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Sh'ma

A JOURNAL OF JEWISH RESPONSIBILITY

Inside...

Jewish liberalism.

What does it mean?

Is it dead?

Should it be?

Standing firm on liberalism ■ Leonard Fein

To assert, as many these days do (some with glee, others sorrowfully), that the Jews of America have lost their appetite for liberalism is to assume that by liberalism we mean something enduring, static, a sacred text from which we have departed. By that reading, a lapsed Jewish liberal is a heretic, an apostate.

How curious. Jews otherwise quite comfortable with a text whose meaning changes with new circumstances now propose that, in the realm of politics, departure from the orthodoxy of original intent amounts to heresy.

A Politics Of Ends

Even if we measure fealty to liberalism in terms of doctrinal purity, the wonder is that so many Jews remain orthodox in their political conviction. They believe today what they believed 20 and 30 years ago: less money for defense, more for social welfare programs; higher taxes (or fewer loopholes) for corporations; crime as a product of societal conditions rather than moral failing, and so forth. People rarely abandon the themes that governed the decade during which they came to political awareness.

Still, we are not entirely immune to the drifts (and sometime avalanches) of prevailing opinion, and we are also sufficiently mature to learn at least a bit from experience. No politics of means is engraved in stone. In the case at hand, the Jewish case, most of us do not make a mantra out of

either the invisible hand of the market or the beneficence of big government. Ours is a politics of ends, and only the ends are constant: dignity, equity, personal and communal responsibility.

Is that sufficient to beget a distinctive agenda that liberals can claim? No, Jack Kemp would have no trouble endorsing it. But the traditional liberal disposition is to regard government as an appropriate vehicle for the achievement of those ends, whereas the conservative view shuns governmental involvement in the economy (except, as a practical matter, where the intervention comes to benefit business, and especially big business).

Believing In Helping

These days, the distinctions are blurred. As a nation, we are still trying to deal with the aftermath of the 1960s, when liberalism and libertinism came together in an unhappy moment. Moreover, we have a president who has, perhaps purposely, set out to blur the old distinction between liberal and conservative. It may well be that Mr. Clinton, himself a child of that tumultuous decade, understands the nation and its needs better than most of us. The terrible fraying it beget needs to be repaired, and emphasizing the old divide is not an especially helpful way to go about repairing it.

Yet on at least one critical variable, the president is decisively liberal. It is the duty of government to invest in its people.

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In the conservative view, the government should leave people alone (except in the arena of morals); unfettered, they will rise or fall according to their worth. In the liberal view, shared by the president, all human beings are intrinsically worthy, and the government must be their ally in enabling them to reach their full potential.

That view is shared by the overwhelming majority of America's Jews, as election after election shows. A recent survey of American Jewish opinion finds that only 14% of us identify as Republicans—of those, two out of three as “weak Republicans”—another 22% as independents, and 59% of us as Democrats, of which more than two-thirds as “strong Democrats.” Among Reform Jews, 65% are Democrats; so, too, 57% of Conservative Jews, and even 50% of Orthodox Jews. These figures are so far in excess of the general population that we might as well inhabit a separate political universe—which may be the best way to understand Jewish political preferences.

Constancy Does Not Mean Inflexibility

Except for the fly in the ointment of Jewish liberalism. Whereas 54% of us who are 65 years old or older identify as “strong Democrats,” and 43% in the 35–64 age cohort, among 18–34 years-olds the figure drops to just about one-third. The other two-thirds are distributed among weak Democrats (22%), independents (17%), weak Republicans (18%), strong Republicans (5%) and “don't know” (9%). We also have data showing that younger Jews are considerably less likely to be politically engaged than their elders, an indication that we are not, after all, entirely indifferent to the general tendencies of American society.

I leave aside all the other indices of Jewish political attitudes—the extraordinary level of financial contribution to the Democratic party by Jews, our regular preference in primary elections for the more liberal of the candidates, and, of course, the distribution of our vote in presidential elections.

Steven M. Cohen has argued that Jews have moved rightward as the society has, but that the difference between us and the rest of society remains where it was when the drift began, at just about 20 points more to the left. My own view is that the more remarkable phenomenon is our steadfast support for the liberal choices we are offered. Given the difficulty of defining with any precision what is meant by the word “liberal” in the immediate aftermath of the Cold War, during a time of rapid globalization of the economy, in a period when the best of us have no clear idea as to how to deal with the inner

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city and the underclass, the fact that we remain unashamed to call ourselves “liberals” and to behave accordingly is testament to our political constancy.

The high visibility of some Jewish conservatives (viz. Kristols and Podhoretzes, *peres et fils*) and the noise of others (viz. Lapin and Medved) is a diversion. What *Commentary* has accomplished is to make Jewish conservatism respectable, not to make it popular.

Seeking The Restoration Of Liberalism

As to popularity, look to the continuing disproportionate involvement of Jews—including, decisively, young Jews—in the most active precincts of liberalism, of social action and of organizations devoted to the pursuit of social justice. While we may share in the general confusion regarding, what, precisely, liberalism means in the realm of politics and government (yes NAFTA or no NAFTA, yes or no to welfare reform, yes or no to privat-

Sh'ma

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ization and devolution), we remain quite clear regarding what Judaism requires in the broader realm of action on behalf of the public interest.

The emergence in recent years of a number of new organizations that reflect that clarity—the Jewish Fund for Justice, American Jewish World Service, Jews for Racial and Economic Equality (in New York), the Jewish Council on Urban Affairs (in Chicago), the Jewish Metropolitan Organizing Project (in Minneapolis) along with the *Tikkun Ha'ir* program of the Jewish Community Relations Council in Boston, substantial Jewish participation in Habitat for Humanity and any number of local volunteer programs—indicates our continuing availability for and involvement in mending the world. The work of that mending remains, for most of us, our personal commitment, our religious conviction, and our political

inclination. From that we may infer that most Jews will experience relief if and when liberalism is restored as a coherent and plausible political doctrine. †

Liberalism and the jews—an appeal from the perplexed

M. Michael Sharlot

I confess to being amazed at the persistence of the traditional voting pattern of American Jews. Why do Jews vote so differently from similar European immigrants who divide their votes between the parties in roughly even, if shifting, proportions? Is the answer to be found in the continuing enigma of what it means to be a Jew as contrasted with being an Italian or a Pole? We and the world around us have never successfully unraveled the twisted skein of religion and ethnicity/nationality.

Are Jews “liberals” because of our faith? This is unconvincing inasmuch as I suspect that the most religious, in the sense of the most Orthodox, are the least likely to adhere to the dominant liberal ethos as expressed by *The New York Times* or *Tikkun*. Indeed, although I make no claim to knowledge of Torah and Talmud, I am as skeptical of claims that Judaism embodies the Democratic Party platform of 1968, as I am that the New Testament is the source of the Contract with America.

In both cases it seems a terrible distortion and misuse of religion, with its concerns about the relationship between man and God, the effort to perfect one's own soul, and the ultimate explanation of existence, to use it to resolve questions of the desirability of raising the minimum wage or of night basketball.

Seeking The Font Of Jewish Liberalism

Part of my difficulty in understanding the phenomenon of persistent Jewish liberalism lies in the disparity between the values of the current version of American liberalism and those values which dominated the lives of our ancestors. Life in Eastern Europe was permeated by the values of personal responsibility, observance of the dictates of the religion, stable marriage, devotion to children, communal self-help, and behavioral norms of thought vital to the survival of the group. In contrast, liberalism insists on: government as the source of succor

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for all unhappiness; government as an instrument for the compelled self-improvement of the individual; active hostility to the public expression of religious belief; excusing moral and ethical lapses; the elevation of a rampant individualism to the virtual exclusion of respect for traditional morals and mores; and a belief that it is societal forces—susceptible to infinite reshaping by government—rather than personal failings which explain the persistence of evil.

The values that suffused Jewish life in the past seem to me far more consonant with conservative views than with those of liberalism. Yet the voting pattern persists.

I suggest that the explanation for the anomalous pattern of Jewish voting is not to be found in our religion but rather in our experience as a people in this century. Let me suggest two distinctive features of the American Jewish experience which may help to explain. One is the paradoxical anxiety which many Jews seem to feel about their security despite three centuries of life in a nation that may be, as to matters of faith, the most tolerant in human history. The second is the special connection masses of American Jews have felt to the struggle for Black liberation.

Afraid To Let Go Of Fear

As to the question of anxiety, it is as though the extraordinary freedom enjoyed by Jews in America to practice their faith, or, indeed, not to, and to form organizations to give voice to shared interests, has not assuaged sensitivities reflective of life in the Pale of Settlement. Many Jews, including intellectual leaders, seem unable to accept that, whatever the tolerance of America for different faiths, this is in a very deep sense a Christian society and nation. The fears associated with that ineluctable fact have given rise to a devotion to the Constitution's Establishment clause worthy of the most militant atheists. The Establishment clause of the First Amendment, with all of its judicial accretions, has been embraced by the Jewish community as a bulwark against the danger that the *de facto* status of America as a Christian nation will become *de jure*.

In my view the danger of this, given our nation's history of religious pluralism, is largely imaginary. Moreover, it is strange for this clause to have become an icon for a people who, in the final analysis, are defined by a shared historical, religious experience. Whether or not these fears are realistic or the devotion to this constitutional provision is consonant with the history and values of Jews, I would suggest that a significant part of the Democratic party's attraction is its perceived commitment to upholding and strengthening this clause.

As to the relationship, albeit unrequited, with African Americans, again the Democrats are seen as more deeply committed to the cause. It was undoubtedly a noble chapter in American Jewish history that so many individuals and organizations played an important role in redressing some of the altogether legitimate grievances of Black Americans. Perhaps this cause resonated with our ancestral memories of the Exodus, reviewed each year at the *Seder*. Perhaps it was motivated in part by the continuing sense of insecurity in the *galut* which made identification with the plight of another marginalized group not only noble but self-protective.

Back To The Future

With regard to both of the social phenomena set out above, the Democrats have been seen as the paladins of the fears and hopes of American Jews. But in my view it smacks of arrested development for these concerns to define and constrain the voting behavior of an extraordinary majority of American Jews. These concerns, however worthy or understandable, are utterly inadequate definitions of the totality of our lives as individuals or as a group. There are other important values steeped in our traditions which must be refurbished and inculcated for the good of our nation, our society and our progeny. I would only ask that Jews consider the possibility that conservatives may be better allies in carrying out this vital task. †

A new liberalism for the 1990s?

Richard T. Foltin

Thirty years ago, Professor Theodore Lowi asked (in his book entitled, ironically for the theme of this publication, *The End Of Liberalism*) questions that still resonate: "What kind of government, what ends of government, what forms of government, what consequences of government?"

As Americans and as Jews, we are in the midst of a fundamental rethinking of the proper role of government. The three decades since Professor Lowi asked those trenchant questions have demonstrated that not every government program intended to deal with societal problems has been well advised and, more crucially, that

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not every problem is necessarily susceptible to government solution in the first place.

Blending Personal And Social Responsibility

To be sure, the emerging “new liberal” (or, perhaps, “not-a-liberal”) mode continues to value the vital role of government and to assert that there are crucial national interests that cannot be delegated wholesale to the state and local levels. This is the case not only in the international arena, but also with respect to such domestic concerns as alleviating domestic poverty, civil rights enforcement, promotion of an effective public education system and protection of the environment.

Thus, a willingness to say *al het* (we have sinned) for some of the liberal approaches to social issues should not invalidate the ideological premises on which those approaches were founded, premises that include a societal responsibility for the neediest and a belief that there are useful things that can be done for that portion of society beyond a call for “personal responsibility.” To be sure, responsibility for self is a crucial value. Jewish tradition teaches us that the highest form of charity leads to the self-sufficiency of its beneficiary. Among the great failings of the welfare system have been its breeding of dependency and the denial of dignity to its recipients. But personal responsibility cannot be de-linked from social responsibility, which, in our society, resides with a number of institutions—religious organizations, volunteers at the community level, and, yes, government.

Where Government Is Necessary

Since Jews have often been the victims of persecution and worse—often carried out by or with the connivance of government officials—it would not have been surprising if Jewish tradition exhibited bitterness and hostility toward government. But this is not the case. Jewish law teaches the principle of *dina de'malkhuta dina* (the law of the land is the law). As Jews, we are directed to obey the laws of a state ruled by principles of neutral justice and to pray for the welfare of its officials, knowing that the absence of government leads ultimately to anarchy. And, as Americans, we should bear in mind that the just society—whatever one believes that to entail—is not likely to be achieved without government. Nor are we likely to have a system of governance much better than the one we now enjoy.

The leap from Jewish tradition to an argument that government ought to fulfill a social policy function is, perhaps, a bit less direct. The biblical imperative to care for the poor was addressed primarily to person-to-person

giving and to communal mechanisms that were small and local. But while the instrumentalities by which we carry out our present-day society's activities—including its charitable functions—have changed, the underlying values have not. As Jews and as Americans, it is appropriate that we promote government policies that care for the poor in a way that is respectful of individual dignity and promotes self-sufficiency, and that aspects of those policies be codified at the national level.

This argument for a continued central role for government (and the making of this argument in the context of welfare policy is simply by way of example) does not imply the government ought to plan the economy through centralized bureaucracies, or needlessly override personal decisions, or even preempt state and local approaches to issues of poverty and education. History has taught that grand government programs are themselves subject to the most rigorous law of all, the law of unintended consequences. And the principles of our capitalist system—the law of supply and demand, the profit motive—are among the underlying reasons why this nation has been so prosperous.

Self, Government And Values

A free society must be vigilant, moreover, in the struggle to keep government from encroaching on fundamental rights of personhood. One example is the necessity to protect the principle of separation of church and state. Similarly, we must remain on guard against government encroachment on free speech and privacy, including private decisions of reproductive choice. All such matters touch upon fundamental aspects of individual autonomy; any utility arising out of government encroachment in these areas is unlikely to outweigh the harm done by infringement on individual liberties. As a minority community, Jews, as much as any other group, must beware of the overreaching state.

But unqualified *laissez-faire* is as unworkable as unqualified state control. Committed only to individual (or corporate) maximization of profit, it gives no regard to the larger good. It can lead to ecological and other public health problems, and invidious discrimination against minorities. *Laissez-faire* makes no provision for the poorest and least able among us, whom society ought to seek to make self-sufficient or, failing that, for whom at least the benefit of a minimum safety net ought to be provided. It makes no allowance for the measures that are sometimes necessary to steer the economy away from impending danger. And unbridled *laissez-faire* cares nothing for the ties that bind diverse and heterogeneous neighborhoods into communities.

On this last point, the progressive end of the political spectrum has encountered its greatest failing and faces its hardest task. The exponents of a more “conservative” approach have responded to the sense of diminishing common values and lack of community that troubles the American electorate, and the appeal of conservatism has been based in large part on an explicit promise to address those concerns. There is a legitimate need for community and legitimate demands that community has upon us (how could anyone who takes Jewish tradition seriously think otherwise?), even as we may disagree on the appropriate responses to those needs and demands.

We must find ways to grapple with society’s need for values and community in a way that respects our society’s diverse streams. It is time to say that there is right and that there is wrong, that the smaller communities and the larger community of which we are all part nurture us and deserve our support, that we have responsibilities as well as rights, and that there are healthy values and values that are dysfunctional (for example, acceptance of self-responsibility—even in the context of real, outwardly imposed problems—as compared to responses to problems based on overarching theories of victimization).

To paraphrase the questions asked at the beginning of this piece, “What kind of society, what ends of society, what forms of society, what consequences of society?” The questions as to the role of government are, at their core, really the same questions. The political future of the next years depends on our ability to articulate a vision that draws wisdom from all portions of the political spectrum while remaining true to the ideals encapsulated in the—by now familiar—Hebrew phrase, *tikkun olam*. †

🌿 Endthoughts 🌿

Peace and palestine in the classroom

Carmela Ingwer

As a Jewish educator witnessing the Intifada, I found myself confronted by a pedagogic void. The uprising in the territories compelled me to abandon my belief in the justice of Israel’s position regarding the Israeli–Palestinian

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conflict, and therefore to question the traditional way I had been presenting Israel in the classroom.

The formerly sacred underpinnings of classical Zionism were beginning to unravel with lightning speed, along with a spate of “reliable” educational paradigms that had granted teachers and students alike a false sense of confidence in Israel’s course. Each fateful event in the following years—from the Oslo accords and Baruch Goldstein’s massacre, to Rabin’s assassination and the rise in Hamas terror—served to intensify my angst about the teaching of Israel. Mirroring our community—at-large, the long-standing consensus among Jewish educators over Israel’s character and destiny was shattered, leaving many of us with the feeling that we, too, were fragmented, and uncertain of how to handle the new reality in our classrooms.

Educating For Peace

This dilemma will not be easily solved. Given the deep split in American Jewry’s attitudes toward the peace process, underscored by their polarized reaction to Netanyahu’s victory last May, one can hardly expect the speedy re-emergence of communal consensus regarding Israel. However, I believe that our community’s lack of unanimity must in no way deter liberal educators from instituting a staunchly pro-peace agenda in their schools. In fact, in light of this past year’s blows to the peace process, to do so now is crucial.

A transformed Israel curriculum is needed to drive home the message that nothing, whether the scourge of Hamas terror or the re-ascendance of Likud, could ever utterly abrogate the precious, dearly-bought peace that burgeoned against all odds. The conviction that the peace process must endure should become the core of students’ developing relationship with Israel.

Prophetic Precedent

What will be the first, and possibly hardest, task of educators seeking to bring the proverbial peace train into their classrooms? We will have to repudiate the still unchallenged communal dictum demanding the removal of political controversy from the arena of religious education. Evoking our most venerated teachers, the prophets of old, we can assert that they would have flatly rejected such a separation; their revolutionary exhorta-

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tions to pursue peace and justice in the name of the Lord collapsed politics and religion into an indivisible, sublime endeavor. Prophetic teachings thundered through market stalls, classroom walls and Temple halls, creating an educational dynamic that touched everyone, from the lowliest beggar to the king himself. Our ancient teachers had no use for artificial constructs or divisions. They knew what we have tried so hard to forget—namely, that education is the most powerful political enterprise on the planet.

Tainted Fruits Of The Past

The political ideology which birthed our community's concept of Zionism has continuously scripted the identity-forming master narratives taught to generations of American Jewish youth. Understandably a natural reaction to the Holocaust and to the initial vulnerability of the fledgling State, these master narratives emotionally portrayed Israel—the ultimate good—as eternally engaged in a stark, (and after 1967) increasingly messianic battle against the forces of evil—Arabs and Palestinians. In direct opposition to our community's purported “non-interference” policy, Jewish classrooms did adopt a definite political stand by endorsing the establishment's anti-Palestinian bias. To say that Jewish education ill-prepared us to even contemplate peace with our former enemies, let alone cultivate it, is a grand understatement. For over four decades, our prevailing political ideology precluded the development of a forward-looking Israel curriculum that could look peace in the eye.

Since the 1991 Madrid conference, most Jewish classrooms have metamorphosed into a twin image of our broader community. They are suspended in troubled hiatus, as teachers grope shakily for a “balanced” approach when the uncomfortable topic of Palestinian autonomy arises, refraining from condemnation of the peace process, but extremely skittish about enthusiastically supporting it. The problem is that we are still going about the business of remaking children in our own image by feeding them the tainted fruits of our own Jewish education—an education that was, vis-à-vis the Palestinians, decidedly biased. The post-Madrid call for “balanced” dialogue on the Palestinian issue in Jewish schools has deteriorated into an excuse for delaying a principled pro-peace stand. “Balanced” currently denotes the insidious etiquette of ambiguity and evasion, and signals the repression of curricular initiatives that could transform classrooms into genuinely positive forums for promoting peace.

Precisely because Rabin's assassination compelled us all to take heed of Hosea's warning that “...they [who]

Ta sh'ma

We invite you to send us your favorite text and comment. Submissions should not exceed 200 words. Be sure to include proper citation of sources. Hebrew will appear in transliteration.

■Marian H. Neudel

You shall not curse the deaf, nor put a stumbling block before the blind, but you shall fear your God...

LEVITICUS 19:14

The two prohibitions seem to illustrate a single point—don't take advantage of people with special vulnerabilities. So why state both? Perhaps to teach that the blind and deaf are not the only ones harmed by such actions.

If you throw an obstacle in the path of a blind person, s/he will find out about it, immediately, painfully, possibly dangerously. Whereas, if you curse a deaf person, s/he will probably never even know about it, much less be hurt or even inconvenienced by it. So what's wrong with it?

Two things, I think. While a *partially* blind person would be better able to avoid the stumbling block, a *partially* deaf person would likely be hurt by the curses.

And even more, even if the deaf person never learns of your verbal assault, it debases *you*.

This double injunction forbids attacks on vulnerable people, whether the result damages them, or only the attacker. Finally, of course, both acts offend the Holy One, Whom we are to fear—Who sees and hears *everything*.

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have sown the wind...shall reap the whirlwind...,” (Hosea 8:7) the right psychological moment for reevaluating Israel, and what we teach about it, has arrived. No mere blast from the past, these words of the prophet; they point up the many educational mistakes we have made in the name of our well-intentioned but seriously misdirected passions. We have been teaching Israel as if it were a kind of narrow, nationalistic Disney World, where every “ride” we offer students carries them deeper into a distorted perception of reality. Through nuance and narrative, the classroom has been used to validate a number of perilous fantasies—the undisputed vulnerability

of the Jewish state; the Israeli army's impeccable status, not only as an agency of defense, but as an instrument of righteousness; the greater legitimacy of the Jewish claim over the Palestinian claim to the land; and Arab and Palestinian intransigence as the sole reason for Israel's woes.

Our Challenge

Jewish educators and peace activists need each other to disavow this litany, and to make the demythologization of Israel a priority in Jewish schools. For their part, educators would have to help the peace movement comprehend that bedrock political attitudes do not crystallize within the adult political sphere, but rather culminate there. Activists, in turn, possess the knowledge and experience essential to the creation of context for a new Israel curriculum. Together, the two groups would be able to override the highly politicized anti-Palestinian mythologies that have reigned supreme in Jewish classrooms, and nurture a proactive climate for peace.

Can we rationally—and ultimately, dispassionately—craft curricula that address the flaws of classical Zionism, particularly its lack of a solution to the inevitable collision between Jew and Palestinian? Can the collision itself be examined devoid of the apocalyptic hopes and raw emotions which so many of us have harbored? Can we unflinchingly critique Orthodoxy for its perpetration and/or toleration of the religious culture which produced Yigal Amir? Can we constructively discuss Israel's use and abuse of power during the Occupation, and its alarming impact on the moral fabric of Israeli society?

Students involved in a meaningful, pro-peace dialogue on Israel would grapple with these questions, and many others. They would study the integral link between Judaism's classical sources mandating the pursuit of peace and nonviolence, and the holy work of reconciliation. They would grasp that peace-seeking constitutes Judaism's central lesson, and embrace it as a springboard for principled action.

It is my fervent hope that we can dedicate ourselves to the proposition that peace is a fulfillment of Zionism. May our children learn that "The whole Torah was given for the sake of promoting peace, as it is written, 'all her paths are peace'" (*Talmud Bavli, Gittin 59b*).✦

Book reviews

JPS Torah Commentary: Deuteronomy Jeffrey Tigay. JPS. \$60.

A distinguished conclusion to a notable series. The verse by verse explanations add luster to the shining texts and the "excurses" provide a quick course in Biblical reality. Every serious Jewish student of the Torah will be deeply grateful for this immense gift of scholarship and love of text.

The Politics of Memory Raul Hilberg. Ivan Dee. \$22.50.

The scholar who initiated the American academic study of the Holocaust only to face steady resistance from the devotees of Jewish spiritual triumph, nicely recounts his struggle to get ever more data. Don't miss his early difficulty getting into the Yad Vashem archives. A bit *kvetchy*, but understandably so.

The Generations of Adam Isaiah Horowitz (Miles Krassen, tr.). Paulist. \$24.95.

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