



## Framing the Zionist Movement: The Effects of Zionist Discourse on the Arab-Israeli Peace Process

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### Introduction

The Zionist movement resulted in the establishment and recognition of Israel as a Jewish state on May 14, 1948, granting the movement its primary goal: “the creation of a home for the Jewish people in Palestine secured by public law.”<sup>[1]</sup> Given the current prospect of Israeli disengagement from occupied territories and an uncertain Arab-Israeli peace, a review of Zionism’s evolving framing processes can aid in analyzing the various discursive processes that shape the present Israeli predicament. Social Movement Theory (SMT) will be applied here to Zionism with an emphasis on competing frames prior to state independence and up to the current disengagement debates. By using SMT to analyze the Zionist movement, I argue that because Zionism is and has been the dominant discourse for Israeli Jews, a critical factor impeding the Arab-Israeli peace process is the ongoing framing of Israeli identity through a particular Zionist discourse.

Originally framed within biblical contexts and dominated by passive, orthodox discourse which dismissed any notions of non-messianic Redemption, Zionism required continuous reframing over time to gain legitimacy in the modern era. With increasing anti-Semitism and nationalism throughout Europe, a minority of Jewish elites adapted secular and nationalistic frames to Zionism. Zionism became more offensive, coordinated, and inclusive within Palestine spawning several institutional and armed components to facilitate mobilization. With statehood, Zionism became exclusionary and defensive as the Israeli center sought to legitimate itself from its external advocates and as surrounding Arab states became increasingly aggressive. Despite the dominance of secular Zionist frames after independence, competing but subordinate religious frames lingered within Israel and reemerged in dominant fashion due to reclamations of sacred land during the Six Day War.

The prevailing ultra-orthodox discourse of New Zionism, which justifies Zionist achievements through religious frames, serves as a barrier to peace negotiations and disengagement. However, Zionism seems to have come full circle as post-Zionism, which resembles the pre-movement anti-Zionism, has regained strength within the past decade by framing the Zionist movement and its achievements as blasphemous, immoral, and illegitimate. Some argue this burgeoning post-Zionist movement provides a much-needed critique of Zionism’s impact on Israeli identity and the

peace process.[2] Laurence Silberstein contends that “for significant social and cultural transformation to occur, a change in the discourse through which events are framed and assigned meaning must first occur.”[3] Similarly, social constructivist Ted Hopf also argues that domestic discourse shapes state identity and thus how states behave towards others.[4] If applied to Israel, it is possible that further reframing of Zionist discourse at the domestic or state level can reshape Israeli identity and provide the impetus for a more conciliatory peace settlement.

## Framing: Pre-State Zionism

### Precursors

The emergence of the Zionist movement created several competing frameworks beginning in the mid-nineteenth century due to the Emancipation of Jews brought on by the French Revolution.[5] Most of them would have to come to grips with their biblical obligation to await the Messiah's return of Jews to Palestine, or *Eretz Yisrael* (land of Israel), and the harsh reality of the Jewish subjugation to worldwide anti-Semitism. The resultant distancing of Jewish plight from messianic Zionism was noted by rabbi and historian Arthur Hertzberg:

The era of the Emancipation has represented a radical break with the entire past of Jewry. Until the beginning of the age the Jew conceived of himself as part of a holy community, a divine priesthood, and the elected of God, in an attitude of waiting for the Messiah. Since the Emancipation, Jewish thought has been attempting to rebuild a definition of Jewish identity, even with some—or many—bricks borrowed from a different perspective: in order to make Jewish existence analogous to the categories by which western man has been defining himself.[6]

Impatience with messianism pre-dated the Zionist movement and was expressed in the discourse of Jewish intellectuals like Polish Rabbi Zvi Hirsch Kalischer who wrote in 1862 that:

The redemption of Israel, for which we long, is not to be imagined as a sudden miracle. The Almighty, blessed be His Name, will not suddenly descend from on high and command His people to go forth.... Cast aside the conventional view that the Messiah will suddenly sound a blast on the great trumpet and cause all the inhabitants of the earth to tremble. On the contrary, the Redemption will begin by awakening support among the philanthropists and by gaining the consent of the nations to the gathering of some of the scattered of Israel into the Holy Land.[7]

However, the concept of self-redemption did not resonate initially among Jews as a whole. One reason was the blasphemous notion of man doing God's work to resettle the Jewish people. Many orthodox Jews viewed Zionism as a secular movement which conveniently sidestepped Judaism in favor of nationalistic goals.[8] Others did not oppose voluntary migration to Palestine, but felt that a mass movement was either impractical in light of the Arabs already inhabiting Palestine or unnecessary with Jews already able to assimilate and live freely in the United States and parts of Europe (including Germany at the time). Such anti-Zionist sentiment reflected a broader fear that mobilization might stimulate anti-Semitism against Jews living in these places.[9]

### Political Zionism

Undeterred by anti-Zionism, intellectuals like Hungarian Jew Theodor Herzl advocated Political Zionism and reflected Kalischer's contention of establishing a home for Jews by means of philanthropy and international consent. Disheartened by overt French anti-Semitism revealed in the Dreyfus Affair of 1894,[10] Herzl began writing fervently about resolving the Jewish dilemma that “wherever they live in appreciable numbers, Jews are persecuted in greater or lesser measure.”[11] One notable exception to Herzl's view echoed the writings of Russian Jew Leo Pinsker that resettlement in *any* available territory would suffice, not necessarily Palestine. Herzl's

willingness to consider Palestine as one of several alternatives was demonstrated in his reflection on Argentina as an equally viable option in 1896 when he published *The Jewish State* and asked:

Is Palestine or Argentina preferable? The Society will take whatever it is given and whatever Jewish public opinion favors.... Argentina is one of the most fertile countries in the world, extends over a vast area, is sparsely populated, and has a temperate climate. It would be in its own highest interest for the Republic of Argentina to cede us a portion of its territory.... Palestine is our unforgettable historic homeland. The very name would be a marvelously effective rallying cry.[12]

Herzl's inclination toward a diplomatic solution and misguided optimism for gaining European or Ottoman approval to establish a Jewish homeland in either place was evident as he added:

The present *infiltration* of Jews has certainly produced some discontent, and it would be necessary to enlighten the Republic [of Argentina] on the intrinsic difference of the new *immigration* of Jews.... If His Majesty the Sultan [[Abd-ul-Hamid II](#)] were to give us Palestine, we could in return undertake the complete management of the finances of Turkey. We should there form a part of a wall of defense for Europe in Asia, an outpost of civilization against barbarism.[13]

Herzl's diplomatic networking would culminate in a controversial attempt to establish temporary Jewish settlement in Uganda.[14] Russian Zionists vehemently opposed the Uganda proposal, stormed out of the First Zionist Congress in protest and returned only after gaining unified acceptance of Palestine, and *only* Palestine, as the future homeland of Jews.[15] Taking advantage of Political Zionism's diminishing popularity and Herzl's death in 1904, subordinate factions quickly overshadowed Political Zionism and gradually organized into more radical, grassroots efforts.

### Practical Zionism

One faction that opposed the Uganda plan and filled the void left by Herzl was Practical Zionism advocated by Russian Jew and statesman Chaim Weizmann who felt that relying on diplomacy alone was naive. Weizmann's brand of Zionism called for diplomacy along with mass immigration, rural settlement, and Hebrew education.[16] Though Herzl was able to convene an international assembly of Jews at the First Zionist Congress in 1897, establishing a parliamentary style venue for Zionists and institutional mechanisms like the Zionist Organization (ZO) and the Jewish National Fund (JNF) to manage and support migration and settlement of Jews, these efforts still lacked the grassroots appeal to mobilize Jews below the elite and bourgeoisie levels of society.[17] In the wake of the second pogroms (1903-1906), Practical Zionism gained appeal and promoted immigration as 35,000 to 40,000 Jews arrived from Russia and Eastern Europe to Palestine during the Second *aliyah* (1904-1914).

### Labor Zionism

The Second *aliyah* also brought socialist-minded intellectuals like Russian Jew Aaron David Gordon, the first Labor Zionist to step foot in Palestine.[18] Gordon arrived in 1904 and his presence enabled Labor Zionism to mobilize Palestinian Jews through grassroots efforts and youth political movements such as Poale Zion (Workers of Zion) and Hapoel Hatzair (The Young Worker), to which Gordon belonged.[19] Based on the writings of Labor Zionists intellectuals like Nachman Syrkin and Ber Borochov, Gordon promoted a "religion of labor" as he toiled alongside Jewish peasants.[20] Hertzberg described Gordon, a middle-aged migrant, as a "legend" and the "central personality" to younger "Zionist idealists" immigrating to and living in Palestine.[21] Gordon's fervor for creating a Jewish ideal of laboring Jews in Palestine was not only expressed in his actions, but also his writings:

In Palestine we must do with our own hands all the things that make up the sum total of life. We must ourselves do all the work, from the least strenuous, cleanest, and most sophisticated, to the dirtiest and most difficult. In our own way, we must feel what a worker feels and think what a worker thinks—then, and only then, shall we have a culture of our own, for then we shall have a life of our own.... From now on our principal ideal must be Labor. Through no fault of our own we have been deprived of this element and we must seek a remedy. Labor is our cure.[22]

The appeal of Labor Zionism was especially successful in the way it was framed as a take-charge, do-it-yourself approach. Like other factions, Labor Zionism was not born from within Palestine. It capitalized on recruitment of immigrants fleeing anti-Semitism who were already primed to accept socialist-framed Zionism based on the revolutionary struggle in Tsarist Russia. Its proletariat appeal attracted modernized, educated, politically conscious Jews by promoting an ideology that characterized them as pioneers at the forefront of building a self-sufficient community of Jews; a socialist utopia “sustained by the labor of the Jewish working class.”[23]

The realization of a Jewish collective was achieved in Galilee in 1909 when Degania, the first *kibbutzim* (communal settlement), was established by five men and one woman. These settlers would endure unfamiliar and unfavorable conditions to create a symbol of communal existence and embodiment of utopian socialism espoused by Labor Zionists.[24] What began with half a dozen Jews in a single *kibbutz*, encouraged by Labor Zionism’s vision and disenchanted by the Palestinian socioeconomic structure of Jews supervising Arabs, rose to over 800 settlers in twelve *kibbutzes* by 1920 as the *kibbutz* inspired Jews arriving in the Second *aliyah*. The *kibbutz* continued to grow exponentially with subsequent *aliyah*’s into a population of over 66,000 in 214 *kibbutzim* by 1950 and peaking in the 1990s with over 125,000 Jews in 270 *kibbutzim*.[25]

In 1919, the social base of Labor Zionism further strengthened in Palestine during the Third *aliyah* (1918-1923) and when the Ahdut Ha’avoda socialist party was created. Ahdut Ha’avoda’s merger with the Poale Zion (1923), Kibbutz Hameuchad Federation (1927), and Hapoel Hatzair (1930) parties into the Mapai party granted Labor Zionism political dominance in the *Yishuv* (Jewish community in Palestine) and the ZO.[26] David Ben-Gurion, who co-founded Poale Zion in Russian-controlled Poland in 1903 at the age of seventeen, came to Palestine in 1906 to labor alongside Gordon and laid the foundations for the Labor movement from within Palestine.[27] He would assume leadership of a fairly unified Labor Party in the 1930s. However, sectarian movements within the Labor Party would cause shifts in the ideology of Labor Zionism. The secession of Kibbutzim movements in particular posed a threat to the Labor Party’s legitimacy as the existence of “non-Labor Kibbutzim implied that Labor represented only part of the pioneers.”[28]

Unable to sustain political power by solely representing a pioneer minority, Labor ideology began shifting during WWII to broaden the base from the pioneer ideal to the working class.[29] It would shift again prior to 1948 due to a power struggle between Labor Zionists and the ZO. By the start of WWII, American Zionists made up half the world’s Jewry, became the largest political force within the ZO and were less inclined to support a labor or socialist agenda. As such, an attempt at coalescing with American Zionists required Labor Zionists to subordinate their socialist aspirations and acquiesce to a universally acceptable ideology.

Beginning in 1942, Ben-Gurion began reframing Zionism to explicitly include immigration to Palestine and the establishment of a Jewish state and to implicitly associate the Labor movement with this ideology. What is noteworthy about this new frame is that it incorporated the establishment of a Jewish “state” instead of simply a “homeland” or “community.” As awareness of the Holocaust grew, this new ideology was reinforced and by 1946, references to pioneers and the working class were replaced by promotions of immigration and statehood.[30] The stage was set for the Labor Zionists to assume legitimate control over the “state” of Israel established in 1948.

## Revisionist Zionism

Not all factions of Zionism were so willing to negotiate. The most controversial was the Revisionist Party led by Russian Jew [Ze'ev Jabotinsky](#). Revered by followers and loathed by foes, Jabotinsky's militant approach to achieving Zionist goals began in a Jewish self-defense corps to counter Russian pogroms in 1903.[\[31\]](#) He would further his military background in support of the allies during WWI and through a self-defense corps opposing Arab riots in 1920. He eventually lost confidence in British sincerity and Arab consent for Zionist goals. While other Zionists continued to invest in soft diplomacy, Jabotinsky advocated power maximization through immigration and armed defense.[\[32\]](#)

To advance the Revisionist approach, Jabotinsky founded Revisionist Zionism in 1925 and the New Zionist Organization in 1935 (dissolved in 1946) and was in constant conflict with more moderate Zionists like Weizmann and Ben-Gurion. However, the framing of the Revisionist ideology was appealing and marketed Jews as organized, disciplined, courageous, and capable of self-defense. This was especially attractive in light of the constant anti-Semitism, ghetto-dwelling, dependency, and vulnerability Jews felt worldwide. Jabotinsky tapped into the Jewish warrior ethos[\[33\]](#) and attracted a “steady stream of young recruits” prepared to fight for Jewish statehood by any means necessary.[\[34\]](#) Though the base of the Revisionist Party was in Poland Jabotinsky's ideology would give birth to even more radical terrorist elements within Palestine—the Irgun Zvei Leumi (IZL) and LEHI (Lohamei Herut Israel or Stern Gang).

## Political Opportunity and Mobilizing Structures under Ottoman/British Rule

### Political Opportunity

Framing of the Zionist movement overtime shifted from passive resistance to offensive confrontation and was complicated by the many factions and sub-factions vying for political power. A complete understanding of these complexities requires a review of Zionist political opportunities and mobilizing structures.[\[35\]](#) McAdam et al. illustrate that we can expect groups to “mobilize in response to and in a manner consistent with the very specific changes that grant them more leverage.”[\[36\]](#) Three specific changes in the international environment created political opportunity for both the ZO and Zionists embedded in Palestine.

First, Herzl's establishment of an international venue (Zionist congresses) helped to standardize Zionist goals, legitimize the Zionist movement, and organize a mixture of Zionists thinkers into a central transnational advocacy group—the ZO.[\[37\]](#) Because the social base was scattered throughout Europe and the United States, the ZO acted as an international institution for “information exchange” and monetary support for the common goal of establishing a Jewish state.[\[38\]](#) In response to a League of Nations stipulation, the ZO created a Palestine Zionist Organization (or Jewish Agency) in 1929 with the duty of “discharging the functions of the Jewish Agency as set forth in the Mandate.”[\[39\]](#) This Jewish Agency helped further organize international and Palestinian Zionists.

Second, the fall of the Ottoman Empire and subsequent establishment of Palestine as a British Mandate allowed Zionists the opportunity to create state-like institutions. Under Ottoman rule, Herzl's appeals to the Sultan to permit the “systematic immigration” of Jews to Palestine were turned down.[\[40\]](#) By the early twentieth century, when grassroots movements began to take root in Palestine, many political activists (including Ben-Gurion and Yitzhak Ben-Zvi, Israel's second President) were expelled by the Turks to quell the Zionist fervor.[\[41\]](#) In 1917, the Ottoman obstacle was removed and political opportunity increased for Zionists (and Arab nationalists) under British command. The subsequent Balfour Declaration, orchestrated by Weizmann, relayed

Britain's sympathy (sincere or not) for the Zionist cause in 1917 and received UN reinforcement in 1947.

In 1918, Zionists were able to openly assemble, discuss, and formulate the structure of future political institutions. Three years later, the British officially recognized all political institutions in Palestine, including Knesset Israel (Assembly of Israel), granting them autonomous control.<sup>[42]</sup> Zionists created an Assembly (parliament) and held elections based on proportional representation laying the foundation for state formation. Additionally, this enabled the various youth movements a platform to promote interests, form coalitions, and recruit members.

Third, increased anti-Semitism from the Russian pogroms, Arab riots (1920s) and uprisings (1936-1939), and most notably the Holocaust helped promote non-Zionist sympathy worldwide. Here again the Balfour Declaration and British concessions are examples. However, the Holocaust in particular evoked feelings of guilt especially from those who had set limits on Jewish immigration. President Harry Truman's empathy for Zionists is said to have been also politically motivated to gain Jewish votes for his bid for the presidency.<sup>[43]</sup> Regardless, he still aided the movement by continually defying State Department warnings in favor of Zionist interests by lobbying UN support and making the United States the first to recognize the state of Israel in 1948.<sup>[44]</sup> Once the British withdrew and Israel gained legitimacy as a state, political opportunities for Jews in Israel would be a matter of Israeli prerogative.

### Mobilizing Structures

With increased political opportunity, Zionists took advantage to maximize mobilizing structures. The Zionists congressional meetings provided rotating locations worldwide for Zionist delegates to assemble. The goal was to "stress the international character" of the Zionist movement and "emphasize that it was a movement not of Jews in Palestine but, rather, of the Jewish people throughout the world."<sup>[45]</sup> After Ottoman decline, groups within Palestine employed tactics that complimented the grassroots setting of Jewish settlement and became transnational in character by remaining linked to their external bases.<sup>[46]</sup> Three mobilizing structures were used strategically by Zionists to advance the movement, expand the base, and increase party political power—formal, informal, and illegal.

First, Zionists utilized formal mobilizing structures such as political parties to mobilize youth. Political parties mobilized through newspapers, speaking engagements, and door-to-door solicitation. Intellectuals like Louis Brandeis, Weizmann, Jabotinsky, and Herzl spoke openly encountering thousands of audiences and wrote in newspapers that reached more. Zionist parties recruited from within settlements for political and military support, and even recruited newly arriving immigrants. As demonstrated by voting patterns for Assembly and ZO representation, mobilization within Palestine was a crucial aspect of gaining and maintaining political strength.<sup>[47]</sup> Defensive militias like the Hagana recruited by establishing training branches throughout the *Yishuv*. Once recruited, Hagana trainees were inducted during "a solemn candle-lit ceremony before a pistol and a copy of the Bible."<sup>[48]</sup>

Second, Zionists established informal mobilizing structures in the areas of healthcare, welfare, immigration, education, financial, religious, and labor services. Particularly in-between the World Wars when immigration resumed, Zionists developed defensive institutions like the Hagana (1920) to counter Arab aggression and aid illegal immigration. The Histadrut (1920) created labor, health, and educational services. The Worker's Bank (1926) provided credit services for rural and urban development.<sup>[49]</sup> Zionists also aspired to gain a monopoly on land and labor through such policies as the "conquest of land" and "conquest of labor."<sup>[50]</sup> Both efforts facilitated immigrant transition, agricultural development, and self-sufficiency.<sup>[51]</sup> Economic development in the *Yishuv* experienced lulls particularly during the First *aliyah*. Zionists gained support from agricultural and industrial development, the JNF, wealthy philanthropists, and donations. Between the World Wars nearly \$400 million was invested in the *Yishuv* from external sources.<sup>[52]</sup>

Third, Zionists utilized illegal mobilizing structures such as clandestine terrorist cells and immigration networks. Throughout the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s Jews witnessed increasing Arab resistance, British indifference, and increasingly grotesque anti-Semitism. With no faith in British protection, the Hagana became more structured to counter Arab uprisings, but also cooperated with the British to fight against Arabs in Palestine, Hitler in WWII, and perform secret missions in the Middle East.[53]

The IZL became a radical, underground splinter group of the Hagana in 1937 and carried out offensive operations against Arabs and covert operations against the British after Britain issued its Whitepaper in 1939 limiting Jewish land acquisition and immigration to Palestine at 75,000 over a five year period and subject to Arab approval thereafter.[54] As borders tightened, immigrants sailed to Palestine as illegal cargo to be unloaded and dispersed by the IZL and Hagana who were heavily involved in illegal immigration activities. The IZL and New Zionist Organization helped to organize illegal immigration without authorization from the Zionist leadership who remained uninvolved until 1939 when it was clear that Britain had no interest in making a Jewish state possible.[55] With the onset of WWII, the IZL split into those who entered WWII on behalf of the allies, and the LEHI who refused to cooperate with the British and continued terrorist attacks against their presence in Israel. Despite clashes between the militias, all three groups united after WWII in a Jewish resistance movement against British presence in Palestine and again after state independence to form the Israel Defense Forces.[56]

### Reframing: New Zionism

Under self-rule, Zionism experienced reframing during the 1950s due to a power struggle between the external ZO, whose role was diminished to monetary support, and a new Israeli government trying to legitimate itself and control its financial resources. As a result, Ben-Gurion disassociated Israel from Zionism by redefining Zionists as Diaspora Jews who contributed only money to Israel. For Israeli youth, Zionism became a derogatory term associated with those who lacked the Israeli experience.[57] However, the victory of the 1967 Six Day War had a profound effect on political orientation in Israel and inspired a radical redefinition of Zionism by Israeli youth.

Israeli youth disconnected with their Jewish heritage faced an identity crisis as their secular government reclaimed historically holy land. On the one hand, there was the image of the courageous Jew who once again beat the odds and emerged victorious. On the other hand, retaining war-conquered territories that were not God-given was considered unethical.[58] As the Labor-led government engaged in withdrawal negotiations a surge of religious reform movements swept through Israel to revive Judaism. By 1974, the Labor Party's political dominance faded as ultra-orthodox college students emerged under the religious ideology of New Zionism which captured the Knesset under the Likud Party in the 1977 elections.[59]

Messianic Zionism was therefore revived with a militantly Revisionist twist and moved to the forefront of Jewish ideology and political control, thereby justifying Israel's possession of conquered territories. Unlike the Labor Party, the Likud-led government abandoned withdrawal plans and reinforced illegal settlements with new settlements claiming religious entitlement.[60] Occupation was framed as both a matter of security or military necessity and a prelude to the return of the Messiah and Jewish Redemption.[61] New Zionists viewed "securing the territorial integrity of the whole of *Eretz Yisrael*" not as a triumph of nationalism, but as the next stage in the Redemption process and returning the territories would constitute a "mortal sin" and human interference with a divine process.[62]

### Reframing: Post-Zionism

The interesting aspect of the New Zionist argument is that initial framing of the Zionist movement and retrieval of *Eretz Yisrael* in 1948 justified human intervention as a necessary step toward

Redemption. Whether human intervention is perceived as immorally premature or prophetically necessary, the Zionist movement is facing another identity crisis to reform or concede before a more radical mutation offers a solution that further stalls the peace process. A Post-Zionist mindset has emerged that contends Zionism has achieved its goals and is therefore obsolete. More extreme discourse redefine Zionism as “a violent and oppressive movement” that created Israel through “sin.”[63] Post-Zionism ultimately calls for Israel to become “a multicultural, pluralistic state” accountable to all its inhabitants including Palestinians.[64]

Post-Zionists recognize that Zionism treats Israel as if it were created in a vacuum by continually framing the Israeli experience without regard to the Palestinian one. Pre-state Zionists created an "Us-Them" identity that placed Arabs in the category of them. All of these identities and frames have been linked in some way to the religious significance of Israel, and Post-Zionists warn that the dominance of Zionism as the lens through which Israeli Jews view themselves blinds them to alternative discourses which are necessary for resolving the Arab-Israeli conflict.[65] Silberstein contends that every part of the Israeli “everyday” from literature, cultural practices, and terminology to language, institutions, and landmarks are filtered through a Zionist lens and accepted as indisputably true.[66] Therefore, in order to get Israeli leaders, elites, and scholars to behave differently, the discourse which shapes their attitudes must change.

## Conclusion

The application of SMT to Zionism exposes the complexities of the social and political environments inside and outside Israel that inhibit peace. The necessity of restructuring the discursive processes in modern Israel is not just a prescription for the Israeli identity, but also has implications for the Palestinian identity and for onlookers and arbitrators who diagnose the Arab-Israeli conflict as something that can be resolved purely from redistribution of land which Arabs and Israelis equally value as their right. As stated earlier, Israel was not created in a vacuum. To argue that peace is a matter of changing only the Israeli discourse is an oversimplification and ignores the Palestinian piece of the puzzle. Without changes in the discourses that frame both Israeli and Palestinian identity, there is little chance that disengagement will provide a long-lasting solution.

## About the Author

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