

Exile and Absence from the True Homeland: The Topos of Exile in Religious Literature

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Introduction

This paper started life as a short presentation at a one-day conference on “Exile, Diaspora and Persian Poetry” in November 2019 at Leiden University. My brief was to present some medieval texts of my own choosing with the theme of exile and absence from the homeland, as a precursor to the evening’s discussion of twentieth-century perspectives on poetry and politics in modern Iran and its diaspora. I chose texts I had previously translated or discussed in publications, but not together as here, where my purpose is to reflect on the fluidity of the concepts of exile and absence from the homeland.

In the present age of postcolonial migration, the concept of diaspora becomes increasingly ramified as diasporic communities become

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assimilated into their adopted lands, and self-identify as Iranian American, British Muslim, or Indian Parsi, for example. *Diaspora*, *dispersion* of a people, is a borrowing from the Ancient Greek *diaspeirein* (to scatter about)—for example, as used by historians to describe the movement of citizens of a dominant city–state who migrated in order to colonize other areas, to bring the territories into their empire. With the translation of the Hebrew Bible into Greek in the third century BC, *diaspora* came to be used of Jewish and other tribes from the Northern Kingdom of Israel who had been exiled by the Assyrians in the eighth century BC. Thereafter follows the long history of diasporic populations of displaced peoples, who had migrated more or less against their will.

The topos of exile and separation from the physical or spiritual homeland runs deep in the religious imagination, and is tantamount to an underlying plot or narrative of chronologically and causally related actions. In genres such as mystical and eschatological literature, the religious are repeatedly exposed to key texts, whether they are scriptural citations, prayer formulae and traditional aphorisms, or elements of ritual practice that dramatize and reenact their salvation history. The three medieval or premodern poetic texts discussed below variously recall or allude to contexts of actual dislocation, but also reflect metaphorically on the theme of existential, spiritual separation from and longing for the “true homeland.” Indeed, *reflect* is the operative word in each case: if the actual and the metaphorical are two sides of the same coin, it is not certain which is which, and whether the explicit form is the obverse or the reverse, as they interpenetrate and flow into one another.

However, I begin by identifying a set of reference points in discussion of exile in religious literature; such nodal points may intersect and overlap. They are the following:

1. *Lost home*: This is in only one sense the starting point (that is, of a migration), for it is occasioned by previous actions and events. In general, those who lose or leave their home may do so for negative reasons, by compulsion (for example, prototypically, the Fall and

expulsion from Eden), or because of the danger of invasion, revolution, war, or persecution. Alternatively, departure may be voluntary—that is, for positive reasons such as to fulfill a vow or obligation, or to improve one's lot by economic migration. Yet even this may be preconditioned by the negative events just mentioned. The professed motivation for leaving carries a burden of ambivalent symbolism and poignant significance, pregnant with existential or spiritual meaning.

2. *Homelessness*: This is the focal point of each of the texts, and is emphatically not a static state but a transitional, intermediate condition and ongoing process, with several stopping points along the way. Thus, as in these texts, it is often represented by a journey of stages and, characteristically, as in two of the texts, by an experience or threat of chaos and disintegration at a critical point in the transition. The Hebrew and the Zoroastrian Persian examples below feature a sea crossing interrupted by a storm at sea: a state of insecurity, suffering, and hopelessness. Exiles, who fear being lost in liminality, are ironically in danger of being swallowed up by the deep.
3. *Home*: As a category, this is better left undefined and understated here, as it is in question in the poems, like a vanishing point, and is resolved in different ways by the poems, as a promise or commitment, or a mystery that defies fixed definition. However, two key features of this point are defined by its remoteness from the lost home, and by the necessity of a traumatic, transformative, purgative experience of the crisis experienced in *Homelessness* above.

Three Texts

The texts, from Zoroastrian, Islamic, and Jewish cultures, are by authors experiencing exile away from their longed-for homeland as they define it. Each achieves resolution of a personal and poetic tension by distinctively different means. Two are written in Persian and one in Hebrew, but they form a triad of texts with correspondences and contrasts of genre and a particular temporal point of view: looking at them together makes for a three-dimensional appreciation of the depth of pathos and poignancy in texts about exile.

The *Qesse-ye Sanjan*

The Zoroastrian text now known as the *Qesse-ye Sanjan* (*Story of Sanjan*, hereafter *QS*) comprises some 435 Persian verse couplets composed in 1599 in the *masnavi* version of the *bahr-e hazaj* (shaking) meter.¹ Its author is the literary-minded high priest of Navsari, Bahman Kay Qobad Sanjana.² Text and author are more or less unknown outside the Indian Zoroastrian (Parsi) tradition. It is neither a short lyric poem nor one of *masnavi* length; rather, it is a micro-epic, quasi-historical in character. Overall, it tells of Zoroastrianism from its origins to the author's present. I have chosen a central passage of 32 verses about a storm at sea at a crucial point in the long journey of flight from Islamic Iran to refuge in India. The *QS* is addressed to posterity, but it seems it is intended exclusively for the ears of those "of the Good Religion": it is a narrative poem, written both for pious, commemorative reasons, representing an oral tradition of a body of story preserved within the Zoroastrian community in Gujarat, and also for the author's own political reasons within the community, as I discovered in the course of studying it toward a published edition, translation, and analysis.³ It features several scenes of crisis, the first of which is quoted in full below: the storm at sea during the crossing from the island of Dib (Diu, on the southern tip of the Rajkot peninsular in Gujarat) to Sanjan.

The *QS* begins with a 63-verse doxological proem, including a section of مناجات (prayers) in praise of God, followed by some verses on the nature of humanity and its relationship with God, and imprecations by the author. Notably, in light of the long journey ahead into exile in India, from the beginning the author addresses his God in appropriately migratory terms (vv. 5–8):

¹It is also the meter of some renowned classical Persian poems—for example, Nezami's *Khosrov o Shirin*, 'Attar's *Elahiname and Asramame*, and Mahmud Shabestari's *Golshan-e Raz*.

²The author does not refer to the text by the full name of *Qesse-ye Sanjan*, though he several times calls it قصه. One MS has the descriptive heading آغاز داستان بهدینان فارس که از ولایت ایران به هندوستان آمده اند (The Beginning of the Story of the Zoroastrians of [the Province of] Fars Who Came from the Land of Iran to India).

³Alan Williams, *The Zoroastrian Myth of Migration from Iran and Settlement in the Indian Diaspora; Text, Translation and Analysis of the 16th Century Qesse-ye Sanjan* (Leiden: Brill, 2009).

کند بخشنده و پوزش پذیرست	بما هر جا پناه و دستگیرست
بما دانش بداد و دین نمودست	همو فریاد رس هموار بودست
گنه آمرز و لغزش بخش آدم	غریبان پرور و دارای عالم
انیس خلوت و مشکل گشای ست	همو همواره ما را رهنمای ست

He is our refuge and protector everywhere,
 forgiving and accepting penitence.
 And He has been our constant source of refuge,
 He gave us knowledge, He revealed the faith.
 The stranger's Guardian, Keeper of the world,
 forgiving sins, He pardons man's backsliding.
 He also is our Everlasting Guide,
 the Friend in solitude, the Problem-solver.⁴

This poem includes a sentiment of the author's that could equally be applied to the pilgrims on board the ship before they reach a safe haven at Sanjan (v. 53):

چرا از دیگران مخلص کنم خواست	در این گیتی رهائی از تو ما راست
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In this world our salvation is from You,
 why should I look to others for asylum?

The most important and well-known section of the *QS* runs from verse 64 to verse 223, covering all the narrative of the journey from Iran to India, and begins with a nuanced verse that is curiously resonant:

ز گفت موبدان و باستانها	کنون بشنو شگفتی داستانها
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Now listen to the tales of wondrous things,
 told from the lore of priests and ancient sages.

This verse contains a twofold literary reference: to the first verse of Rumi's (1207–73) *Masnavi* (see the later section in this paper on the *Masnavi*), and also to how Ferdowsi (940–1019 or 1025) refers back to his own ancient sources of the *Shahname* at the beginning of the story of Rostam and Sohrab.⁵

⁴All translations are mine unless otherwise noted.

⁵J. W. Clinton, trans., *The Tragedy of Sohrab and Rostam from the Persian National Epic, The Shahname of Abol-Qasem Ferdowsi*, Rev. ed. (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1996), 4–5.

ز گفتارِ دهقان یکی داستان بپیوندم از گفته باستان
 ز موبد بر این گونه برداشت یاد که رستم یکی روز از بامداد

In the dehqān's story there is a tale that I
 have versified from ancient narratives.
 The mobad starts his recollections thus,
 "Rostam, one day, just as the sun rose up..."

Bahman Kay Qobad's introductory doxological narrative (vv. 1–63) comprises three parts: blessings in praise of God (vv. 1–10), the creation of humankind (vv. 11–21), and the calling down of blessings upon the author (vv. 22–63). The story is introduced first at v. 64, with mention of the traditional sources and a contracted synopsis of the early history of the Zoroastrian faith, as if it has been a prediction of the prophet Zoroaster, as Bahman announces in v. 77a (بوستا در بگفته حالها را) "He told of things to come in the Avesta"). Less than twenty verses later, the text sweeps forward to the end of Zoroaster's millennium and the fall of Iran to Islam (vv. 95–97):

چو از زرتشت سال آمد هزاره ز دین به همی آمد کناره
 چو از شه یزدگر شاهی برفته که جدین آمد و تختش گرفته
 از آن مدت شکسته گشت ایران دریغ آن ملک دین افتاد ویران

When Zoroaster's thousandth year had come,
 the limit of the Noble Faith came too.
 When kingship went from Yazdegerd the King,
 the infidels arrived and took his throne.
 From that time forth Iran was smashed to pieces!
 Alas that land of Faith now gone to ruin!

Immediately, the story begins of how those faithful to the Zand and Pazand (Avestan scriptures and subsequent exegetical texts) had to go into hiding and abandon all they possessed (vv. 99–100):

چو بهدینان و دستوران سراسر ز کار دین نهان گشتند یکسر
 مقام و جای و باغ و کاخ و ایوان همه بگذاشتند از بهر دین شان

When every layman and dastur at once
 went into hiding for religion's sake,

Left homes, lands, gardens, villas, palaces,
they left all for the sake of their Religion.

According to the *QS*, the faithful are oppressed by the *دُرّوندان* (wicked ones) to the point of renouncing their faith or fleeing to the mountains, where it is said they remain for a hundred years. At all stages of their journey, they are guided by heaven through the consultations of a sage *dastur* (high priest) in vv. 103, 107–11, and 117–18. The *QS* tells of how they travel south to Hormuz, on the southern coast of Iran, where they remain for another fifteen years, until they set sail along the coast and eventually land at the small island of Dib. They stay there for nineteen years, until they resolve to make the famously perilous sea crossing of about 200 kilometers to the western coast of India. The action of this decisive journey starts here, beginning with the decision to leave Hormuz:

ز دروندان کشیده هریکی رنج	در آن کشور چو سال آمده و پنج
همیشه در مُنجم بُد توانا	بدانجایی که بُد دستور دانا
که بر ما آبخور آخر رسیده	همودر زیج‌های کهنه‌دیده
کنون زین ملک بیرون رفت باید	اگر این بوم بگذاریم شاید
خرد باطل شود کاری بود خام	و گر نه ماهمه افتیم در دام
بباید رفت ما را بر سرهند	پس آن بهتر که از دیوان دروند
گریزیم باز سوی هند زان پس	ز بیم جان و بهر دین همه کس
همانگه بادبان بر پای کرده	سوی دریا چو کشتی ساز کرده
به سوی هند کشتی تندراندند	زن و فرزند در کشتی نشاندند
بدیب افتاد لنگروار بیشک	چو کشتی سوی هند آمد یکایک

105 When fifteen years had passed in that domain,
each one had suffered grief from infidels.
A wise *dastur* there was in that domain,
a master in the science of the stars.
He looked in his old tables of the heavens,
and said, "At last our life is finished here.
It is correct for us to leave this land.
We must now make an exit from this realm,
Or else we shall all fall into a trap.
To reason were in vain, a foolish thing.

110 So it is better we set off for India,
 and that we leave behind the wicked devils.
 Let everyone escape henceforth to India,
 to save our lives and for Religion's sake."
 And when a boat was ready on the sea,
 and even as the mast was raised aloft,
 The women and the children were embarked,
 to India then they sped the boat apace.
 Now when the boat came close to India,
 at once they chanced on Dib, for anchorage no doubt.

The episode that follows occupies only another 22 verses of the poem but is central to the fate of the Zoroastrian pilgrims in search of a safe and permanent refuge:

بگل در ماند آخر پای آنجا	فرود آمد گرفته جای آنجا
شده آخر منجم زد یکی فال	در آن بودند بهدین نوزده سال
همانگه گفت کای یاران پر نور	بزین اندر به دیده پیر دستور
که در آنجا بود آرام یکسر	از اینجا رفت باید جای دیگر
سوی گجرات کشتی تیز راندند	ز گفتارش همه کس شاد گشتند
از آن جا آفتِ طوفان رسیده	چو کشتی ره بدریا در کشیده
در آن ورطه چو سرگردان بماندند	همه دستور دین حیران بماندند
بیا ایستاد و زاریها نمودند	بدرگاه خدا رخ زار سودند
ازین سختی رهان ما را به یکبار	که ای دانا تو یاری رس در اینکار
از این مشکل مرا گردان تو به روز	بیاری رس تو ای بهرام فیروز

115 They disembarked and made their landing there,
 and there their feet remained on land at last.
 The faithful would remain for nineteen years,
 until at length their sage divined an omen.
 The old dastur consulted his star tables,
 and said at once: "Companions, full of light,
 We must depart here for another place,
 together in that place there will be peace!"
 They all rejoiced to hear what he had said,
 full speed they sailed their boat to Gujarat.

120 But once the boat made headway on the sea,
 a most ferocious storm blew up from there.
 The dasturs of the faith were all distraught,
 as they were cast adrift upon that whirlpool.
 They rubbed their faces, crying in God's presence,
 they stood up straight and let their cries come out.
 "Wise Lord, come to our rescue in this plight,
 save us just once from this calamity!
 Victorious Bahram, come to rescue me!
 Make things auspicious for me in this trouble!

هراسی در دل و جان می‌نیاریم	بلطف تو غم از طوفان نداریم
نمای راه تو گم کردگانرا	تو خود فریاد رس بیچارگانرا
نه هرگز پیش آید زین بلایی	از این غرقاب گر یابم رهایی
رسیم آنجا بدلشادان خرسند	از این دریا اگر در کشور هند
از این سختی رهان و کن توانا	فروزیم آتش بهرام پانا
که جز وی ما نداریم ایچ دیگر	پذیرفتیم مایان این ز کرکر
از آن سختی همه گشتند بهروز	ز یمن آتش بهرام فیروز
خدا در کار ایشان داد یاری	همان ساعت قبول افتاد زاری
همان باد مخالف شد از آن دور	خنک بادی وزیده با خره نور
زبان بگشاد و زورق راند یکبار	چو کشتیبان بنام پاک دادار
همانگه راند اندر بحر کشتی	همه دستورو بهدین کرد گستی
سوی سنجان رسیدند آنهمه کس	چنین حکم قضا شد هم از آن پس

125 By your grace we'll not suffer from the storm,
 there'll be no dread within our hearts or souls.
 You are defender of the helpless ones!
 Reveal the way to us who've lost our way!
 If we should find salvation from this whirlpool,
 and no disaster falls on us again,
 If from this sea we reach the land of India,
 and are contented there with happy hearts,
 We'll light a Fire of Bahram, our Protector,
 O save us from this plight and make us strong!

130 We've undertaken this ourselves with God,
 apart from Him we have no other help."
 They were all blessed in their adversity,
 by fortune of victorious Bahram's Fire.
 The very moment when their cry was heard,
 God gave them succour in their difficulties.
 A fair wind blew, there was a glorious light,
 the hostile wind then disappeared from there.
 The captain uttered "By the Holy Name
 of God," and straightaway he steered the vessel.

135 All dasturs and all laymen tied their kusti,
 the boat was then propelled upon the sea.
 And after that it was the law of Fate
 that every one of them arrived at Sanjan.

The journey to India begins with the statement (v. 101) that they left their homes for کوهستان, the "mountainous region" of Khorasan in the northeast of Iran. A century ago, Parsi historians J. J. Modi and S. H. Hodivala argued that this is where the original Khorasani town of Sanjan was located; the *QS* itself asserts (in vv. 190–223) that *Sanjan* was the name the Zoroastrian *dastur* gave to the place where the pilgrims subsequently consecrated a fire temple dedicated to Bahram/Verethraghna, the Avestan *yazata* (gods) of victory in fulfillment of the promise they made at the height of the storm at sea.⁶ The *ateshbahram*, which they named ایران شاه (King of Iran; the *QS* also refers to it as شاه ایران in vv. 363 and 399), is the most sacred grade of Zoroastrian ritual fire. The fire was later moved with great ceremony to the town of Navsari for safekeeping, as is reported in the *QS* in vv. 366–403.

The storm at sea in the *QS* is a dramatic and unforgettable setting for the life-or-death crisis of the homeless émigré Zoroastrians. At its height, they collectively appeal to Ohrmazd, "Wise Lord," through their *dasturs* all "distracted" and "cast adrift" (v. 121). Their dedication to "Victorious Bahram" is affirmed in their cry to heaven, which is immediately

⁶However, for further discussion see Williams, *Zoroastrian Myth of Migration*, esp. 32–34 and 172–73.

answered with the arrival of a fair wind and a glorious light, and so all is made well, as they all become “blessed in their adversity, / by fortune of victorious Bahram’s fire” (v. 131). The rescue is almost prosaically undramatic, as the captain utters the benediction of the name of the Holy Creator, “and straightaway he steered the vessel” (v. 134), and by “the law of Fate,” they arrive at Sanjan (v. 136). The brief storm episode and quick bargain with heaven allows the author to drive the narrative forward onto Indian soil. The author immediately switches his attention to the landing at Sanjan, in which the written text of the *QS* has a memorable exchange of speeches between the *dastur* and the “virtuous prince Jadi Rana”; the latter subsequently grants them sanctuary and land on which to settle and to build their fire temple. This scene has been much elaborated in the Parsi (Gujarati and English) oral traditions, and today, Parsis pay more attention to it than to anything else in the *QS*—understandably, as it simultaneously establishes their ethnic-religious identity as Iranian Zoroastrians as well as confirming their official acceptance as Indian Parsis.

Judah Halevi’s Poem “Still Chasing Fun at Fifty”⁷

Abu’l-Hasan al-Lawi is better known as the Judeo-Arabic poet and philosopher Judah Halevi (1075–1141). He is thought to have been born into an elite Jewish family in Tudela in Spain, and was author of a large body of poetry in Hebrew, as well as his great philosophical treatise in Arabic, the *Kuzari*.⁸ His 39-couplet Hebrew poem “Still Chasing Fun

⁷I previously discussed this poem, in conjunction with an early translation of the above-quoted passage of the *QS*, in a paper at a conference at the Ben-Zvi Institute, Jerusalem. The paper was subsequently published as “The Zoroastrian *Qesse-ye Sanjan* and Judah Halevi’s ‘*aliya* to Eretz Israel: Reflections on Two Contrasting Journeys in Faith,” in *Irano-Judaica*, vol. V, ed. Shaul Shaked and Amnon Netzer (Jerusalem: Ben-Zvi Institute, 2003), 27–51. In that paper, I relied on an old (but dependable) translation by Nina Salaman. Since then, Raymond P. Scheindlin has published his excellent study, *The Song of the Distant Dove: Judah Halevi’s Pilgrimage* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008). Here, I am able to quote his own lively and lyrical version of the same poem (184–89), and I gratefully acknowledge his illuminating work on the subject. I have also availed myself of the insights of Andras Hamori’s reading of the poem, especially his seeing a Neoplatonic influence on Halevi, in Hamori’s essay “Lights in the Heart of the Sea. Some Images of Judah Halevi’s,” *Journal of Semitic Studies* XXX (1983): 75–83. After the translation, I have also added a few of my own remarks.

⁸The *Kuzari*, known in Arabic as *كتاب الحجة والدليل في نصره الدين الذليل*, “The Book of Refutation and Evidence on Behalf of the Despised Religion,” is a dialogue between a rabbi and a pagan.

at Fifty” purports to be about a rescue from the jaws of death in a storm at sea, like the passage of the *QS*, but there, the similarity ends. A strong theme in the poem gives it perhaps more of a connection with the Persian text by Rumi that follows here, as Halevi’s poem treats the peril of such a dramatic life-threatening experience as a stage on the way to transcendence and unity. The goal is definitely otherworldly.

Whereas the Iranian Zoroastrians of the *QS* were leaving their home to find a new life free of Islamic persecution, Judah Halevi deliberately left his family, friends, and community in Spain. In mid-life, he had turned more seriously to religion, and resolved to set off by ship from his home to Alexandria. This particular poem, like others of his sea poems, is written in anticipation of the future voyage, bound as he is to make the pilgrimage, the “ascent” (Heb. אֲלִיָּהּ, ‘*aliyah*’), to the Holy Land of Israel, specifically to Jerusalem, to Zion, in order to die there. It is recorded that he boarded a ship that set sail from Alexandria on 14 May 1141. Raymond P. Scheindlin, author of a modern study of Halevi, asks the crucial question, “Did Halevi reach Jerusalem?” His answer is worth quoting at some length:

According to a later tradition, he arrived at the gates of the city and was kneeling there to recite his great “Ode to Jerusalem”, when an Arab horseman, enraged at this display of Jewish piety, charged and trampled him under the hooves of his steed. The story is probably a legend. All that we know is that Halevi died during the summer of 1141. But the legend of Halevi’s violent death embodies a sort of higher truth, for the devotion to the land of Israel expressed in his poetry emits a whiff of martyrdom. Furthermore, the legend’s depiction of Halevi dying in the embrace of stones and the soil of the Holy Land echoes a particular recurring image in his poetry that expresses his principled quest for concreteness and certainty in religious experience. It was this quest, pervading his poetry and religious thought that led him to the East.⁹

It has been translated by N. Daniel Korobkin as *The Kuzari: In Defense of the Despised Faith* (Northvale, NJ: J. Aronson, 1998; Jerusalem: Feldheim Publishers, 2009).

⁹Scheindlin, *Song of the Distant Dove*, 4.

Halevi was not making a conventional religious pilgrimage, like the annual medieval pilgrimage to the Mount of Olives or the Islamic Hajj ritual, as he never intended to return to Spain; again, it was his wish to die there in the Holy Land. Indeed, his life of exile was the one he left in Spain, and his *'aliyah* seems to have been an act of religious purification, toward illumination and union: finding home.

Here is Halevi's poem in the original Hebrew:

הַתְּרַדְּף נַעֲרוֹת אַחַר חַמְשִׁים,
וְיִמְיָד לְהַתְּעוֹפֵף חַמְשִׁים?
וְהַבְּרַח מֵעֲבֹדַת הָאֱלֹהִים,
וְחִסְפָּךְ אֵל עֲבֹדַת הָאֲנָשִׁים?
וְהַדְרֵשׁ אֶת פְּנֵי רַבִּים, וְהַפֵּשׁ
פְּנֵי אֶחָד לְכָל חַפְּץ דְּרוּשִׁים?
וְהַתְּצַל לְהַצְטִיד לְדַרְכְּךָ,
וְחַמְכָּר חֶלְקְךָ בַּזּוּר עֲדָשִׁים?
הֲלֹא אִמְרָה לְךָ עוֹד: נִפְשֶׁךָ "הוֹן"
וְהַאֲוִתָּה תִּבְכֶּר לְחַדְשִׁים?
נָשָׂה מֵעַל עֲצָתָהּ אֵל עֲצַת אֵל,
וְסוּר מֵעַל חֲמֻשַׁת הַרְגָּשִׁים,
וְהַתְּרַצֵּה לְיֹצֵרְךָ בְּיָתֶךָ
יְמוֹתֶיךָ אֲשֶׁר אֵצִים וְחֻשִׁים.
וְאַל תִּדְרֹשׁ בְּלֵב וּלְבַב רְצוֹנוֹ,
וְאַל תִּלְדָּךְ לְךָ לְקִרְאָתָהּ נְחֻשִׁים.
הִיָּה לְעִשְׂוֹתָ רְצוֹנוֹ עַוְוָה כְּנֶמֶר,
וְקַל כְּכַבִּי, וְנִבְוֹר כְּלִישִׁים.
וְאַל יִמּוֹשׁ בְּלֵב יָמִים לְבָבְךָ,
וְהָרִים תִּתְחַוֶּה מִשִּׁים וּמְשִׁים,
וּמְלָחִים יְדִיהֶם כְּמִלְחִים,
וְחֻכְמֵי הַתְּרָשִׁים מִחֲרִישִׁים--
שְׂמֻחִים הוֹלְכִים נֶכַח פְּנִיהֶם,
וְשׁוֹבִים אֵל אַחֲרֵיהֶם וּבֹשִׁים--
וְאוֹקֵינוֹס לְפָנֶיךָ לְמָנוֹס,
וְאֵין מִבְּרַח לְךָ כִּי אִם יְקוּשִׁים,
וְיִמּוֹטוּ וְיִנְטוּ קַלְעִים,
וְיִנְעוּ וְיִזְעוּ קַרְשִׁים,
וְיָד רֹחַ מִצְחָקָתָ בְּמִים
כְּנוֹשְׂאֵי הַעֲקָרִים בְּרִגְשִׁים,
וּפְעַם תַּעֲשֶׂה מִקֵּם נְרַנְנוֹת,
וּפְעַם תַּעֲשֶׂה מִקֵּם גְּדִישִׁים--
כַּעֲת הַהַתְּבָרֵךְ דָּמוֹ אֲרִיזוֹת,
וְעַת הַחֲלֵשׁ דָּמוֹ נְחֻשִׁים--

וראשונים דלקום אחרונים
 כצפעונים ואין להם להשיב,
 וצו אדיר פקט זפל באדיר,
 ונהרין ונהם נחלשים,
 והתכה וקניה נבכים,
 פתחתים שנים כשלישים,
 ומושכי החבלים בחבלים,
 ונשים ואנשים נאנשים,
 וריח חבלה מחובליהם,
 וקצו הגויות בגפשים,
 ואין יתרון לחנוק התכנים,
 ואין המדה לתחבולת ישישים,
 ונחשבו לקש תרני ארזים,
 ונהפכו לקנים הברזשים,
 ונטל חול בגב הים סתבן,
 וברנולי ארזים כחששים.
 ועם ותפללו כל איש לקדשו,
 ואף פונה לקדש הקדשים.
 והזכר מפלאות ים סוף וירדן,
 אשר על כל לקבות הם חרושים.
 תשבח למשביח שאון ים
 בעת שיגרושו מימיו רפשים.
 והזכר לו זכות לבות טמאים,
 וזכר לך זכות אבות קדשים.
 וחדש נזראותיו כי תחדש
 לפניו שיר מחול מחלים ומושים,
 ושיב הנשמות לפגרים,
 ויחיו העצמים היבשים.
 וקנע ישתקו גלים, וידמו
 עדרים על פני ארץ נמושים.
 ותליל, כבוא שמש במעלות
 צבא מרום--ועליו שר חמשים--
 ככושית משבצות זקב לבושה,
 וכחכלה במלואת גבישים.
 וכוכבים בלב הים נבוכים
 כגרים ממעוניהם גרושים,
 וכדמותם בצלמם יעשו אור
 בלב הים פלקבות ואשים.
 פני מים ושמים עדיים
 עלי ליל, מטחרים לטושים.
 וים דומה לרקיע בעינו;
 שניהם אז שני ימים חבושים,
 ובניוהם לקבי ים שלישי
 בשוא גלי שבחי החדשים.

Here is Scheindlin's translation of "Still Chasing Fun at Fifty"
(translating Heb. *Ha-tirdof na'arut ahar hamishim*):¹⁰

Still chasing fun at fifty, like a boy! –
and yet your time could run out any day.
You flee God's service,
have no better aspiration
than to be slave to men.
You seek the favor of the many, turn away
from One who has it in Him
to answer every man's desire,
if they would only ask.
You won't be bothered gathering provisions for your journey,
but lightly trade the banquet of eternity
for lentil stew.

- 5 When will your appetite say, "Enough"?
When will your lust
stop growing back her maidenhead every month?
Turn from her advice to God's,
abandon those five senses.
Make peace with your Creator
while your remaining days are speeding by.
Do not expect half-hearted deeds will please Him,
or go to serpent-oracles to learn your fate.
To do His will, be tiger-fierce, gazelle-fleet, lion-mighty.
- 10 And do not lose heart in the heart of the sea,
when mountains seem to be sliding, shifting,
when sailors' hands are limp as rags
and skilful seamen silent, helpless
(they were jaunty sailing forward;
cross now, thrust backward).
You've nowhere but the ocean to escape to,
the trap of doom your only refuge.

¹⁰Hayim Brody, ed., "Ha-tirdof na'arut ahar hamishim," in *Dīwān yehuda ben shemuel halevi*, vol. 2 (Berlin: Mekize Nirdamim, 1909), 160–63 (poem 5). This is quoted, translated, and discussed by Scheindlin, *Song of the Distant Dove*, 184–91. See also the discussion by Hamori, "Lights."

The sails are tilting, slipping,
boards shift and tremble.

15 The wind toys with the water
like harvesters bringing sheaves to threshing,
pats the water flat as a threshing floor,
then heaps it up like mounds of grain.
The waves surge up like lions leaping,
then recede in foam that coils like serpents.
Waves succeed those waves and chase them—
vipers that no charmer can control.
Here comes a mighty blow! The mighty ship might founder!
Mast and pole are shivered.

20 The decks, all three,
and all their chambers are in chaos.
Rope men are in terror,
passengers (not only women) are collapsing.
Sailors' spirits fail, and people faint.
The strength of masts and skills of men mean nothing,
when cedar masts behave like chaff,
and cypress turns to reeds,

25 when ballast hit the sea like straw,
and iron bars like stubble.
Each man is praying to whatever he holds holy,
but you are facing God's own Holy Temple,
remembering the Sea of Reeds, the Jordan—
miracles engraved on every heart—
and praising Him who smoothes the sea
when it churns up scum.
You beg that He may purify your heart.
He will spare you for the sake of holy ancestors,

30 renew His miracles as you renew
the Levites' dance and song to Him.
He will restore the souls to bodies,
put back life in desiccated bones.
At once, the waves are calm;

they seem like flocks of sheep
scattered on a meadow.

The sun is setting and the stars are rising,
with the moon as captain, watching over them.

The night is like a Moorish woman dancing,
wearing an embroidered cloth with eyes,
cloth of sky-blue set with crystals.

- 35 Lost in the heart of the sea, the stars
dart and wander like men compelled
to leave their homes as exiles;
they make little lights in their own image,
little flames and flares in the heart of the sea,
pairs of ornaments on sky and water
to adorn the night.
Sea and sky, so like in color, seem to merge,
while in between
my heart makes yet another sea,
as my new songs and praises upward surge.

The poem is addressed by the poet to himself, yet he never speaks of himself in the first person until the last, v. 39, where he refers to “my heart.”

Vv. 1–9: The poem begins conventionally, with moral reproachments about the foolishness of youth in vv. 1–5, answered in reverse order in vv. 6–9. Each of the first five verses is a challenge, and each is answered in reverse order:

- | | |
|-------------------------------------------|------------------------------------|
| (1) don't let time run out | (9) be tiger fierce |
| (2) don't flee God's service | (8) don't be half-hearted |
| (3) don't seek popular favor | (7) make peace with God |
| (4) don't trade the banquet of eternity | (6b) abandon those five senses |
| (5) don't be trapped by the lust of woman | (6a) turn from her advice to God's |

V. 10, “And do not lose heart in the heart of the sea, etc.”: As A. Hamori has observed, “This beautiful poem is of the familiar literary type in which a physical and a spiritual journey run parallel courses.”¹¹ The formally smoothed transition (تخلص, in Arabic rhetoric)—that is, from the moral exhortation to the beginning of the spiritual journey—begins here at v. 10, as Halevi begins to imagine what might happen if he were to make the sea crossing. Unlike the *QS*, Halevi describes the storm not in the past tense but in what I would call the visionary present, as the poet imagines, or foresees, the tribulations of a storm and takes the reader through them with him. It is directly a reference to Psalm 46:2–3: “2 Therefore will not we fear, though the earth be removed, and though the mountains be carried into the heart of the sea; 3 Though the waters thereof roar and be troubled, though the mountains shake with the swelling thereof.” As Hamori notes, “The *takhalluṣ* turns on the word *lev* [“heart,” in v. 10] having been used in the moral sense in v. 8, it is now naturalised in ‘the heart of the sea.’”¹²

V. 13, “You’ve nowhere but the ocean to escape to, / the trap of doom your only refuge”: Halevi addresses himself in the second person, and builds a violent storm to a climax alongside “skilful seamen silent, helpless.” The “trap of doom” is reminiscent of *QS* vv. 107b–10, where the *dastur* says this:

At last our life is finished here.
It is correct for us to leave this land.
We must now make an exit from this realm,
Or else we shall all fall into a trap.
To reason were in vain, a foolish thing.
So it is better we set off for India,
and that we leave behind the wicked devils.

The Zoroastrian and Jewish pilgrims are similarly caught between the devil and the deep blue sea.

¹¹Hamori, “Lights,” 75.

¹²Hamori, “Lights,” 76, n. 4.

Vv. 17–18: The wind and the waves are now out of control and, as Scheindlin comments,¹³ “turn into a surreal landscape inhabited by lions, snakes and vipers [. . .] All that is left is prayer.”

Vv. 19–25, “Here comes a mighty blow, etc.”: Here, the end is announced as the elements are about to destroy the ship (which Halevi does not refer to as a whole, but only as sails, boards, decks, and chambers). The total disintegration of the scene on board is graphically sketched in each hemistich, as if frame by frame.

Vv. 26–31, “Each man is praying to whatever he holds holy, / but you are facing God’s own Holy Temple, etc.”: This is the pivotal point and climax of the poem: while all others fall into prayer, only Halevi faces the Holy of Holies, and his presence of mind to praise God, beg for forgiveness, and recollect his religious faith allows for the resolution in calmness and transformation of the scene. As Hamori observes, “In the poem, a scene of soaring peace follows the storm.” He adds, commenting on Halevi’s transformation of Isaiah 57:20, “The heart will come through; it will emerge pure from its tumults; the dross will be cast out.”¹⁴

Vv. 32–39: It is not necessary to comment on these sublime verses, except to quote the last two verses in Andras Hamori’s translation:

38 The sea will be like the firmament in colour,
the two of them two seas bound together,
39 With my heart between them a third sea,
as the waves of my new praises rise.¹⁵

His reading, in identifying the Neoplatonic ideas underlying Halevi’s thinking in the poem, to me sums up their essence: “These images – of purification, illumination, and union – govern the conclusion of the poem.”¹⁶

¹³Scheindlin, *Song of the Distant Dove*, 189.

¹⁴Hamori, “Lights,” 76.

¹⁵Hamori, “Lights,” 77.

¹⁶Hamori, “Lights,” 77.

A Passage from Rumi's *Masnavi* Book 4

Mowlana Jalaloddin Rumi Balkhi is, of course, far better known to Persian speakers than either of the two writers just discussed, but he is not conventionally thought of as an exile: although he lived his adult life several thousand kilometers from the place of his physical birth and childhood, he did not have to migrate in order to return to his home. For him, the separation he speaks of at the opening of the *Masnavi* is the common human predicament so long as humans are dominated by the *nafs*, the egoistical, illusory condition of self-regard. The beginning of the *Masnavi* is the only place to start (1.1–4):

بشنواین نئی چون شکایت می کند از جدایی ها حکایت می کند
کز نیستان تا مرا بُبریده اند در نفیرم مرد و زن نالیده اند
سینه خواهم شرحه شرحه از فراق تا بگویم شرح درد اشتیاق
هر کسی کاو دور ماند از اصل خویش باز جوید روزگار وصل خویش

[—] Listen to this reed as it is grieving,
it tells the story of our separations:
“Since I was severed from the bed of reeds,
in my cry men and women have lamented.
I need the breast that’s torn to shreds by parting,
to give expression to the pain of heartache.
Whoever finds himself left far from home,
looks forward to the day of his reunion”¹⁷

This is no metaphor—it is the underlying premise of the whole of his work. It is no theme, but the reality Rumi inhabits: like Judah Halevi before the Holy of Holies, Rumi is no exile in his spiritual home.

As so often in Persian poetry, here the bird is Rumi’s symbol of the soul (1.2736–38):

¹⁷Books 1 and 2 of the *Masnavi* are published. See Alan Williams, ed., *The Masnavi of Rumi, A New English Translation with Persian Text and Explanatory Notes*, books 1 and 2 (New York: I. B. Tauris, 2020). Others will follow in the same series. NB All verse references are according to the edition of Mohammad Este’lami, ed., *Masnavi*, 7 vols. (Tehran: Entesharat-e Sokhan, 1393/2014), not to R. A. Nicholson’s edition.

مرغ کآب شور باشد مسکنش او چه داند جای آب روشنش؟
 ای که اندر چشمه شور است جات تو چه دانی شط و جیحون و فرات؟
 ای تو نارسته از این فانی رباط تو چه دانی محو و سُکر و انبساط

The bird, whose home is on the salty sea,
 how can she know a place of limpid water?
 O you whose home is in the brackish spring,
 what do you know of Oxus and Euphrates?
 And you who have not fled this half-way hostel,
 what do you know of ecstasy and passion?

In this “half-way hostel” (این فانی رباط), we are all exiles. Toward the end of this book, Rumi writes two Arabic verses in homage to Hallaj (executed 922), imitating the opening to one of his most famous odes (1.3949–51):

اقتلونی یا ثقاتی لائما ان فی قتلی حیاتی دائمی
 ان فی موتی حیاتی یافتی کم افارق موطنی حتی متی

Kill me, my trusty friends, for I am wretched,
 indeed my death is my eternal life.
 Indeed my life is in my death, young man,
 how long shall I be severed from my homeland?

Rumi then adds, also in Arabic, quoting Koran 2:156 (1.3951),

فرقتی لو لم تکن فی ذا السکون لم یقل انا الیه راجعون

In this my dwelling if there were not severance,
 He would not say, “To Him we are returning.”

In fact, with the mention of severance (فُرقتی), Rumi is returning to the severance of his beginning nearly 4,000 verses earlier (کز نیستان تا مرا بُبریده اند). But his next verse leads to a conclusion (1.3952):

راجع آن باشد که باز آید به شهر سوی وحدت آید از تفریقِ قهر

He who returns comes back to his own city,
 to unity from violent separation.

This leads me directly to a passage of 29 verse couplets of *Masnavi* book 4 with which I would like to conclude this discussion, presented here in my new and previously unpublished translation (4.3629–57):

سال‌ها مردی که در شهری بود یک زمان که چشم در خوابی رود
 شهر دیگر بیند او پر نیک و بد هیچ در یادش نیاید شهر خود
 که من آنجا بوده‌ام این شهر نو نیست آن من در اینجام گرو
 بل چنان داند که خود پیوسته او هم در این شهرش بده ست ابداع و خو
 چه عجب گر روح موطن‌های خویش که بده ستش مسکن و میلاد پیش
 می‌نیارد یاد کاین دنیا چو خواب می‌فرو پوشد چو اختر را سحاب
 خاصه چندین شهرها را کوفته کرده‌ها از درک او ناروفته
 اجتهاد گرم ناکرده که تا دل شود صاف و ببیند ماجرا
 سر برون آرد دلش از بخش راز اول و آخر ببیند چشم باز

For years a man may dwell within a city—
 the moment when his eyes drift into sleep

3630 He sees another full of good and bad,
 and nothing of his city is remembered
 Recalling “I was there, this city’s new,
 this is not mine, here I am just a guest,”
 But no! He thinks that he has always been
 here in this very city born and bred.
 What wonder if the spirit’s own abodes,
 which were its dwellings and its former births,
 Are now forgotten? For this world, like sleep,
 enfolds it as the clouds obscure the stars.

3635 More so, from all the cities it has trodden
 the layers of dust are unswept from its sight.
 It has not striven ardently in order
 to purify the heart and see what’s happened,
 To raise its heart out of the pit of mystery
 and see with open eyes both first and last.

آمده اول به اقلیم جماد واز جمادی در نباتی اوفتاد
 سال‌ها اندر نباتی عمر کرد وز جمادی یاد نآورد از نبرد
 وز نباتی چون به حیوانی فتاد نامدش حال نباتی هیچ یاد

<p> خاصه در وقتِ بهار و ضیمران سرّ میلِ خود نداند در لبان سوی آن پیرِ جوانبختِ مجید جنبشِ این سایه زان شاخِ گل است پس بداند سرّ میل و جست و جو کی بچند گر نچند این درخت می کشید آن خالقی که دانی اش </p>	<p> جز همین میلی که دارد سوی آن همچو میلِ کودکان با مادران همچو میلِ مفرطِ هر نو مرید جزو عقلِ این از آن عقلِ کل است سایه اش فانی شود آخر در او سایه شاخِ دگر ای نیکبخت باز از حیوانِ سوی انسانی اش </p>
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At first he came to inorganic realms
from inorganic to organic life.

For years he lived in an organic state
and now forgot the inorganic world.

3640 And when he passed from plant to animal
there was no memory of the state of plants,
Except a feeling which he had for it,
so strong in springtime with its fragrant flowers,
Like babies feeling for their mother, it
knows not the secret of its urge to suckle,
Or like each novice's attraction felt
toward his noble Pir of generous fortune.
This finite mind is from that perfect Mind
this shadow moves just as the Great Bough moves.

3645 His shadow passes into Him at last,
and then he knows the secret of the quest.
How can the shadow of the other move,
O blessed man, if this Tree does not move?
Again the Lord Creator whom you know
led it from animal to human nature.

<p> تا شد اکنون عاقل و دانا و زفت هم از این عقلش تحوّل کرد نی ست صد هزاران عقل بیند بوالعجب کی گذارندش در آن نسیانِ خویش؟ که کند بر حالتِ خود ریشخند چون فراموشم شد احوالِ صواب؟ </p>	<p> همچنین اقلیم تا اقلیم رفت عقل های اوّلینش یاد نیست تا رهد زین عقلِ پر حرس و طلب گرچه خفته گشت و شد ناسی ز پیش باز از آن خوابش به بیداری کشند که چه غم بود آن که می خوردم به خواب؟ </p>
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چون ندانستم که آن غم و اعتلال فعل خواب است و قریب است و خیال؟
 همچنان دنیا که حُلْمِ نایم است خفته پندارد که این خود دایم است
 تا بر آید ناگهان صَبِحِ اجل وا رهد از ظلمتِ ظَنِّ و دغل
 خنده اش گیرد از آن غمهای خویش چون ببیند مستَقَرَّ و جای خویش

And so it went from state to state like this
 till now it is enlightened, wise and great.
 There's no recalling prior states of mind;
 from this one too there is advancing onward,
 3650 To quit this greedy avaricious mind,
 to see a hundred thousand minds of wonder.
 Though he might fall asleep forgetting all,
 how could they leave him to oblivion?
 They bring him back to wakefulness from sleep
 that he may laugh at his own sleepy state:
 "What was that sorrow suffered in my sleep
 and how could I forget the truthful states,
 and could not see those sorrows and those ills
 result from sleep, deception, fantasy?"
 3655 Thus is the world, which is the dream of sleepers!
 The sleeper thinks it truly is eternal,
 Till suddenly the dawn of death shall break
 and free him from thought's darkness and deceit,
 And laughter at those sorrows overcomes him
 to see his true abode and dwelling place.

A full commentary on this remarkable example of Rumi at his most lyrical outside the *Divan* will be included in book four of my ongoing series *The Masnavi of Rumi*. The passage—which has been referred to by R. A. Nicholson as “one of the finest in the *Mathnawi*”¹⁸—is concerned with the divine origin of the soul. Nicholson takes considerable interest in these verses in several pages of commentary, as he finds here a clear case of Rumi's using ideas that “have their source in

¹⁸Reynold A. Nicholson, ed., *The Mathnawī of Jalālu'ddin Rūmī*, vol. VIII, *Commentary on Vol. III-VI* (London: Gibb Memorial Trust, 1940), p. 214, n. to vv. 3628–36.

the Neoplatonic theory of emanation and the psychology of Aristotle and Plotinus.”¹⁹ Nicholson sees Rumi “as standing much nearer to Plotinus” in his ideas than to Aristotle and his interpreter Farabi, and draws parallels from Christian mysticism with Origen, Plotinus, John Milton in *Paradise Lost*, and even with the more contemporary William Wordsworth in his *Ode on Intimations of Immortality*. Rumi’s “all the cities it has trodden” of v. 3635 are, according to Nicholson, the “phases of experience through which the soul must pass in its journeys from and to God before it can attain to gnosis.”²⁰ Long before this, back in the first book of the *Masnawi*, Rumi refers to the world as a prison, in which humanity is oblivious (1.986–87):

این جهان زندان و ما زندانیان حفره کن زندان و خود را و راهان
چيست دنیا؟ از خدا غافل بدن ده قماش و نقده و میزان و زن

This world’s a prison and we are prisoners,
so burrow out of prison and escape!
What is the world? Obliviousness of God,
not goods and money, weighing scales and women.

Here in the fourth book, he changes the metaphor of the condition of being in the world to dreaming in sleep, in which we forget the true identity of the person we are in the wakeful consciousness. Like the English poets of whom Nicholson is reminded, Rumi does not use philosophical terminology to explain the Neoplatonic doctrine of emanations and the ascent of souls through mineral, vegetal, and animal states. Rather, he lightly suggests to the reader a dreamlike sequence of “flashes.” One example of these flashes occurs in a succession of images of momentary feelings in the transition from plant to animal: fragrant flowers in springtime, babies’ urge to suckle, and the novice’s attraction to the teacher (vv. 3641–43). A doctrine is slipped in in v. 3644a: “جزو عقل این از آن عقل کل است,” “This finite mind is from that perfect Mind.” However, he then quickly returns to the images of shadows moving, and the unseen mover of the Great Bough (vv. 3644b–46). The

¹⁹Nicholson, *Mathnawi*, vol. VIII, 215.

²⁰Nicholson, *Mathnawi*, vol. VIII, 214, commenting on 4.3634 of his edition.

passage continues ascending from animal to human nature and higher to the present moment in v. 3648b: “تا شد اکنون عاقل و دانا و زفت و زفت: ‘till now it is enlightened, wise and great.’” At v. 3649, there is a pausing in this present, and a reflection that the process of ascension shall continue. Presumably, this is a reassurance to the reader that though one may lapse from a certain attainment, one is subsequently roused:

باز از آن خوابش به بیداری کشند که کند بر حالتِ خود ریشخند

They bring him back to wakefulness from sleep
that he may laugh at his own sleepy state.

One senses that Rumi is himself in an ascending, expansive state here, as the passage continues to the end in a mood of laughter and relief. The discourse, in fact, continues for a further 11 verses, to v. 3668, where it is explained that sorrow and distress in dreams turn out to mean their opposite. And since this world is all a dream, the outcome is that on Resurrection Day, which is the time of true awakening, there will be joy:

گریه و درد و غم و زاری خود شادمانی دان به بیداری خود

Know that when you awake your tears and grief
and sorrow and your pain will turn to joy.

My overall conclusion, then, after all these many kinds of verses, is that these three works contain expressions of three different catharses being worked out in poetry to treat the pain of separation. In the first work, the Zoroastrians are escaping from a fallen land that has been “smashed to pieces” by invading enemies. It is all told in the past tense as a memorandum to future generations. Much of the Zoroastrians’ journey, as they moved eastward toward India, would presumably have navigated coastal waters, avoiding the turbulence of the deeper ocean; but the crossing from Diu (Dib) to mainland Indian Gujarat, which is notoriously prone to storms, provides the author with a dramatic opportunity to play out under heaven’s eye all the insecurities and perils of the pilgrims’ journey. The hostile forces of the storm bring them to the point of begging for a celestial solution, and inspire their

promise to the divine. In the other two texts, two superior visionary thinkers speak in the present tense about a metaphysical transposition of the travelers' plight. Both poets ascend in different ways to the summit of their aspirations. Both are capable, with their powerful command of poetic skills, of doing justice to their spiritual inspiration in words. They reflect on what has gone before with no suggestion of nostalgia, but see it as part of an evolutionary process. In Judah Halevi's case, he knows that he, alone among the company on board, is prepared for the necessary cleansing of the heart and to face the Holy of Holies. Rumi's verses show parallels with the Hebrew poet in his Neoplatonic intuitions of a true home beyond worldly multiplicity and severance from the divine. In their texts, the poets clearly are on their way home. Whether such parallels support an argument for a universal tendency to such mystical abstraction of the exilic topos is a tempting question, but on this occasion, I resist it.

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