

# Looking Backward: The Ideology of Hesder

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Looking Backward

## ***The Ideology of Hesder Today***

Yossef Slotnik

*["Looking Backward" is an occasional feature on TraditionOnline.org in which we ask our authors or readers to re-explore classic essays from our pages and their ongoing contributions to religious thought.]*

In a seminal paper, "The Ideology of Hesder" (*Tradition* 19:3, Fall 1981), penned close to 40 years ago, Rav Aharon Lichtenstein *zt"l* mapped out his view and vision of *Yeshivot Hesder*. As described in the opening remarks, a male religious high school graduate can typically choose between enlisting to the IDF for 32 months, as is mandated by Israeli law, excusing himself from military service on the grounds that "Torah is his [full-time] vocation," or he can join a *Yeshivat Hesder*. The last option entails spending five years in yeshiva, with a stint of a year and four months training and serving in the IDF.[1]

A critical part of the paper portrays the *Hesder* program as a fulfillment of both aspirations of the student: the moral outlook, which requires a person to participate in the protection of his family, his country and his homeland—alongside his fierce desire to dwell in the tent of Torah. With bold strokes of his pen, Rav Aharon emphasized that *Hesder* is not the product of a compromise between the demands of the State and the desires of the religious society. Rather, it is an ideal to combine different values that are in the focus of the religious experience. Combining the desire to study Torah, and the moral will to take part in the protection of the State of Israel is the true calling of the religious person.

With an analytical and critical eye, Rav Lichtenstein enumerated the challenges facing the student who chooses to serve as part of a *Hesder* program, emphasizing the tension between values that may sometimes contradict each other, with the army on one hand and yeshiva on the other. These are frameworks that have sets of principles, language, and values which tug in totally opposite directions. Rav Lichtenstein neither obscured nor dulled these difficulties, and with intellectual honesty admitted that it is a “small wonder that many only achieve the balance imperfectly.” However, the partial success does not dim the importance of the *Hesder*, which in Rav Lichtenstein’s view, should be assessed based on its myriad successes and contributions to Jewish life and learning in the State of Israel.

A considerable part of the essay is devoted to countering the claims of those opposing the *Hesder* program, claiming that while military service is important, Torah scholars are nevertheless exempt from carrying this burden. Rav Lichtenstein addressed the supposed proofs to this claim, including the halakhic discourse surrounding the Talmudic statement “Rabbis do not require protection” (Bava Batra 8a), or Rambam’s assertion that a person who dedicates his life to Torah and worship, is likened to the tribe of Levi, and exempt from participating in war (*Shemitta veYovel* 13:13). Rav Lichtenstein refuted each and every claim as irrelevant to the questions of serving in the IDF. Moreover, he showed how the idea of *Yeshivat Hesder* is a continuation of the historical model of a combination of Torah and warfare already from the days of Moses and Joshua.

The paper ends with the echoing proclamation, “Standing in tears atop Har Hazeitim, the bleak sight of *kol hamekudash mehavero harev yoter mehavero* stretching before him, what would the Ramban have given to head a Yeshivat Hesder?”

King David asks the Almighty to have the right to “visit (*ule-vaker*) his Temple” (Psalms 27:4). In his interpretation of this verse, Rashi cites a dispute between two of the greatest medieval Hebraists. Dunash ben Labrat connected the verb *b-k-r* to the noun *boker* (morning), interpreting the request as a hope of a daily visit to the Temple. Menahem ben Saruk, on the other hand, expounded the verb as a process of examination and testing. I thank the editors of *Tradition* who invited me to enter the *Kodesh* and dwell within the words of *mori ve-rabbi* Rav Aharon Lichtenstein. With God’s help, I will tread with the proper respect of a student entering his master’s home, and I will attempt to accomplish both aspects of the “*ule-vaker*.” At once a visit in which the guest is looking at the treasures of his host in awe and admiration, while at the same time attempt to not allow the genuine awe to prevent a degree of scrutiny, in order to assess R. Lichtenstein’s essay now with the distance of many decades.

As for the first “*bikur*,” a nostalgic visit, I will stroll down memory lane to my youth. I grew up in Jerusalem in the Religious Zionist community. For high school, I attended Netiv Meir, one of the best yeshiva high schools in Israel. I was a member of religious youth movements and participated in various frameworks of study and dialogue between religious and secular. We were Zionists by ideology, and we were religious, and it was clear to us that our Zionism was

linked to the religious world, but we didn't know exactly how to give it expression (beyond saying Hallel on Yom Ha'atzma'ut with a *berakha!*). Looking back, our Zionist ideology was closer and clearer to us, while our religious identity as *bnei Torah* was much more muddled and foreign. In seminars the oft-asked question "what defines you best: being a Jew, an Israeli, or a member of humanity" generated much debate – and as young men our answers were unclear. Indeed, at the end of high school, a significant group of my peers left the religious world but remained avid Zionists. This quandary has many reasons, and this is not the place to enumerate them, but unquestionably one is the fact that we had not encountered, as young students, a significant amount of rabbis who presented the Religious Zionist worldview. Most of our teachers and educators came from the Haredi world. They often demonstrated deep contempt for the Zionism we so valued. They did not see us as the generation of redemption, nor did they see God's hand in the historical movements of the previous two generations. Subliminally they tried to change and shape our world according to their ideal that Torah study was the only significant value. As students, we walked around with the feeling that our spiritual leaders expected us to choose between the world of Torah and the world of Zionism. I should note that the picture was not uniform; there were a few rabbis we met who offered another vision. Rabbi Shlomo Aviner, for example, whose weekly shiurim drew a great number of students, or a few teachers in Netiv Meir who were graduates of Yeshivat Mercaz HaRav, tried to tip the scale, but generally speaking the choice was clear—Torah or Zionism.

While there were already a small number of *Hesder Yeshivot*, the feeling was that in some sense they were second best. If a student were really serious, he would go to a "*Yeshiva Kedosha*" and invest all his time and energy to Torah, in place of some "arrangement" allowing him to *also* serve in the army. A person who decided that a life of total dedication to Torah was not for him, that is, one who wanted to study Torah, to also serve in the IDF, and then perhaps turn to academic studies, was offered the "second best" option – a *Hesder Yeshiva*.

In this climate, Rav Lichtenstein's paper was, "like cold water to a weary soul is good news from a distant land" (Proverbs 25:25). The article was published in *Tradition* in 1981, and two years appeared in Hebrew in *Alon Shevut*, the journal of Yeshivat Har Etzion. For me the timing was perfect. Two months before the publication of the article in Hebrew, I arrived at Yeshivat Har Etzion as a first-year student. My senior year of high school had been plagued by confusion and doubt about which yeshiva to attend. Frankly, a good part of the decision to attend *Hesder* was the feeling that this would allow me, five years later, to return to "a normal life" in which there is room for Torah, but also for other things – for me the key word was "Hesder," an arrangement (or should I say "compromise"?) which would have allowed for me to maintain such plans for my future. When this article entered my life it caused a real revolution, the aftermath I can still trace to this day. Suddenly, Religious Zionism had become a legitimate way of life. Solidarity with the State of Israel was not perceived as a rebellion against the religious world, but as the high road which anyone who looked squarely at reality

and Judaism must surely identify with. The duty and desire to serve in the IDF was now understood as a moral challenge that must be met. In essence, a combination of army, Zionism, and Torah learning was no longer a compromise or a concession to a second best religious reality, but a worthy and necessary combination, not without difficulties, which offered religious and spiritual opportunities.

In short the publication of this article became a pivotal moment for many in my generation, allowing us to stand tall and recognize the integrity of our choice. For the first time, we felt that we and our rabbis were in tune, not facing an either/or choice, but confronting the question of how to best do both. This confrontation helped us find our spiritual home, one which was difficult but true, complex yet more complete, one which did not require compromising Torah, rather complementing it with a moral aspect necessary for its existence.

Yet, the editors of *Tradition* have assigned me another task, namely, revisiting the work from a contemporary glance. Since it is inappropriate for a student to critique the works of his Rabbi, not to mention my inability to do so, my second “*bikur*” will not criticize “The Ideology of Hesder,” but rather question how its arguments resonate today. I set out to do so from two vantage points. The first is that close to four decades have passed since these arguments have been composed, and the religious Zionist world in Israel has evolved considerably. The second is that I am no longer the young student I was, confused and seeking a spiritual home, rather I am an educator who teaches in a post-high school yeshiva where students chose *not* to join the *Hesder* program (in our yeshiva, under the “*Shiluv*” program, students typically study for two years in addition to completing a full stint of army service).

Looking back now at the essay it is clear that Rav Lichtenstein was polemicizing against various groups who were challenging the idea of *Hesder* as an ideal and no mere compromise. This presumption is supported by the fact that he chose to publish the article initially in English and to an American readership. In fact, a comparison of the English and later Hebrew version shows that, in general, they are one and the same except for a handful of terms that are clarified for the benefit of the American reader. The one dramatic difference is in the foreword of the article, where Rav Lichtenstein justifies the need for the article. In short he claims that in the years just after the Yom Kippur War, The *Hesder* program was not only well known but had become a symbol of the Jewish soldier with a Gemara in one hand and a gun in the other. By the early 1980s, with its illusion of peace and security, the necessity and legitimacy of *Hesder* began to be questioned—and required “if not an advocate, at least an expositor.” This introduction, which is completely missing from the Hebrew version, convinces me that the article was written in response to the undermining of the legitimacy of *Hesder*.

Clearly, it was written as a polemic against three points of view:

1. Those, apparently from the Haredi society, who question the need to go to the army. They believe Torah learning exempts the yeshiva students from taking part in the burden of defending the State of Israel and its citizens.
2. The contention that the program offered by the *Hesder Yeshivot* will not allow for serious emphasis on Torah study and will not be able to create great Torah scholars, with a resulting cost of spiritual mediocrity. Therefore, the Yeshiva students who devote their lives to Torah should be exempt of other tasks, including military service.
3. There are those from “one major yeshiva” who admit that army service is indeed a necessity, and agree that yeshiva students must enlist. However, they think it is sufficient to be trained for battle during war, and there is no need for yeshiva students to share in the burden of service during times with no imminent danger.

The very fact of the polemic with the various groups attests to a community comprised of diverse and varied outlooks, some of which were Zionists, while some were not, some put much weight on army service while others did not. Seemingly, Rav Lichtenstein’s premise was that his readers were at some crossroads regarding their relationship between Zionism, Torah, and the weight given to each. Undoubtedly this was the situation 40 years ago, when large segments of Modern Orthodoxy in the US and Religious Zionism in Israel were still in formation. If we go back to my contemporaries in Netiv Meir, there were indeed students who turned to Haredi *yeshivot*, and there were those who went straight to the army without furthering their Torah education, and yet there was ample room to convince students to choose the third option to attend the *Hesder* program.

This is not the situation today! Few, if any, students completing Religious Zionist schooling choose to go to a Haredi yeshiva with no army service. This is not by chance; rather, it is the product of a clear education, which emphasizes the centrality of the State of Israel, and our religious obligation to be part of its foundation and growth. Zionism is no longer a point of debate, but is one of the cornerstones that the Religious Zionism educates towards. From where I stand, it seems that for 99% there is no doubt that they have a moral obligation to serve in the IDF. It seems to me that today’s students are convinced of the need way before they would have encountered any of Rav Lichtenstein’s numerous reasons that call for service in the IDF. The question moved from being an acute discussion to being philosophical discourse. They do not need textual or moral claims to convince them of what they know viscerally and intuitively.

Sadly, the *Haredi* student who could be swayed by Rav Lichtenstein’s plea most likely will not hear it.[2] This cultural disparity between the Haredi yeshiva world and the alumni of Religious Zionist schools over the past four decades creates such a wide gulf that one could say that despite the broad common denominator both in the observance of the commandments and in the study of the Torah, there is almost no actual contact between the worlds. Things have come to the point that almost every educational institution takes its

students to “experience” the Haredi world, with the aim that their students will be able to see the ultra-Orthodox world at least as tourists.[3] Hence, the world that Rav Lichtenstein was writing for in many respects ceased to exist.

There is little doubt in my mind that this ideological revolution has happened much because of the teachings of Rav Lichtenstein in general and this article in particular. The idea of a life of complexity, a world where one feels commitment to different ideals, is one of the foundations of Rav Lichtenstein’s thought. I will venture a guess that this is why he chose to present his ideal of *Hesder* first to his contemporaries in the United States, a religious community well versed in *Torah uMada*, recognizing the ideal of a complex religious life which is nurtured by different and competing values. Forty years ago, Israeli Religious Zionist society was not ready for this innovation, but it seems that with time it has largely adopted it as an ideal, at least in relation to the question of army service. Self-confidence and faith in the righteousness of Religious Zionism was reinforced by the recognition that it had a religious basis.

It is important to emphasize that the ideological revolution was accompanied by the demographic change in the educators—today, most of the rabbis in Religious Zionisms’ institutions are themselves graduates of *Hesder Yeshivot*, and other Zionist *yeshivot* and institutions. The leadership seen by the pupils in their formative years are supportive of army service, which in most cases they have themselves performed. Be that as it may, whatever the reason, the need for a debate against the opponents of military service is no longer necessary. Our opponents are as convinced of their own position, as we are of ours, and they will not be swayed by Rav Lichtenstein’s eloquence. It seems to me this change has also had a positive effect on the lamentable phenomenon of young people who leave the life of Torah and *mitzvot*. A recent survey speaks of 14-16 percent of students who leave the fold at the end of high school. The article quotes Dr. Avraham Lifshitz, the head of the Religious Zionist school system in the Ministry of Education, saying that these numbers are substantially lower than what they were in previous years. This is what I remember as well, when 25-30 percent of my class was no longer observant by the end of high school.[4]

Likewise, in relation to the second debate, which Rav Lichtenstein insisted that military service is not a barrier to the dedication of one’s life to Torah, and the ability to grow in Torah is not only not hindered by the commitment to army service, but is intensified by it. While Rav Lichtenstein spoke to this on the textual and intellectual realms, nowadays there is a plethora of empirical proof to this claim. It is sufficient to quote from the decisions of judges who decided to grant the Israel Prize to the *Yeshivot Hesder* movement, stating that “students of *Yeshivot Hesder* are scattered throughout the country, especially in development towns, integrate into society’s life wherever they are, while fulfilling all debts to the State. The graduates of *Yeshivot Hesder* take an active part in the forefront of all the tasks facing the State of Israel, and bring to fruition studying and practice of the Torah of Israel along with the

settlement of *Eretz Yisrael* and with the love of the people of Israel.” Furthermore, *Yeshivot Hesder* succeeded in creating an impressive assembly of religious leadership, and the vast majority of the *Rashei Yeshivot Hesder* are graduates of *Yeshivot Hesder* themselves.

The third issue addressed by Rav Lichtenstein is his response to those who believe that it is enough for yeshiva students to prepare for war but need not take part in active army service aimed at prevention of war, while the *Hesder* students spend quite a few months of active duty beyond the initial preparation time. This dispute had practical ramifications beyond the intellectual aspect described in the article. *Yeshivot Hesder* accepted only students who agreed to enlist through the *Hesder* program, and did not allow an Israeli student who did not serve or wanted to serve in a different way to attend a yeshiva. The *yeshivot* also did not permit the student to extend his service to a full three-year course while he was a fulltime student in the yeshiva. The same was true from the angle of the service itself—a student who chose to study in a *Hesder Yeshiva*, was obligated to a specific service as decreed by the association of *Yeshivot Hesder* in conjunction with the IDF commanders. Therefore, if in a certain year, Yeshivat Har Etzion students enlisted to the tanks, a student could not choose to serve in paratroopers or any other unit. This situation forced students to choose their yeshiva according to the ideology of the institution regarding military service notwithstanding the likelihood that he would be assigned to a specific unit of his choice, and not according to other criteria such as the style of learning, the rabbis, character of the Beit Midrash, and other issues that were often significant, and perhaps even more so than the question of the ideology of the service in the IDF.

I do not know when, how, or why this changed, but this is no longer the case. In many Religious Zionist *yeshivot* the BeitMidrash is comprised of students who are in the *Hesder* program (serving 17 months in the army),, students who came to the yeshiva to study for a year or two, and then enlist to a full military service of 32 months, and students who do the “*Hesder Merkaz*” program, which means they enlist only for as little as 6 months. Even Yeshivat Har Etzion, the institution which was headed by Rav Lichtenstein, now allows students to enroll for two years before enlisting in the IDF for a full 32 months of service. This relative harmony sends a strong message that the length of service has become a personal choice rather than communal decision. The student does not choose which yeshiva to attend based on these criteria, rather he decides this question on his own, without necessarily being judgmental about the answer that his friends give. An extreme example of this may be seen in Yeshivat Maale Gilboa. One of the impetuses for the *Kibbutz HaDati* to open this yeshiva was the need to have a place which promotes full service in the IDF. For years this was the case, and many students came to Maale Gilboa for this very reason. A few years our yeshiva, with the blessing of the IDF and the *Kibbutz HaDati*, allowed for a small number of students to return to the yeshiva after only 24 months of service. Although the program was met with some initial anger and dismay, it is now part and parcel of the yeshiva, which means that even in our “stronghold” for full service there is room for varieties of Religious Zionist experience.

To a certain extent, this fact conveys the reverse of the previous point. While on the subject of Religious Zionist ideology, the community has completely accepted the position of Rav Lichtenstein and virtually no one in our world questions the *need* for army service, from a moral or religious standpoint. Regarding the question of the length of the service, and whether one should prepare for war or be part of the daily security needs, not only does the question still echo, the *yeshivot* have allowed every student to find a path that works for him, without forcing the entire institution to be of one mind. I believe that despite the value of military service, and often the students' personal desire to go in the extreme in one way or another, it does not prevent them from remaining squarely within our ideological community. This should not be taken lightly, since there are quite a few other issues that are subject of raging disputes that threaten to split Religious Zionism. Among these are the status of women, secular studies, modesty, the right relations between religious and secular, and more. Each of these topics is at the core of heated debates, often it is hard for people to set them aside, and they choose their communities, schools and *yeshivot* based on their ideological outlooks on these matters. The fact that the length of military service is not one of these questions, and students are willing to accommodate their peers' choices, shows that the question is not a crucial one (as long as there is some form of service), unlike what it was forty years ago when Rav Lichtenstein was writing his article.

At some point Rav Lichtenstein added another aspect to his article—a polemic against the world of *Mechinot* (one-year programs to prepare the religious student for his army service by fortifying his religious commitments).[5] This debate, contrary to its predecessors, is more subtle and more refined. Rav Lichtenstein recognized the importance of the *Mechinot* in strengthening and safeguarding their student's religious world and spiritual identity. However, Rav Lichtenstein emphasized the difference between the *Mechinot* programs and *Yeshivot Hesder*. The latter are not satisfied with this level alone and are more concentrated on molding a *Ben Torah* whose focus is on learning Torah as an independent value. Rav Lichtenstein vividly claims that “to ensure that the yarmulke stays on the head, it is advisable to deepen both scholastically and spiritually the head and the person under the yarmulke.” As noted above, he was aware that not all *Hesder* students will indeed be well-versed in *havayot Abayey veRava*, and will not necessarily converse with the *Ktzot*, *Netivot* and *Reb Chaim*. Yet the goal of *Yeshivot Hesder* and their focal point are those who can feel at home in these surroundings.

It is surprising that the scholastic differences between the institutions are only mentioned in this context, and nowhere in the article does Rav Lichtenstein discuss varieties of learning styles as a measure to tilt the readers to or away from *Yeshivot Hesder*. I believe the question was not raised as a point of contention between the *yeshivot* whose students do not serve in the army, *yeshivot* who have a very short stint in the army, and *Yeshivot Hesder*, since there was really no major difference in curriculum between the different options. All the *yeshivot* focused mainly on Talmud, and all learned and taught in a similar style forged in eastern Europe in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Most added a smattering of other



classes dealing with *Tanakh* and works from the world of medieval Jewish Philosophy and *Mussar*. The *yeshivot* varied in the level of their teachers, and by slight nuances and emphases, but by and large were part of the same genre. The *Mechinot* indeed veered dramatically from this norm and hence Rav Lichtenstein felt the need to highlight these differences.

In this field, too, the situation today is completely different from what was described in the article. The world of *Mechinot* has evolved and in many cases built extensively on its early foundations. *Hesder Yeshivot* grew from being an organization with a handful of affiliated *yeshivot*, there were around 14 when the article was first published, to a world with almost 70 *yeshivot* that reflect a complete spectrum ranging from those that focus on classical yeshiva studies to others which combine volunteer work, spiritual workshops, emphasis on hasidut, or a strengthening of settlement and *yishuv haaretz*. Styles of study of Talmud have varied substantially. For example Yeshivat Karnei Shomron focuses on *limmud aliba de-hilkhata* where every *sugya* is resolved to its clear halakhic conclusions; Yeshiva Maalot strengthens the idea of *Torat Eretz Yisrael*, combining the spiritual aspects of Talmud study with the intellectual aspects; Yeshivat Tekoa, Otniel, and Maale Gilboa emphasizing the historical layering of the Talmudic *sugya* and the work of the “*Stamma*”; or Yeshivat Maale Adumim with its strong emphasis on Rambam’s writings. All have veered away and offered alternatives to the classical yeshiva learning that was the sole curriculum in the past.

The plethora of options allows students to choose their yeshiva based on a particular taste and goal, with the students finding an almost exact fit for their needs. This wide spectrum created situations where some of the *yeshivot* are very close to *Mechinot*, and some *Mechinot* are virtually *yeshivot*. The wide array presented to the senior in high school makes no distinction between the different types of institutions and allows the student to choose specifically and not categorically. In this way, as in the previous era, we see that the period of the clear dichotomy between the various types of institutions has passed. *Yeshivot* with little army service, *Yeshivot Hesder*, and *Mechinot* can join together based on other common denominators. As an example, there have been conferences on *Tanakh* sponsored cooperatively by Yeshivot Orot Shaul and Yeshivat Otniel (both *Yeshivot Hesder*), Mahanayim a yeshiva with the “new *Hesder*” program, whose students serve two years of service (longer than the service of the usual *Hesder*), and Yeshivat Ma’ale Gilboa (where I teach) which requires full military service for the majority of its students. In other words, the variety of institutions enables a focus on the content needed and chosen by the students and less focused on the ideological question of the length of his service.

In sum, Rav Lichtenstein’s article in many aspects was a resounding success. His goals were to “to persuade in a gentle way to the importance of military service, and in cooperation with the security burden of society in Israel,” and undoubtedly, the Religious Zionist world embraced this vision to the extent that the question is no longer a burning one, and virtually everyone embraced this message. The second goal set by Rav Lichtenstein, to have the bulk of the community align itself with the *Hesder* option, was far from successful. First and

foremost the *Hesder Yeshivot* themselves stopped demanding this loyalty to the idea and allowed students to decide the length of the service on their own, without having to align themselves institutionally. The student no longer sees 32 months of army service as *the* defining aspect in his society, and unlike other issues is willing to sit side by side with people who have made different choices. I believe this is linked to another revolution that happened in the Religious Zionist *yeshivot* when a handful of similar programs evolved to a full range of institutions which vary both in styles of learning, in focal points, and goals. These offered each student a refined choice of religious and ideological options which overshadow the question of the length of service. This is not to say that the choice of how long to serve is taken lightly, but that the choice is personal and communal.

To paraphrase Rav Lichtenstein, the Ramban would be proud that, like him, the Religious Zionist world is interested in *Tanakh*, Talmud, Halakha, and *Torat Ha-sod*, while settling the land and fighting for its security. He never mentioned how long a person actually needs to serve.

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*Read Yair Kahn's contribution to this series on "The Ideology of Hesder"*

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[1] When the article was original published general enlistment lasted 36 months, during which *Hesder* soldiers spent two stints in the army, of nine and six months each. The remaining time was spent in yeshiva. Currently, enlistment obligates 32 months of service, of which *Hesder* students spend 17 months in the active army.

[2] This is especially unfortunate as the small but impressive number of Haredi soldiers who actually join the army would truly benefit from exposure to the ideas and ideals presented by Rav Lichtenstein.

[3] There are some rabbis, such as Rav Asher Weiss *shlita*, who try to bridge the gap and open their *shiurim* to an audience of different backgrounds, but these are the exceptions not the rule.

[4] The above is based on an article by Noah Stern in the *Makor Rishon* magazine (January 2, 2019).

[5] I am unaware when this happened, but on the website of Yeshivat Har Etzion the updated article appears with a note stating that the article originally appeared in *Alon Shevut* 100 (Kislev 5743) and was amended by Rav Lichtenstein.

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