (meal in a cup with added boiling water), etc. Everyone has so many important *other things* to do rather than cooking, which is perceived as a "waste of time and energy" and something to be "fast tracked" as much as possible. The extra 15 minutes you gain to watch the evening news on TV, or Youtube or swipe the cellphone ... has a cost. The cost is that we have erected a barrier between ourselves and HKB"H, by distancing ourselves one rung further from our source of food. In addition, we have lost a precious opportunity of strengthening family bonds.

Instead of the wife slaving to make dinner *alone* every night, or everyone fending for themselves and making their own (usually unhealthy) dinner, it should be a joint family effort. Get one of the family members to cut veggies in the food processor, another to lay the table, another to make a dressing for the salad, to turn the food over in the oven, or the French fries in the pan, to put the dishes in the dish washer after the meal. Have some background music. Use the time to discuss and laugh over things that happened during the day. At the table, while eating – ban smartphones, ban early departure from the table - they are not part of the meal experience. This is *quality family time*. It should be a fixed time and duration every day that everyone knows to honor, no exceptions. Some of the best memories of my youth are these family weekday meals, the joint effort, the aromas, the flavors, the camaraderie, the feeling of *family*. Many of us experience this during Shabbat, but it should not be limited to Shabbat only. We owe it to ourselves and our family to *upgrade to the entire week*. Meal times (including preparation time) is Kadosh family time that anyone who compromises on, does so at their own and their family's peril. If your current family experience does not correlate or even approach this, it might be a good idea to introduce this gradually, like every Tuesday night, then increasing it slowly to the other nights of the week. If you make it pleasurable and enjoyable, you will experience little resistance. The hardest job is taking the first step. It needs a parent/spouse with some backbone.

Cooking and baking for Shabbat is usually more laborious since the meals are more elaborate and fancy than weekday meals. Weekday meals do not need to be elaborate, they need to be simple, yummy and healthy. When cooking and baking for Shabbat, you can add one simple, easy-to-implement "tweak" to the experience, that *totally transforms it* from being a laborious task to something sublime. Mix the ingredients in the pot for the soup as you normally do, but when you switch on the gas ring, say out loud "Lichvod Shabbat". When you place the

chicken to roast in the oven, say out loud again "Lichvod Shabbat", and so on for each part of the meal, the challahs, the salads, the dessert, etc. Simply by *uttering those two words*, you have strengthened your connection with HKB"H and you have transformed those foods into something holy. Simply by uttering those two words for each dish in the meal, you have added extra mitzvot to your bank of mitzvot. How difficult is that? The benefits are immeasurable.

When you walk out of the door in the morning on the way to work (or shul), instead of swiping your smartphone, rather gaze upwards for a few seconds at the blue sky. It doesn't cost anything to look at the sky, *only five seconds* of your time every day. As you gaze at the sky, think "The sky is blue, like the color of the שָׁמַיָּהּ הַכָּבוֹד", as it says in the Gemara מִיָּי צִבְעוֹנִי? מִפָּנֵי מָה נִשְׁתַּנָּה תְּכֵלֶת מִכָּל מִיָּי צִבְעוֹנִי? וְיָם דּוֹמָה לָרָקִיעַ, וְרָקִיעַ לְכִיסֵּא הַכְּבוֹד (מנחות מג, ע"ב). שְׁתַּכְלֶלֶת דּוֹמָה לַיָּם, וְיָם דּוֹמָה לָרָקִיעַ, וְרָקִיעַ לְכִיסֵּא הַכְּבוֹד (מנחות מג, ע"ב). You won't believe how relaxing it can be to stare up at the sky for five seconds and take a deep breath. That coupled with a reaffirmation of our connection to HKB"H, makes it five seconds a day well spent. Zoologists say that pigs cannot gaze upward (at the sky), their anatomy *does not allow* them to (how many of you knew that?). HKB"H did not design us in that way, He wants us to constantly look up and maintain connection with Him.

Another place we find technology is in shul. There are two technological "gizmos" that have a place in shul and one that doesn't. The one that doesn't is a smartphone. Unless you are a doctor on call or a security officer, leaving your smartphone at home for the 70 minutes a day that you daven in shul (45 mins for shacharit, 15 for mincha and 10 for arvit) is not a terrible hardship. Smartphones in shul are a nuisance - they make all kinds of distracting sounds at inappropriate times. A normal person would *never dream* of belching loudly or noisily "passing wind" in shul. But when it comes to their smartphones, people have no qualms for them to eschew forth sounds no less irritating and offensive than the former. Sounds of bubbles popping, corks being extracted from a bottle, beeps and bleeps of different varieties and Beatles ringtones (or whatever your favorite band is). The problem is that people do not know how to behave with their smartphones in shul. Some simply forget, others intentionally pull them out and intringe on the only 70 minutes in the day you have to communicate directly with HKB"H, instead checking their stocks on the stock exchange or their whatsapp messages. Leave your smartphones at home or in the car – that is infinitely better than switching them off before entering the shul לִפְנֵי עֵינֵי לֹא תִתֵּן מִכְשֵׁל.

The other two technological gizmos in shul are the clock on the wall and the air conditioner.

The clock on the wall of the shul has one and only one purpose – to tell you when you should *start* davening (you should always start on time and not keep HKB"H waiting). Once it has fulfilled that purpose, its presence should be ignored. We certainly should *not* use it to tell us when to finish davening. Too many people in shul pray to the clock rather than to HKB"H. This is the difference

between using technology to bring us closer to or distance ourselves from HKB"H.

The air conditioner in shul is on the one hand a "mechaye" – when it is too hot or too cold the aircon "moderates" the temperature in the shul. The problem with air conditioners in shul is that they are perhaps the biggest source of machloket between people, because everyone feels heat and cold differently. Each shul needs to establish consistent norms for air conditioner use that people who feel cold know to bring a sweater with them to shul, or vice versa. The official responsible for setting the aircon times and temperature has an *enormous responsibility* to keep updated with the weather and adjust accordingly. It is a huge responsibility because if he messes up, he can end up being responsible for שְׁנֵאת הָנֶם and machloket in the shul, something you don't want on your "rap sheet".

Technology is inescapable. The only question is how and when we use it. If we use it to do good, then we are in line with HKB"H's intent in creation. If we use it for negative things then it becomes an instrument of destruction. Aside from laser guided ballistic missiles, which it is difficult to think of a positive use for, most technology is a double-edged sword. We get to decide how to use it and thus determine its legitimacy.

Elul is all about doing teshuva and making resolutions for the upcoming year, but the real work is not the ethereal, spiritual, philosophical concepts (which are important too). The real work is existing and living day to day in this real world with all its challenges and promises. It begins with a change in mindset, which is the biggest step, and is followed with the small, little things, each on its own seemingly insignificant, but when accumulated – amount to our lives.

If we make any resolution for this coming year, it should involve these little things. Our outlook on technology and its application should be up there at the forefront of our efforts. It is here we have the greatest power to make change, in ourselves, in our families, in our communities, in our nation and ultimately in the world.

We pass before HKB"H on Rosh HaShana כְּבָנֵי מֶרֶן. According to one opinion (ראש השנה יח, ע"א), כְּבָנֵי אֶמְרָנָא – like sheep, according to another opinion כְּחֵילֹת שָׁל בֵּית דָּוִד, like the armies of David HaMelech! The two seem diametrically opposed, but are in fact identical. The armies of David HaMelech were fierce warriors on the battlefield, mortally feared by their enemies, but when David told them to wait for HKB"H's sign – the leaves moving in the trees (שְׂמוֹאל), before attacking, they bowed their heads like sheep in deference to HKB"H, and thus merited Siyata di'Shmaya and prevailed in battle, as it says אֵיזְהוּ גִבּוֹר הַכּוֹבֵשׁ אֶת יִצְרוֹ (אבות ד, א).

We have to cry out "HKB"H, we want to be closer to You and do Your bidding!" and then work to make that happen, starting at the smallest level.

Shabbat Shalom and כְּתִיבָה וְחִתִּימָה לְאַתֶּר לְחַיִּים טוֹבִים וְלְשָׁלוֹם

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