



Overcoming Doubt and Inner Struggle in Healing Roles: *A Jewish Religious Perspective*

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the struggle in surrendering to the divine when confronted with doubt, internal resistance, or overwhelming urges in Jewish religious and mystical traditions. Through a review of classical and contemporary Jewish theological sources including Hasidic teachings this paper identifies key frameworks for understanding the spiritual struggle a healthcare giver faces in the therapeutic space, confronting the anguish and suffering of his or her patient or client and practical methodologies for maintaining faith during periods of such religious doubt [1,2]. This claims that Jewish approaches to spiritual surrender are neither passive resignation nor blind obedience, but rather transformative practices that integrate psychological insight with religious devotion [3].

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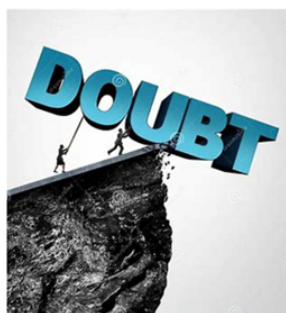
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Introduction

The challenge of maintaining faith in a personal God during periods of doubt, disbelief, or internal resistance represents a fundamental religious struggle across traditions. Within Jewish religious thought, this tension has generated a rich theological discourse spanning centuries [4,5]. While much academic attention has focused on intellectual approaches to faith and doubt in Jewish philosophy, less scholarly work has examined the more experiential dimensions of spiritual surrender during moments of inner conflict [6,7].

This article investigates how Jewish theological sources particularly those from mystical and Hasidic traditions conceptualize the process of surrendering to divine will when confronted with powerful internal resistance. By examining classical texts alongside modern and contemporary Jewish religious writings, this paper identifies both theoretical frameworks and practical methodologies for navigating the complex terrain between doubt and faith, resistance and surrender [8].

Maimonidean Rationalism

Maimonides' approach to faith struggles in *The Guide for the Perplexed* emphasizes intellectual understanding as the primary pathway to resolving religious doubts [9]. For Maimonides,

apparent contradictions between faith and reason could be resolved through proper philosophical investigation. However, this intellectualist approach does not fully address the experiential dimension of spiritual struggle, where emotional resistance rather than logical objection may be the primary barrier to faith [10,11].

Experiential Approach

In contrast to Maimonides' rationalism, Judah Halevi's *Kuzari* prioritizes direct religious experience and collective historical memory over abstract philosophical reasoning [12]. Halevi argues that the lived experience of divine encounter provides stronger evidence for faith than intellectual arguments. This approach offers resources for those whose doubts stem not from logical objections but from the absence of felt religious experience [13].

A Dialectical Approach

A modern thinker, Rabbi Jonathan Eybeschutz (1690-1764) offers a distinctive framework for understanding spiritual struggle in his homiletical works, particularly *Ya'arot Devash* and *Tiferet Yehonatan* [14]. Eybeschutz, standing at the intersection of rabbinic scholasticism and nascent Hasidic thought, develops a dialectical approach to faith and doubt that anticipates later Hasidic teachings [15-17]. He suggests that divine withdrawal (*tzimtzum*) manifests subjectively as religious doubt, making moments of spiritual struggle not merely psychological phenomena but cosmic events reflecting divine processes [18].

Particularly relevant is Eybeschutz's concept of "holy doubt" (*safek kadosh*), where uncertainty itself becomes a vehicle for deeper religious consciousness [19,20]. Unlike purely intellectualist approaches, Eybeschutz acknowledges the

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existential dimensions of doubt while providing theological frameworks for reinterpreting these experiences as sacred encounters rather than spiritual failures [21,22].

Spiritual Doubt

Hasidic thought introduces the revolutionary concept of "yeridah l'tzorech aliyah" (descent for the purpose of ascent), most prominently articulated by the Baal Shem Tov and elaborated by subsequent Hasidic masters [23-25]. This framework reinterprets moments of spiritual struggle not as failures of faith but as necessary components of spiritual growth. The Baal Shem Tov taught that periods of doubt and distance from God often precede moments of profound spiritual elevation [26].

Rabbi Nachman of Breslov further developed this concept through his teachings on "the void" (יונפה ללחה), suggesting that questions without answers constitute a necessary space for authentic faith [27,28]. Rather than viewing doubt as the enemy of faith, Rabbi Nachman reconceptualizes it as the precondition for genuine religious commitment [29]. Appropriating the Lurianic myth of the tzimtzum which described the cosmic birth of the universe from the infinite divine, he applied these mythic concepts to the heart of the individual, suggesting a similar process occurring on the microcosmic level. There must be a psychological withdrawal into a vacuous space of the absent divine where doubt and heresy might prevail to then create or allow a ray of the divine faith to birth and flourish.

Radical Theology

The Izhbitzer school, founded by Rabbi Mordechai Yosef Leiner (1801-1854) and interpreted by contemporary scholars such as Shaul Magid and Rabbi Hershy Worch, offers perhaps the most radical theological framework for understanding spiritual struggle in Jewish thought [30,31]. Worch's extensive work translating, commenting on, and teaching the Izhbitzer tradition following his teacher Rabbi Shlomo Carlebach who introduced Izhbitz hassidic thought to a post Holocaust generation, represents a significant contemporary revival and reinterpretation of this challenging theological approach [32].

Central to Worch's interpretation of Izhbitz is the concept that even sinful thoughts and urges originate in divine will [33,34]. In his commentary on Mei HaShiloach, Worch emphasizes the Izhbitzer profound determinism, which reconceptualizes divine will as manifesting not only through conventional religious categories but also through the full spectrum of human experience, including apparent transgressions [35,36]. According to Worch, "The Izhbitzer's radical innovation was to perceive the divine voice speaking not only through sacred texts but through desire itself particularly those desires that seem to contradict religious norms" [37].

This approach fundamentally challenges conventional understandings of spiritual struggle. As Worch explicates in *Liberating Faith*, when inner urges feel overwhelming, this experience itself becomes a form of divine communication, revealing the limitations of conventional religious categories [38,39]. Worch emphasizes that the sensation of being

overwhelmed by desire represents not moral failure but an invitation to deeper theological awareness: "When desire threatens to overwhelm, the Izhbitzer teaches that we are encountering not the enemy of divine will but its most profound expression" [40].

The Izhbitzer's radical determinism does not negate religious law but reframes the experience of internal conflict as a necessary process for discovering deeper dimensions of divine will beyond conventional religious categories. As Worch notes, "The Izhbitzer does not advocate antinomianism but rather a transcendent nomian consciousness that perceives law as the container rather than the content of divine will" [41,42].

Contemporary Jewish Thought

Contemporary Jewish thinkers have integrated modern psychological insights with traditional religious frameworks. Rabbi Shagar (Shimon Gershon Rosenberg) employs post-modern concepts to suggest that faith must incorporate rather than eliminate doubt [40]. Rav Shagar uniquely embraces the tension between faith and doubt, viewing it not as a weakness but as an authentic dimension of religious life in the postmodern era. Rather than resolving doubt through dogma or certainty, he wove it into the very fabric of emunah (faith), suggesting that true belief arises not in spite of doubt but through it. For Rav Shagar, the struggle itself becomes sacred a site where vulnerability, brokenness, and divine presence intersect. His writings reflect a deep existential honesty, drawing from Hasidut, postmodern philosophy, and personal introspection to affirm that fragmented faith still holds spiritual integrity [43]. Similarly, Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik's *The Lonely Man of Faith* examines the existential dimensions of faith struggles, suggesting that the tension between secular achievement and spiritual longing reflects fundamental aspects of human nature [44]. In a world where rational inquiry and sacred tradition often collide, rather than eliminating doubt, Rabbi Soloveitchik argued for a faith forged in its presence a dynamic, dialectical relationship with God that honors both the intellect and the soul. For him, doubt was not antithetical to belief but a catalyst for deeper spiritual maturity and moral responsibility.

Reframing of Jewish Mysticism

Elliot Wolfson's scholarly analysis of Jewish mystical traditions offers a sophisticated theoretical framework for understanding spiritual struggle that bridges academic and religious perspectives [44,45]. Wolfson's extensive work on visualization, embodiment, and the erotic in Jewish mysticism provides new conceptual tools for interpreting experiences of religious doubt and inner conflict [46].

Particularly relevant is Wolfson's exploration of "coincidentia oppositorum" (the coincidence of opposites) in kabbalistic and Hasidic sources, which suggests that apparent contradictions including the tension between surrender and resistance reflect deeper unities within divine reality [47]. His analysis of the "hermeneutics of concealment" in Jewish esoteric traditions reveals how the very experience of divine hiddenness paradoxically becomes a form of revelation [48]. Wolfson's examination of gender dynamics in kabbalistic symbolism

further illuminates the psychological complexities of surrender, suggesting that the interplay between masculine and feminine divine attributes provides a template for understanding the relationship between active assertion and receptive surrender in religious consciousness [49]. This sophisticated theoretical framework transforms the phenomenology of spiritual struggle by revealing its resonance with fundamental structures of kabbalistic cosmology and divine-human relations [50].

A Jewish-Adjacent Perspective

Though not traditionally categorized within Jewish religious thought, Simone Weil (1909-1943) represents an important philosophical voice whose work on affliction, attention, and divine surrender bears significant resonance with Jewish mystical traditions [51,52]. Born to secular Jewish parents but drawn to Christian mysticism, Weil's writings occupy a unique interstitial space between Jewish and Christian thought, influencing subsequent Jewish theological discourse while remaining distinct from it [53].

Weil's concept of "decreation" the voluntary abdication of the self in order to create space for divine presence offers a radical framework for understanding surrender that complements Hasidic and kabbalistic approaches [54]. Unlike some mystical traditions that emphasize ecstatic union, Weil's theology centers on absence and distance, suggesting that authentic encounter with the divine often occurs through the experience of God's withdrawal rather than presence [22,55].

Particularly relevant to the question of overcoming doubt and inner resistance is Weil's notion of "waiting" (attente) a receptive attentiveness that neither actively seeks nor rejects divine encounter [56]. This practice of sustained attention without attachment represents a distinctive approach to surrender that avoids both passive resignation and aggressive spiritual ambition. Her concept of "attention" as the purest form of prayer resonates with Rabbi Nachman's hitbodedut while offering a more restrained alternative [57].

Weil's profound engagement with suffering what she terms "affliction" (malheur) further illuminates the relationship between inner struggle and divine encounter. For Weil, extreme affliction destroys the self's illusion of autonomy, potentially opening space for authentic divine relation [58,59]. This perspective offers a philosophical complement to Hasidic concepts of "descent for the purpose of ascent," suggesting that doubt and inner conflict may themselves be vehicles for spiritual transformation [60].

Methodologies

Dialogical Approaches

Martin Buber's dialogical philosophy provides a framework for understanding surrender not as submission to abstract doctrine but as entering into relationship with divine otherness [61,62]. His distinction between "I-It" and "I-Thou" relationships offers a pathway for reconceptualizing faith as encounter rather than intellectual assent [63].

Rabbi Nachman of Breslov's practice of "hitbodedut" (secluded prayer) represents a practical application of this dialogical approach [64]. Through unstructured, vernacular conversation with God, practitioners are encouraged to express their doubts, resistances, and urges with complete honesty. This radical transparency transforms internal struggles into occasions for divine encounter rather than obstacles to it [65].

Transformative Reframing

The Chabad Hasidic tradition, particularly as articulated in Rabbi Schneur Zalman's Tanya, distinguishes between two approaches to internal resistance: "iskafya" (suppression) and "is'hapcha" (transformation) [66]. While "iskafya" involves directly battling and subduing unwanted urges, "is'hapcha" represents the more advanced practice of transforming the energy of those urges toward sacred purposes [67]. This transformative approach is further developed in the writings of Rabbi Mordechai Yosef Leiner of Izbica, whose Mei HaShiloach suggests that even seemingly heretical thoughts can serve divine purposes [68]. Rather than rejecting unwanted thoughts or urges, practitioners are encouraged to identify their sacred potential and redirect their energy [69].

Izhbitzer Methodologies

Rabbi Hershy Worch's contemporary interpretation of Izhbitzer teachings offers specific methodological approaches to surrendering to the divine during moments of overwhelming inner conflict [70,71]. Through his translations, commentaries, and oral teachings, Worch has developed a systematic articulation of practical applications of Izhbitzer theology that makes this challenging tradition accessible to contemporary practitioners [72].

Unlike approaches that emphasize techniques for controlling or redirecting urges, the Izhbitzer-Worch methodology focuses on radical acceptance and perceptual transformation [33]. In his work *The Divine Consciousness of the Mei HaShiloach*, Worch details how this approach differs fundamentally from both suppression and sublimation: "The Izhbitzer offers neither repression nor redirection but radical re-perception seeing the divine source of the very impulses we have been taught to reject" [73].

Worch articulates a three-stage process drawn from Izhbitzer texts:

First, practitioners acknowledge the divine source of all impulses, including those that appear to contradict religious values. Worch describes this initial recognition as "stepping back from the moral theater to recognize the divine playwright behind every character" [74]. This recognition shifts attention from the content of the urge to its energetic quality as divine communication. In his lectures on Parashat Balak, Worch emphasizes that "the overwhelming nature of desire itself its insistence and persistence contains divine communication more authentic than many conventional religious expressions" [75].

Second, practitioners engage in what Worch terms "listening

to desire" (hakshavah lataavah) without immediately judging or acting upon it. This contemplative stance reveals the deeper spiritual message encoded within the experience of wanting. Worch explains that "desire becomes a text to be read rather than an enemy to be conquered its intensity, direction, and timing all contain messages about one's spiritual path" [44]. This analytical approach transforms desire from moral threat to spiritual teacher.

Third, they engage in what Worch, following the Izhbitzer tradition, calls "holy indifference" (hishtavut) regarding the conventional religious categories of permitted and forbidden. In *The Holy Name*, Worch clarifies that this does not mean ethical nihilism but rather recognizing these categories as provisional rather than absolute [76]. This recognition does not lead to antinomianism but to a more nuanced relationship with religious law that integrates both observance and the awareness of its limitations [77].

Embodied Practices

Rabbi Kalonymus Kalman Shapira (the Piaseczno Rebbe) develops systematic embodied practices for navigating spiritual struggles in his work *Bnei Machshava Tova* [78]. These include visualization techniques, focused breathing practices, and the use of melody (niggun) to transform emotional states [77]. Unlike purely intellectual approaches, these methodologies engage the body as a site of spiritual transformation.

Similarly, Rabbi Menachem Nachum of Chernobyl's *Me'or Einayim* provides meditative practices for perceiving divine presence in all things, including moments of struggle and doubt [78]. These embodied practices aim to transform abstract theological knowledge into felt experience, addressing the gap between intellectual understanding and emotional connection [79].

Rabbi Jonathan Eybeschutz, though primarily known for his talmudic and homiletical works, also offers specific embodied practices for moments of overwhelming urges or spiritual struggle [80]. In his *Ya'arot Devash*, he suggests techniques for visualizing divine names during moments of temptation, combining kabbalistic knowledge with practical application [81]. These approaches reflect his integration of scholarly and mystical dimensions, providing resources that address both intellectual and embodied aspects of spiritual conflict [82].

Simone Weil's Method

Simone Weil's approach to spiritual surrender offers a distinctive methodology that complements traditional Jewish practices while introducing elements that transcend conventional religious categories [83]. Central to her method is what she terms "attentive waiting" a disciplined receptivity that neither actively pursues divine experience nor resists it [84].

Unlike more active Jewish approaches to faith struggles such as *hitbodedut*, Weil advocates a form of surrender that emphasizes absence over presence, emptiness over fullness. Her method involves three interconnected practices:

First, practitioners cultivate absolute attention a form of

concentration that suspends the will's natural grasping while maintaining complete wakefulness [85]. This "waiting on God" resembles meditation but differs in its emphasis on receptivity to transcendence rather than awareness of immanence [86].

Second, Weil suggests a practice she calls "reading" approaching reality itself as a sacred text requiring decipherment [87]. When overwhelming inner urges arise, practitioners are encouraged to "read" these experiences as communications that reveal the structure of reality rather than merely subjective states to be overcome [88].

Third, Weil advocates "decreation" the systematic abdication of the illusion of autonomous selfhood [89]. Unlike self-negation practices in some mystical traditions, decreation aims not at annihilation but at creating space within consciousness for divine presence [18].

Weil's methodology is particularly valuable for addressing overwhelming inner urges because it reframes the struggle itself. Rather than viewing the conflict between desire and religious obligation as something to be resolved through willpower or transformation, Weil suggests that sustained attention to the contradiction itself can become a form of prayer [16]. By refusing both indulgence and suppression, practitioners occupy a "crucifying" middle space that Weil identifies as the site of potential divine encounter [90].

Intergenerational Resources

Rabbi Shmuel Bornstein's *Shem MiShmuel* explores how ancestral merit (zechut avot) can sustain faith during personal struggles [91]. This approach recognizes that spiritual resources exist not only within the individual but also within the broader community and its intergenerational memory [56].

The Slonimer Rebbe's *Netivot Shalom* similarly emphasizes communal resources for maintaining faith in modern contexts, suggesting specific practices for drawing strength from collective religious experience [60]. This communal dimension offers support for practitioners who find individual spiritual practices insufficient during intense periods of doubt [92].

Elliot Wolfson's academic work on the communal dimensions of Jewish mysticism further illuminates how surrender involves not only individual transformation but participation in collective structures of meaning [57,93]. His analysis of initiation rituals and transmission practices in mystical circles reveals how individual spiritual struggles gain meaning within communal contexts that provide both interpretive frameworks and practical support [64,94].

The various approaches discussed above converge in addressing one particularly challenging aspect of religious life: how to surrender to divine will when experiencing overwhelming inner urges that conflict with religious values. This specific manifestation of spiritual struggle illuminates broader principles of Jewish approaches to doubt and faith [95,96].

The Mussar Approach

The Mussar tradition, particularly as developed by Rabbi

Israel Salanter, emphasizes systematic self-study (*hitlamdut*) to identify patterns in when and how urges arise [60]. This approach introduces specific practices such as creating time delays between impulse and action, and reciting verses as "spiritual mantras" during moments of struggle [58]. The goal is not to eliminate urges but to create space for conscious choice rather than automatic reaction.

Kabbalistic Techniques

Kabbalistic sources offer techniques of visualization and focused attention on divine names during moments of internal conflict [97]. The concept of "*bitul*" (self-nullification) from Lurianic Kabbalah suggests temporarily setting aside personal identity to allow divine presence to enter consciousness [98]. This practice of self-transcendence offers a method for moving beyond the limited perspective that generates internal struggle.

Rabbi Jonathan Eybeschutz's incorporation of practical Kabbalah provides specific techniques for moments when inner urges threaten to overwhelm [99]. His teachings on the meditative use of divine names, particularly the Tetragrammaton, offer concrete practices for creating psychological space during intense internal conflicts [100]. Unlike purely theoretical approaches, Eybeschutz's method combines sophisticated theological understanding with accessible techniques for immediate application [101].

Weil's Approach to Inner Conflict

Simone Weil's approach to overwhelming inner urges stands in stark contrast to both active transformation and passive submission. For Weil, the experience of being torn between desire and obligation represents not merely a psychological state but a metaphysical revelation [50]. Her methodology for such moments centers on three principles:

First, Weil advocates radical acceptance of contradiction without resolution. Unlike approaches that seek to transform or sublimate unwanted urges, Weil suggests that remaining suspended between opposing forces acknowledging both the reality of desire and the demand of obligation creates an opening for transcendence [102].

Second, she proposes "attention to the void" (*attention au vide*) directing consciousness not toward either pole of the conflict but toward the empty space between them [103]. This practice resembles certain forms of meditation but differs in its emphasis on absence rather than presence, negativity rather than positivity [104].

Third, Weil suggests transferring attention from the specific content of the urge to the structure of desire itself [105]. By examining how desire operates rather than what it demands, practitioners can recognize patterns that reveal fundamental structures of human-divine relations [16].

Weil's approach is particularly valuable for those whose inner conflicts appear irresolvable through conventional religious frameworks. By reframing such conflicts as occasions for metaphysical insight rather than moral failure, her methodology offers a path toward surrender that neither denies the reality

of desire nor compromises ethical commitment [17].

Integrative Approaches

Contemporary Jewish teachers have integrated traditional practices with modern psychological insights. Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz suggests "surrendering the narrative" releasing the story one tells oneself about urges and one's relationship to them [21]. This creates mental space for divine presence and new possibilities.

Rabbi Alan Lew's mindfulness-based approach draws on both Jewish contemplative traditions and Buddhist meditation practices to develop skills for creating space between urges and responses [22]. This integration of ancient wisdom with contemporary psychological understanding offers accessible methods for modern practitioners navigating internal conflicts.

Rabbi Hershy Worch's contemporary interpretation of Izhbitzer teachings represents perhaps the most radical approach to overwhelming inner urges [57]. Worch suggests that certain urges, rather than being obstacles to spiritual life, may actually be divine communications that reveal the limitations of conventional religious categories [60]. His approach involves neither suppression nor transformation but radical recontextualization, where the experience of internal conflict itself becomes an opportunity for encountering dimensions of divine will that transcend conventional religious frameworks [106].

Discussion

This analysis reveals several key features of Jewish approaches to surrendering to the divine during periods of doubt and internal struggle [107,108].

First, Jewish sources consistently reframe struggle not as an obstacle to spiritual life but as an integral element of it. The concept of "descent for the purpose of ascent" transforms moments of doubt from spiritual failures into opportunities for deeper connection [60].

Second, Jewish methodologies for surrender tend to be active rather than passive. Unlike models of surrender that emphasize quieting the self, Jewish approaches often involve intensified engagement through practices like *hitbodedut*, visualization, or redirecting energy [109]. This reflects Judaism's broader emphasis on sanctifying the material world rather than escaping it.

Third, Jewish sources recognize both intellectual and emotional dimensions of faith struggles, offering methodologies that address both aspects [110]. While Maimonides provides intellectual frameworks, Hasidic approaches offer embodied practices that address the experiential dimension of faith.

Fourth, as demonstrated particularly in Eybeschutz's writings and interpretations of Izhbitzer teachings, Jewish approaches often emphasize the dialectical nature of surrender, where apparent opposites resistance and acceptance, law and its transcendence are held in creative tension rather than resolved

in favor of one pole [111]. This dialectical quality creates space for complexity and ambiguity within religious experience.

Fifth, while most Jewish approaches emphasize active engagement with doubt, Weil's methodology of attentive waiting offers a valuable counterpoint that complements traditional Jewish practices [112]. Her emphasis on absence rather than presence, contradiction rather than resolution, provides resources for those who find conventional religious frameworks insufficient for navigating their spiritual struggles.

Finally, Jewish approaches consistently locate individual spiritual struggles within communal and intergenerational contexts [38,93,94]. This prevents surrender from becoming purely individualistic and connects personal religious experience to collective wisdom and practice.

Elliot Wolfson's scholarly analysis further reveals how many of these approaches reflect fundamental structures within Jewish mystical thought, suggesting that methodologies for navigating doubt and inner conflict are not merely pragmatic techniques but expressions of core theological and cosmological principles [52].

Conclusion

Jewish religious thought offers rich resources for understanding and navigating the challenge of surrendering to divine will during periods of doubt and internal resistance. By integrating intellectual frameworks with practical methodologies, these traditions provide comprehensive approaches to spiritual struggle that acknowledge its complexity while offering pathways through it [113,114].

The application of these frameworks to the therapeutic encounter demonstrates their relevance beyond specifically religious contexts, suggesting ways that physicians and other healthcare professionals might engage more meaningfully with both their patients' spiritual struggles and their own [115]. As the field of medicine continues to recognize the limitations of purely materialist approaches to healing, the wisdom traditions examined in this paper offer valuable resources for integrating spiritual and physical dimensions of care [116,117].

This analysis suggests several directions for future research, including comparative studies with other religious traditions, empirical investigations of how contemporary Jews employ these methodologies, and explorations of how modern psychological insights might further enhance traditional practices. Additionally, studies examining outcomes when physicians incorporate these approaches into clinical practice could provide valuable evidence for medical education and healthcare delivery reform [118,119].

As both religious communities and medical institutions continue to navigate the challenges of maintaining authentic human connection in increasingly technical contexts, these ancient wisdom traditions offer valuable resources for understanding spiritual struggle not as the enemy of faith or healing but as the context in which authentic transformation becomes possible [120].

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