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Judaism

Zohar — Introduction, chapters 1 to 6

(selection)

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Attributed to Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai; circulated by Moses de León

Sefaria Community Translation

Credits

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About:

The Zohar ("Radiance") is the central work of Kabbalah: a mystical commentary on the Torah, written in Aramaic and attributed by tradition to Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai (second century); scholars date it to late thirteenth-century Castile, when it was circulated by Moses de León.

This selection gives the opening of the Introduction: the rose among thorns as an image of the Congregation of Israel, the secret of the words WHO and WHAT in the name Elohim, revealed by Elijah to Rabbi Shimon, and the famous passage in which the letters of the alphabet come forward one by one, asking that the world be created through them.

The notes in brackets explain the allusions to the sefirot, the divine emanations of Kabbalah, such as Binah and Malkhut. In Hebrew: זֹהַר.

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CHAPTER 1

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1 Rabbi Hizkiyah opened, “It is written, as a rose among thorns.” (Song of Songs 2:2) What is the Rose? It is the Congregation of Israel. Because there is a rose, and there is a Rose. Just as the rose among the thorns is tinged with red and white, so is the Congregation of Israel affected by the qualities of Judgment and Mercy. Just as a rose has thirteen petals, the Assembly of Israel is surrounded on all sides by the thirteen attributes of Mercy. Thus, between the first mentions of the name Elohim, [in the Torah] these [thirteen] words surround and guard the Congregation of Israel.

2 After this, [the name "Elohim"] is written again in the text. And why is it mentioned again? In order to bring out the five rigid leaves that surround a rose. And these five represent the five gates of salvation. And this secret is written about in the verse, "I will raise the cup of salvation" (Psalms 116:13) This is the cup of benediction which is raised after a meal. The cup of benediction must rest on five fingers, and no more, just as a rose rests on five rigid leaves. And this Rose is the cup of benediction. From the second to the third mention of the name Elohim [in the Torah], there are five words. From this point the Ohr [light] was created [hence "Let there be Light."] and concealed and enclosed within that covenant that entered the rose and fructified it. This is referred to as a "fruit-tree bearing fruit after its kind, wherein is the seed thereof." [Genesis 1:11] This seed is the Covenant.

[3] And just as the Covenant is sown by forty-two birthings from that same seed, so is the engraved and holy name sown, by the forty-two letters that describe the works of Creation.

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CHAPTER 2

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1 "In the beginning," Rabbi Shimon opened, "the flower buds appeared on the earth." (Song of Songs 2:12) “The flower buds” refer to the act of Creation. When had they "appeared on the earth"? On the third day, as it is said, “And the earth brought forth grass.” [Genesis 1:12] That was when they appeared on the earth. The time of "pruning doves" [Song of Songs 2:12] has come, alluding to the fourth day, when the "pruning of the tyrants" took place. ["stars" in Gen. 1:14 shares a spelling with "curses"] The voice of the turtle dove [Songs 2:14] refers to the fifth day, where it is written, “Let the waters swarm,” [Gen. 1:20] so as to produce offspring. “It is heard” [Songs 2:12] refers to the sixth day, where it is written, “Let us create man,” [Gen 1:26] and there it is said, “All that [the LORD] has spoken we will faithfully do.” [Exodus 24:7] "Let us make man" [Gen 1:26], who shall put action before listening. Because it says here, "Let us make man," while there on Mount Sinai, when the LORD asked Israel about the Torah, they said "we will faithfully do". [Exodus 24:7]. "In the land" [Songs 2:12] refers to the day of Shabbat, which represents the Land of Life.

2 Another explanation for "buds" - these are the Patriarchs who come to mind, and came into the World to Come, where they were hidden. They emerged from there secretly and hid themselves within the true prophets. Joseph was born, and they concealed themselves in him. When Joseph entered the Holy Land, he revealed their presence and then they appeared on the earth and were seen there. When are the Patriarchs seen? When the rainbow is seen in the sky. It is when the rainbow is seen that they are re-

vealed. And at that moment, "the time of pruning has come." This means that the time has come to eradicate the wicked from the world. Why were the wicked saved [until now]? Because the flower buds can be seen in the earth. And if they could not be seen, [the wicked] would not have remained in the world, and the world would not be able to exist.

3 And who sustains the world, and causes the Patriarchs to appear? It is the voice of the children, who study the Torah. It is the voice of the children, who study the Torah. And since they grow in the world, the world is sustained. In deference to them, it is written, "We will make you necklets of gold" (Songs 1:11). This refers to the children that grow strong in the world, as is written, "And you shall make two Cherubs of gold" (Exodus 25:18).

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CHAPTER 3

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1 "In the beginning," Rabbi Elazar opened, “Lift up your eyes on high, and behold who has created these things.” (Isaiah 40:26) Lift up your eyes, to what place? To the place where all eyes are turned. And who is He, that has "created these things"? He is one who opens those eyes. And you will know this. It is the concealed Atika,wherein lies the question, 'Who has created these?' And who is He? WHO. [M"I] He is called from the ends of Divine Heaven on high, where everything belongs to Him as everything is in His domain. And since one can ask about Him though He is concealed and not revealed, He is called WHO, because beyond Him, one may not pose such questions. Thus, the end of heaven is called WHO.

2 And there is another below, called WHAT [M"H]. What is between 'WHO' [M"I] and 'WHAT' [M"H]? The first one, which is called WHO, is concealed. It remains a question: Once man has searched and inquired in order to understand and climb from one level to another, and has finally reached the end level of all, he is asked: WHAT? WHAT have you learned? WHAT have you seen? WHAT have you investigated, since everything is still concealed, just as it was before?

3 Of this secret, it is written, “What can I take as witness or liken to you, O Fair Jerusalem? What can I match with you to console you, O Fair Maiden Zion?” (Lamentations 2:13) This is because, after the Temple was destroyed, a voice came forth and said, "What shall I take to witness for you, and what shall I liken to you?" This means that, using 'WHAT', I shall witness about you each and every day since the Ancient Days. As it is written:

“I call heaven and earth to witness against you this day,” (Deuteronomy 30:19) which is what I liken to you. In the very same manner I crowned you with holy crowns and made you ruler over the world. As is written: "Is this the city that men call the perfection of beauty?" (Lamentations 2:15). I have called you, "Jerusalem, built as a city that is compact together" (Psalms 122:3). "What shall I equal to you?" (Lamentations 2:13). Just as your situation is here, so it is seemingly above! Just as now the holy nation does not enter below with the sacred arrangements, so I swear to you that I will not enter above, until your throngs come to you down below. This is your consolation - that I equate you with this level, in every respect. And now you are here, "your breach is great like the sea" [Lam. 2:13] And if you say that there is no existence or remedy for you, then, then who shall heal you? Namely, that same concealed supernal level WHO [M"I] through which everything exists, shall heal and uphold you.

4 WHO [M"I] is the upper edge of Heaven and WHAT [M"H] is the lower edge of Heaven. This was inherited by Jacob, as he "shall reach from end to end" (Exodus 26:28) — From the end above, which is WHO, down to the lower end, which is WHAT. Therefore, he stands in the middle, and "WHO has created THESE [AL"H]"

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CHAPTER 4

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1 Rabbi Shimon [who wrote the Zohar] said, “Elazar, my son, stop talking lest the supernal hidden secret, which humans know nothing about, be revealed. ” Rabbi Elazar was silent. Rabbi Shimon wept, and stood still for a moment. Rabbi Shimon then said, “Elazar, what is this 'THESE'? You say the stars and the signs of the zodiac, but have they not always been seen? And were they not created by WHAT [M"H], as it is written, "By the word of the LORD the heavens were made"? (Psalms 33:6) And if 'THESE' denoted some hidden things, then there is no need to write 'THESE', because they [the planets are stars] are visible, and revealed!” This secret was never before revealed, until one day when I was on the seashore, Elijah came and asked me: Sir, do you know what "Who has created these" means? I answered, 'these' are the heavens and their hosts, the works of the Holy One, Blessed Be He. And man should look at them, and bless Him, as is written, "When I behold Your heavens,

2 Your fingers... Adonai our Master, how majestic is Your name in all the earth!" [Psalms 8:4-10]

3 He told me, Rabbi, the Holy One, blessed be He, had a great secret, which He revealed to the Celestial Assembly. The secret is that when the Most Concealed One desired to reveal Himself, He first made one Point, [Malkuth] and this point ascended and became a Thought. [Binah] He shaped in it all the images and engraved all the designs.

4 He engraved inside a concealed, sacred candle an image of a concealed image of the holy of holies. A profound structure [the upper Sefiroth] emerged from the depth of that thought, and it is called WHO [M"I], which is the inception of this edifice. And it exists, and exists not; it is hidden deep inside the name. [that is, the name 'Elohim'] It is not called [Elohim], but only M"I – WHO [thus leaving the aleph, lamed, and hei of 'ELoHim'] He desired to reveal Himself and to be called this name [Elohim], so He clothed Himself in a precious, radiant garment [Chesed's light of Chassadim] and created THESE, and THESE ascended to the name [Elohim]. And these letters, Aleph, Lamed, and Hei, [together reading "eleh" which means "this/these"] after being joined together, ascended to the name [Elohim] the letters [Mem and Yudh, together reading "mi" which means "who"] combined with [Aleph, Lamed, and Hei] to complete the name Elohim. And until He created THIS, [THESE] Elohim did not ascend to form the name Elohim. Those who sinned in worshipping the Golden Calf used this secret by saying, "This is your Elohim, Israel" (Exodus 32:4).

5 Just as the letters Mem-Yud joined the letters Aleph-Lamed-Hei, [to spell "Elohim"] the name has remained forever combined. And the continued existence of the world is based on this secret. Elijah then flew away, and I could not see him. And it is from him that I received this knowledge and was able to grasp this hidden secret. Rabbi Elazar came with all the other friends and bowed down before him. They wept and then said, if we had not come into this world but only to hear this secret, it would have been enough for us.

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CHAPTER 5

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1 Rabbi Shimon said, So accordingly, the heavens and their hosts were created by WHAT. As it is written: "When I behold Your heavens, the work of Your fingers, the moon and stars that You set in place," (Psalms 8:4). [Before this] it is written, "How majestic is Your name throughout the earth, You who have covered the heavens with Your splendor!" (Psalms 8:2). The heavens were created by the name HOW [M"H, "how" and "what" are spelled the same]. "above the heavens", which is called WHO [M"I], that it amounts to the name of "Elohim". He created a light for His light. This means that He created the light of Chassadim as a precious garment for the light of Chochmah, that is in the name of WHO [M"I] and they enclothed each other. Then [Malkuth] mounted to the Supernal Name [the 'supernal' "Elohim" which lies inside of Binah]. That is why the phrase, "In the beginning Elohim created", [refers to] the upper Elohim, [the one inside of Binah]. WHAT [M"H, Malkuth], is not there and is not constructed.

2 When the letters Aleph-Lamed-Hei are drawn from above, [from Binah], downward [to Malkuth], it is as if a Mother lends Her clothes to Her daughter and adorned her with Her own adornments. [Hence Binah is mother to her daughter Malkuth] And when does She properly adorn her? When all the males appear before her. It is written that "all you males shall appear before the Master, the LORD" (Exodus 34:23). Because [Malkuth] is called "Master" [a grammatically masculine term]. As it is written: "Behold, the ark of the covenant of the Master of all the earth"

(Joshua 3:11). Then the letter Hei departs [from M"H - WHAT], and is replaced by the letter Yud. [So it becomes M"I - WHO] Then she dresses up in male clothes, [hence Malkuth is Binah's daughter, and yet the male Master]

3 And the other letters, [Aleph, Lamed, and Hei] are drawn down by Israel from above, [Binah] down to this place; [Malkuth, since now it is called WHO/M"I just as Binah is]. "When I remember these" (Ps. 42:5) when I utter these letters with my mouth and I shed tears voluntarily to draw down these letters, Aleph, Lamed, and Hei from Binah, and then I was "leading them" (Ps. 42), from above [Binah] "to the house of Elohim" (Ps. 42), [which is Malkuth] would be Elohim, just like [Binah]. And with what [shall I make them]? "With the voice of joy and praise, a crowd keeping holiday" (Ps. 42). Rabbi Elazar said, My silence has built the Temple on high [in Binah] and the Temple below, [in Malkuth]. And surely it is [a proverb], 'a word is worth one sela, and silence two' So the words 'a word is worth one sela' [are] what I have said and clarified, but the words 'silence two' — in my being silent, two worlds [Binah and Malkuth] were created and constructed together. [Since Malkuth's M"H became Binah's M"I]

4 Rabbi Shimon said, from here onward we shall complete the text. As it is written, "That brings out their host by number" (Isaiah 40:26), there are two grades, and each one has to be recorded, one is called WHAT [M"H] and the other WHO [M"I]. WHO is the Upper One, and WHAT is the lower one. The Upper Degree registers, speaks, and brings forth their hosts by number, where the letter Hei alludes to the one that is known and unequaled, [i.e. WHO]. This is similar to the phrase, “haMotzi lechem” – "He who brings forth bread from the earth," where the letter Hei refers to

the knowledge of the known, lower degree, [i.e. WHAT]. And together they are one. [as Malkuth]. So, "...by number," 600,000 that stand together and bring forth the hosts according to their types, which are innumerable.

5 All of them, whether these 600,000 or all their hosts, shall be called by the name. What is meant by "called by the name"? (Deut. 28:10) If you say that He calls them by their names, it is not so. Because had it been so, He should have said, "be [called] by His name." Rather, when this grade does not amount to the name [Elohim], but is called WHO [M"I], it does not beget (any offspring) and does not bring forth those concealed inside it according to their kinds. Although all of them were hidden inside it, [they had not been clothed in the previously discussed 'precious, radiant garment'] Because He created, Aleph-Lamed-Hei, and they amount to His name, and Yud, and are called Elohim. Thus, by the power of this name He brought them forth in all perfection. And this is the meaning of the phrase, "called by the name," by His own name did He call and bring forth each and every species to exist in perfection. The same appears here, "See, I have called by name" (Exodus 31:2), "I have bestowed My name on Bezalel," so that Bezalel's existence reaches perfection.

6 He asks: “What is the meaning of “by the greatness of His might and wealth?” (Isaiah 40:26) This is the supreme grade where all desires rise up in Him. And they ascend through a hidden and secret path... "because He is strong in power". This is the secret of the supernal world [WHO/M"I] that rose up to the name Elohim. As we have stated, the phrase "no one is missing", is to the 600,000 that He brought forth by the power of this name. And because "no one is missing" [from the] 600,000, it follows that in every place that Israel died and were punished for their sins, they were

numbered. And no one was ever missing from the 600,000, to keep the balance [between the worlds]. Just as no one was missing [from the] 600,000 above, no one was missing [from the 600,000] below.

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CHAPTER 6

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1 Rabbi Hamnuna-Saba said: “In the first four words of the Torah, Beresheet Bara Elohim Et, the first two words begin with the letter Bet, and the following two begin with Aleph". It is said that, “When the Creator thought to create the world, all of the letters were still concealed, and even 2,000 years before the creation of the world, the Creator gazed into the letters and played with them.

2 When the Creator thought to create the world, all the letters of the alphabet came to Him in reverse order from last to first. The letter Tav entered first and said, “Master of the world! It is good, and also seemly of You, to create the world with me, with my properties. For I am the seal on Your ring, called Truth, that ends with the letter Tav. And that is why You are called Truth, and why it would befit the King to begin the universe with the letter Tav, and to create the world by her, by her properties. The Creator answered: "You are beautiful and sincere, but do not merit the world that I conceived to be created by your properties. You are destined to serve as a mark on the foreheads of the faithful, who have kept the Law of the Torah from Aleph to Tav. When you appear, they shall die. Not only that, but you are also the seal of the word Death, and because of this, you are not suitable for Me to create the world with you." The letter Tav then immediately left.

3 The letter Shin then entered and stood before Him. It said, "Master of the Universe, may it please You to create the world with me, as Your own name Shaddai is with me. And it would be most proper to create the world

by a holy name. He replies: You are worthy, you are good, and you are truthful. But because you are included among the letters that form the word Falsehood, [sheqer] I do not wish to create the world with you. Falsehood would not have prevailed had you not been attached to the letters [Resh and Quf].

4 From this, whoever wants to tell a lie, should add that lie to a base that is truthful. Because the letter Shin is a letter of truth, meaning a letter of Truth by which the Patriarchs reached unison. [Shin's three arms represent Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob — Chesed, Gevurah, and Tiferet] And the letters Quf and Resh appear on the evil side, [Quf+Resh spells qar, "cold"] In order for them to continue to exist, they pulled the letter Shin to them, creating the combination qesher, ["connection"] When the Shin realized this, it left.

5 Subsequently, the letter Tsade appeared before the Creator and said: “Master of the world, You should create the world with me, for Tzadikim ["righteous ones"] are marked by me. You, who is called a Tzadik, are also recorded within me, for You are righteous and You love righteousness. Therefore, my properties are suitable to create the world by.” The Creator answered: “Tsade, you are truly righteous, but you must remain concealed and not be revealed to the extent required were the world to be created by you, so as to not give the world an excuse.” The concealment of the letter Tsade is necessary, for first came the letter Nun, which was then joined by the letter Yod from the Creator’s Holy Name who stood above it as a mark of the bond between the Creator and His creations, mounted the letter Nun and joined it on its right hand side, thereby creating the letter Tsade.

6 The letter Pe entered and said: “Master of the world, it would be good to create the world with me, for the future liberation of the world is inscribed in me, as the word Pedut ["redemption"] begins with me. That is, liberation is deliverance from all suffering. And it is therefore fitting to create the world with me. The Creator answered her: “Though you are fine, the word begins with you and is secretly denoted by you, like a serpent that strikes and hides its head in its body. So a sinner bows his head, hiding from others’ eyes, but stretches out his hands to sin. So is the shape of the letter Peh, whose head is hidden inside it.” And the Creator also said to the letter Ayin that it would be unfitting to create the world with its properties, for within it is the property of Avon. ["inequity"] And though Ayin tried to object, saying that its properties are contained in the word Anavah, ["humility"] the Creator refused it nonetheless.

7 The letter Samekh appeared before the Creator and said, Master of the Universe, may it please You to create the world with me, because I am able to support those who fall. As it is written, "The LORD supports all who stumble, and makes all who are bent stand straight." (Ps. 145:14). He said to it, This is exactly why you should stay in your place and not move from it. If you leave your place [in the word somekh, "support"] what will then happen to all those who fell and are being supported by you? The letter Samekh then left immediately!

8 The letter Nun entered and stood before Him saying, Master of the Universe, may it please You to create the world with me, because the phrase, "fearful in praises" [nora tehilot] (Ex. 15:11) starts with me. In the words of the righteous, "it is pleasant to sing glorious praise." (Ps. 147:1) ["praise" in Hebrew is nava] He said, Nun, go back to your place! It is be-

cause of you that the letter Samekh returned to its place. And you should depend on it for support. ["to fall" in Hebrew is nefilah, hence fall → support, nun → samekh] It immediately left His presence and returned to its place.

9 The letter Mem entered and said to Him, "Master of the Universe, may it please You to create the world by me, because with me you are called Melech ["King"]. He told it, yes, it is indeed so, but I shall not create the world with you, because the world needs a king! Go back to your place, you and the letters Lamed and Kaph, as it is not proper for the world to be without a king.

10 At this time, the letter Kaph descended from the Throne [kisseh] of His [God's] Glory. Shaking and trembling, it stood before Him and said, Master of the Universe, may it please You to create the world with me, because I am Your Glory [khavod]. When the letter Kaph descended from the Throne of His Glory, 200,000 worlds were shaken and the Throne trembled. And all the worlds were about to collapse. The Holy One, blessed be He, told it, Kaph, Kaph, what are you doing here?! I shall indeed not create the world with you. Go back to your place, because the word 'destruction' [klayah] starts with you. "A decree of destruction upon all the land." (Is. 10:23). So, return to your Throne and stay there. At that same moment, it took leave and returned to its place.

11 The letter Yud entered, stood before Him, and said, Master of the Universe, may it please You to create the world with me, because I am the first letter of the Holy Name. Thus, it should be proper for You to create

the world with me. He replied: It should suffice you to be engraved upon My Name and appear in Me. You embrace all My desires. Rise up, it would not be proper for you to be removed from My Name!

12 The letter Teth entered, stood before Him and said, Master of the Universe may it please You to create the world with me, as by me You are called Good [tov] and Upright. He replied: I will not create the world with you, because your goodness is concealed within you. Therefore it is written: "How abundant is the good that You have in store for those who fear You" (Ps. 31:20). So because your [goodness] is concealed within you, it cannot take any part in this world that I want to create. It only applies to the World to Come. Furthermore, because your goodness is concealed and treasured within yourself, the gates of the Temple shall be 'sunk.' As it is written: "Her gates have sunk into the ground," (Lam. 2:9). And to add to all this, the letter Heth stands before you, together you become a sin (spelled Heth-Teth-Aleph). This is why these two letters do not appear in the names of the twelve tribes. Teth immediately then took its leave and went away from Him.

13 The letter Zayin entered and said to Him, Master of the Universe, may it please You to create the world with me. Because with my help, Your children shall keep the Shabbat, as it is written, "Remember the Shabbat day, to keep it holy" (Ex. 20:8) ["remember" in Hebrew is zakhor] He replied: I will not create the world with you, because you represent war, a sharp pointed sword and a spear! ["sword" in Hebrew is spelled and pronounced the same way the letter name is.] and so you are like the letter Nun! It immediately left His presence.

14 The letter Vav entered, and pleaded before Him, Master of the Universe, may it please You to create the world with me because I am one of the letters of Your Name. He replied: Vav, you and the letter Hei should both be satisfied with being written in My Name. Because you appear in My Name and are engraved in It, I shall therefore not create the world with you.

15 The letters Dalet and Gimel entered. Both also claimed the same thing. He told them also be satisfied with being with each other, because there will always be poor men on earth, and they should be given a benefactor. The letter Dalet is Poor, [daluth] and the Gimel reciprocates as a Benefactor [gomeleth]. Do not leave each other, and it should suffice you that you sustain one another!

16 The letter Bet entered and said to Him, Master of the Universe, may it please You to create the world with me, because by me You are blessed in the upper and lower worlds. [baruch - "bless"] The Holy One, blessed be He, replied: But, of course, I shall certainly create the world with you. And you shall appear in the beginning of the Creation of the world.

17 The letter Aleph stood outside and did not enter. The Holy One, blessed be He, said to it, Aleph, Aleph, why do you not enter and stand before Me like the other letters? It replies: Master of the Universe, because I saw that all the letters left You without benefaction. So what shall I do there myself? Not only that, but You have already presented the letter Bet with this greatest gift of all. And it would not be proper for the supernal King to take back the gift, which He presented to His servant, and give it to another! The Holy One, blessed be He, said, Aleph, Aleph, even though the world is created with the letter Bet, you shall be the first of all the let-

ters. My attachments shall be expressed only by you and all calculations and actions of the people shall commence with you. Therefore, all unity shall be expressed by the letter Aleph!

18 The Holy One, blessed be He, formed large upper [Binah] letters, and smaller lower [Malkuth] letters. And this is why, Bet, Beresheet Bara, and Aleph, Elohim, are letters from above, [Binah] and are letters from below, [Malkuth]. And they are all united - the ones from the world above, with the ones from the world below.

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