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## *Making room for oneself in Galit and Gilad Seliktar's Farm 54*

### ABSTRACT

The article's aim is to explore the representation of the domestic space in contemporary Israeli graphic novels with particular emphasis on the space of the private room. This relatively recent concept of a space that has been understood according to the symbiotically mutual definition of the individual and the collective is the key feature of a domestic space that in order to be accessible must be devoid of human presences. Temporarily or permanently abandoned, these rooms become the place where the humans left their traces, as sort of daguerreotype-like space in its technical impossibility to consider the evanescent presence of human beings as opposed to the assumed stability of things. From this perspective only the objects left behind in these rooms can allude to the protagonists' story reconfiguring these rooms between absence and presence, like in Susan Meiselas's project *A room of their own*. This combination of loss and alterity defines the domestic space as the sum of the objects left behind from the absent or voiceless protagonists of stories that is up to readers to piece together. In contemporary Israeli graphic novels, the protagonists of these stories might have abandoned their domestic space in an attempt to disappear by making a clean break, or against their will, or sometimes simply because they grew up. In order to know their stories, the readers have to follow the mute clues going from one room to another. Approaching the notion of representation and its peculiarities with respect to the graphic novel, the article explores the private rooms as a deserted space in the works of Galit and Gilad Seliktar.

### KEYWORDS

graphic novel, domestic space, Susan Meiselas, Galit Seliktar, Gilad Seliktar



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The image of a space is a record and also a kind of mirror.

Susan Meiselas

*1. Introduction*

Since the beginning of this literary genre, among the stories told using the graphic novel form, the story of the self has been widely represented. In the explorations of the notion of identity considered as the stories we tell, the graphic novel has been a privileged space for “writing that takes a life, one’s own or another’s, as its subject”, according to the definition of life-writing by Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson (2010: 4). This definition, the authors suggest, should be simply taken as a general term for a writing that “can be biographical, novelistic, historical, or explicitly self-referential and therefore autobiographical” (4).

More precisely, the comics medium problematizes the very definition of life writing with respect to the notion of representation of the self. The wide critical reflection devoted to these sub-

jects allows to appreciate how the comics medium offers what Elisabeth El Refaie defines as “new ways of conceptualizing the self” (2012: 19)<sup>1</sup>. This perspective has been especially useful with respect to the complex debate regarding the possibilities to define life-writing beyond the dichotomy between fictional and referential, focusing on the performative dimension of telling the story of the self as a way to shape identity.

In the multiformity of the literary production by the new generations of Israeli illustrators and comic books artists, like for example Rutu Modan, Galit and Gilad Seliktar, Racheli Rotner, Orit Arif, and many others, the modality of life writing can be approached from two different perspectives. On one side, this phenomenon presents some similarities to the very same trend in other literary contexts, as already mentioned, but, on the other, it can also be contextualized with respect to the renewed interest in forms of life writing in modern Hebrew and Jewish literature<sup>2</sup>.

An element that is especially evident in this multiform context is the presence of several works addressing the issue of life writing with particular attention to the notion of loss. This perspective can be developed in relation to the representation of loss in graphic novels, with major emphasis on traumatic experiences often on the border between family history and historical events. However, beyond the thematic approach, there are also works exploring the power of loss as a creative dynamic. Galit and Gilad Seliktar’s collection of graphic stories *Mešeq 54*, “Farm 54” (2009) belongs to the second category. The book by the two siblings Seliktar is composed of three short stories *Mašil maħlif*, “The substitute lifeguard” (1981), *Bošem sefardi*, “Spanish Perfume” (1983), and *Batim*, “Houses” (1989), and an untitled preface. In Seliktar’s collection, the creativity drive, as well as its auto/biographical frame, cannot be separated from the notion of loss. First of all, the loss is chosen as the way to create

the space for the stories both of the self and of the absent other. The absence of the other leads to the definition of the self and, at the same time, this very same absence gives the possibility to tell the story of who is no longer there. The creative process is thus described as a mourning, and more precisely, as a mourning that is the reversal of the act of creation, as I will fully develop in the next paragraph. Secondly, and consistently with this approach to the creative process, the spatial dimension of the graphic novel is built upon empty, abandoned, or deserted places to be filled with the stories and the images of the lost other.

In order to address this creative process and its specific use of loss, I will explore some characteristics of Seliktar's *Farm 54*, with particular reference to the paratext, the preface and the first short story.

## 2. *Let the mourn be*

The function of loss in the development of the history both of the self and of the other has been described by Timothy C. Baker in the following terms:

In both life histories and comprehensive family chronicles, as well as in more explicit accounts of immanent grief and mourning, the death of a loved other is presented as both a narrative framework and an explanatory principle. In order for an autobiographical subject to confront her life as a totality, she must first come to terms with the death of the other (Baker 2010: 220).

In order to describe this double anchorage of autobiography in the loss of the other both as the "narrative framework" and as the "explanatory principle", the paratext can be particularly useful. I have discussed elsewhere the role of framing in the context of life-writing and comics (Carandina 2018). Also in the

case of Seliktar's *Farm 54*, the paratext and the preface are used as the privileged space for defining the autobiographical stand.

On the cover image of *Farm 54* a young girl is fixing her hair under the swimming cap. The torso is bicolour, green for the background, yellow for the body of the girl and the upper part of the bikini, a combination of colour absent from the graphic novel. The detail of the girl's hands conveys the notion of preparations before something and it creates the expectation of seeing her jumping into the water, her head already slightly reclining forward. She is getting ready for something; the image captures the moment right before the instant that will change everything forever. Whatever this will be, she will do this all alone.

After this first image, the readers are ushered to the threshold of a family's domestic space. The visual paratext features the image of a house seen from the outside. Partially hidden by some trees, the house too stands alone, without any human presence, only some traces of it, namely the two garbage cans next to the house. The opposition between nature and human, full and empty, is stressed by the use of a uniform grey for the trees and the grass, while the white is employed for the house and the garbage cans. The domestic space clearly becomes a family's one in the dedication "To mum and dad, Hannah and Moni Seliktar". The dedication frames the collection of short stories with respect to the family of both the authors, Galit and Gilad.

The twice autobiographical framing of the collection of short stories by the siblings Seliktar has been made fully explicit in the English edition (Seliktar, Seliktar 2011). To the English translation of *Mešeq 54* a postface stressing the referential dimension of the literary work has been added. Not only the postface states that "All the stories in *Farm 54* are based on true events which took place between the mid-1970s and late 1980s", but

the words of Galit and Gilad are quoted side by side in order to describe the double genesis of each story. Each story is indeed the result of a creative process of writing for Galit and of graphic adaptation of the sister's words by Gilad. While revealing the referential dimension of these stories, Galit focuses on the writing process and Gilad on the adaptation of the stories into the comics medium. A series of family pictures echoes and visually confirms the words of the siblings by showing the places where they used to live and where the stories take place.

Even without this element, the original Hebrew version frames the collection of short stories in a domestic space, the one of the Seliktar's family. The three pages preface further contextualizes the house of the visual paratext and defines the family dimension. Drawn like the visual paratext in black and white and organized according to a three panels page that is used consistently through the book, the first image shows a natural landscape from which the human presence is completely absent if it wasn't from some electricity poles; no verbal text comes with it. The second image shows a road and it is surmounted by the question "What day is it anyway?", according to the English translation of Ronen Kaydar (Seliktar, Seliktar: 2011). The question is asked while the readers are looking at an unknown space, just an anonymous street and some billboards. The readers are lost in time and space, and the question emphasizes this moment of disorientation. In the third image, where the road starts leading the readers into the intended direction, the question is linked to a character, Amnon, who is said to be *used* to ask this question: "Amnon would always ask what day is it today". The repetition of the question in the past makes the readers wonder why the character who was always asking "What day is it anyway?" is no longer asking it. It is thus as one of the possible explanations for the use of the past in this question that the idea of loss makes its first appearance in

the third scene of the preface. Maybe Amnon is no longer there to ask that question. The next page brings the readers closer to the house visually, and to the context, verbally: the answer to Amnon's question is told to be given by his mother, "Mom would tell him today's Sunday, Amnon, or Monday and so on." In the following panel, which visually brings the readers even closer to the house, a special day is mentioned: "On Tuesdays Mom would say it's Tuesday, twice blessed". This expression, "Yom šeliši pa'amayim", comes from the biblical passages of Genesis 1,9-13. The origin of the expression is due to the repetition of the usual "ki ʔov", "that it was good", (Alter 1996: 4) after the work made by God on the third day of the creation, (Gen. 1,10;12). This repetition is at the origin of the use of the expression "twice blessed Tuesday", and of the custom to celebrate marriages on this day. The exceptionality of Tuesday in daily life is frequently associated by children to a special day, a unique day that is different from every other day of the week<sup>3</sup>. In Seliktar's preface, "Yom šeliši pa'amayim" makes Amnon laugh and he repeats to himself this expression before going to sleep. The notion of something unique that cannot take place another day and that cannot be repeated, also literally, is fully developed in the verbal text; according to it, on Wednesday, when Amnon would ask his mom to say "twice blessed" also about that day, she would refuse, because she would make him laugh only on Tuesdays.

The structure of the verbal preface with its progression from unknown to known suggests a parallel between the beginning of a story bringing gradually the readers into its time and space and creation according to Genesis. From this point of view, the seven days of the week shape the literary world of the story conveying the notion of completeness. If the complex symbolology related to the number seven cannot be addressed in this context, nevertheless it can be mentioned that the seven-day

interval has been referred to as a way to represent “the ideas of totality and completeness” (Zerubavel 1985: 8). Moreover, even if it is not my intention to overemphasize the presence of the biblical text with reference to what is a common expression whose origin might be not clear to everyone - as the presence on the web of the question “Why Tuesday is called twice blessed?” attests - nevertheless it might be worthy to stress that it is in the third day of creation, namely Tuesday, that “with the establishment of land and sea the basic parameters of human existence in time and space are complete” (Wenham 1987: 21). The preface sets the time and the space for the readers too. But, more ambitiously, it makes reference to the notion of beginning as creation and it is not afraid to evoke the tension between void and fullness, presence and absence, life and death.

This tension comes from the fact that despite the presence of the theme of creation and completeness in the verbal text, the allusion to something that was and no longer is overshadows it. What in the text might have been an allusion to a loss is confirmed and made explicit in the visual text. While the readers follow the dialogue between Amon and his mother, they are gradually brought closer to a house, the same drawn in the visual paratext. These black and white images are devoid of any human presence and only in the third page of the book there is a first glimpse of it in the pink colour used uniformly to paint a group of indistinct people packed in a room. Their faces are indistinguishable because their heads are reclining in a mourning attitude not dissimilar from the posture of the girl on the cover. The human presence and its tiny touch of pink is framed by a door through which the readers are invited to have a look, but they are not allowed to enter. On this threshold they should thus stop, and this is the last image of the preface.

This space is a very intimate and private one, and at the same time, it is public and sacred. This is the space of the mourners.

In the Jewish context, during a period of time of seven days after the funeral, the mourners gather at the home of the deceased or of his/her family. The family of the deceased cannot leave the house nor take care of daily life chores and several other activities are prohibited. The mourners are surrounded by people who are willing to share their grief by spending time inside the house, taking care of every practical aspect of life, and participating to the prayer services that take place at the house. This part of the ritual is called *shivah*, from the number seven.

The *shivah* has been described as time-space when/where everything ordinary becomes exceptional according to a precise framework of inversion that the following passages make explicit with respect to several aspects:

These laws altered virtually every aspect of ordinary social behavior for both myself and the shiva caller in ways that made the denial of death nearly impossible (Slochower 1993: 360).

Though the shiva is an institution essentially defined by temporal boundaries, it may also be considered a kind of "space," in which mourning is enacted and evolves (the following month [the shloshim] and then the entire year [shnat evel] are similar examples of temporally defined spaces of mourning). To be clear, by suggesting that the shiva is a kind of space, I am not referring to the physical site in which mourners receive others. Rather, *the prescribed behaviors of the shiva* - covering mirrors, sitting low to the floor, tearing one's garment, reciting certain prayers - *transform an ordinary room in one's home into the space of the shiva for its temporal duration* (Mann 2012: ebook; emphasis added).

The presence of all these sacred items along with the recurrent assembly of worshipers, morning and evening, make the house connected to death and mourning into the most

holy and pure public space the Jewish community can create. This constitutes a symbolic reversal of the highest order, a true consecration of the house (Heilman 2001: 131).

To summarize, the domestic private space becomes public, the familiar becomes strange, the ordinary becomes sacred. From the different perspectives that the above-mentioned quotes highlight without exhausting, the seven-day period of the *shivah* can be defined as a complete inversion of the everyday. More precisely it can be considered as the necessary structure to express what, according to Samuel C. Heilman in *When a Jew Dies: The Ethnography of a Bereaved Son*, is the most radical inversion taking place during the *shivah*:

The seven days of *shivah* represent a kind of inversion of God's seven-day week. Unlike God's seven days, which begin with life and the creation of the world, the mourner's begin with death, as if to indicate that, at least for a week, the human response to death, the work of grief, reverses the divine order of creation (Heilman 2001: 122).

I see the creative drive framing and inspiring Seliktar's *Farm 54* as a mourning considered precisely as the reversal of the order of creation. Defined as such, mourning becomes the creative power necessary to tell a story – as “narrative framework” as well as “explanatory principle” –. Mourning gives also the life-writing modality the meaning of the writing of the story of the self without the other, exploring a notion of identity built upon the absence of the other.

### 3. “*Lui en moi*”: empty places, mourning, and venue à l'écriture autobiographique

In *A View of a Room* by Susan Meiselas (2018) some of the visitors' reactions to a photograph taken by the artist in the con-

text of her project *A Room of Their Own* are reproduced. The artist's project is devoted to the stories and art works of women in a refuge in the Black Country in the West Midlands, UK. Without addressing here the full context of Meiselas' work and the dynamics involved in the collaboration with the women of the refuge, I will focus exclusively on the visitors' responses to Meiselas' picture. In the context of the Touchstone programme, The Photographers' Gallery invited the public to respond to the photograph *Ritu's Room*, featuring an unmade empty simple bed in a room in that refuge. The bed - a simple bed with a pillow and a duvet wrapped up - is positioned in the corner of the room, there are no windows, nor any other elements to define the place, only a tiny red mark on the wall in the right corner of the picture. The visitors were asked to reply to the question "What do you see?" by words or drawings. The emptiness of the room was filled by some of the visitors by their own stories, stories that sometimes they didn't even start to tell, they just replied to the question with "myself" or "my own reflection". One of the visitors wrote: "I see me. Without her". While looking at a room left by someone, the self defines himself/herself according to the loss shaping it. The self becomes then what is left after someone else left, like the tiny red mark on the wall in the corner of the room in Meiselas' photo. It is a very small detail that some of the visitors highlighted mainly in their drawings of the room. It seems like something hit the wall, leaving on it its red trace. Like the abandoned room kept the mark of the passage of the others who are no longer there, what is left after the departure of the other is the self.

The same process unfolded when the visitors invited to respond to Meiselas' picture tried to imagine the stories or the feelings of the person who was in that room: the emptiness of the room was used as a way to imagine the story of the other, the other who, by leaving us, left only images of him/her in us.

Without underestimating the differences between the two artistic projects and their contexts, mainly with respect to the different implications regarding the idea of leaving in the two contexts, in my view the first story of Seliktar's *Farm 54*, *Maşil maħlif*, "The substitute lifeguard"<sup>4</sup> and *Ritu's Room* share one dynamic. More precisely, I see in both projects a similar use of the empty space as a way to tell both the story of the self and the story of the absent other as the creative drive shaping them. With respect to the use of an empty space, both Seliktar's and Meiselas' projects evoke the notion and the visual presence of a trace, to be understood in the context of the Derridean approach to mourning, as my next remarks on a specific passage of *The Substitute Lifeguard* will fully develop.

Towards the end of the unpagged story *The Substitute Lifeguard* there is one three panels page filled by the image of the girl on the cover gradually carved out by the profiles of other members of her family. Slowly these heads invade her space to the point that there is almost nothing left of her. When they leave and their heads disappear, what is left is a tiny pink spot, like a drop, surrounded by the void, and the following panel is all white, no images nor text, just the void. This drop on the white panel it's her mark, it's her, her without him.

The panel comes indeed after the death of Amnon, because *The Substitute Lifeguard* is the double story of the first kiss of Noga - the protagonist of all three stories of *Farm 54* - and of the drowning of Amnon, Noga's brother. Told with a retrospective gaze by the young protagonist on the cover of the book, the story of Noga and Dror kissing in the swimming pool cannot be separated from the drowning of Amnon in the same swimming pool while they kiss. Thinking that they are left alone while everyone else is having lunch, on a summer afternoon in an empty courtyard Noga and Dror jump in the swimming pool. A

white void surrounds the bodies of the two. First, they describe a spiral seen from above, their bodies are pink for the part of body under the water, and black and white for the part outside the water. Not even one line of text delimits the panels, letting the bodies float in this white void. After this first page, a two pages chase follows, with only one line of text: "All of a sudden I really wanted to see if Dror's underpants would get tight like the sub's". In this erotic chase, the girl starts swimming followed by him, according to the role she gave him as her private substitute lifeguard. When what she defines as "a strange hunger" overcomes Noga, she bites Dror's lips and she cannot stop until she hears her mom screaming. Under the text describing how Dror startled by the scream bumps into Noga's teeth cutting the girl's lip, the visual text shows an empty living room. While Noga's mother is screaming "Where is Amnon, where is Amon?", the readers are invited to search for him in the empty rooms, the living room and kitchen. These places are depicted in full details, with all the traces of everyday life, glasses, kettle, bottle, but with no traces of human presence. The laundry folded and piled up over a chest of drawers is the synthesis of the shared life of this family, the clothes are there but not the bodies. Something is then missing, misplaced, or gone. That is what the readers are asked to look for, like in *Rutu's room*. The question is thus what is missing, what might have been accidentally misplaced? Something seems to be misplaced also linguistically as Noga's thoughts about her mother's scream make clear: "At first I didn't really understand what she was shouting because it sounded so much like her morning rant 'Where are my glasses'? Where are the car keys?". It's only when also the father starts screaming "Where is Amnon, where is Amnon?" that the girl notices the presence of an unusual word in the usual refrain. Precisely at that moment the two teenagers in the pool are depicted next to the corpse of the drowned child.

What follows is the above-mentioned image of the girl framed by the heads of the adults, and then the pink drop.

The empty rooms tell the story both of Amnon and of Noga, because the story of Noga is the story of Noga without Amnon. The empty rooms and the empty swimming pool leave her the space she is struggling for. On the narrative level, the coming of age of the protagonist as creation of an autonomous self is clearly defined as an act of murder of the brother: the girl on the cover jumps in the pool and kills her brother. "And Dad called us murders" are the last words of the story. Mourning her brother will make her what she is, her head on the cover is reclining because she is ready to jump and kill as well as she is ready to mourn. This is her way to become herself.

Following this perspective also on a referential level, the paratext frames the twice autobiographical stand in mourning, thus creating a double dynamic where the story of the self comes out from the loss of the other, making the two stories intertwined. And the story of Galit cannot but be the story of Galit without Gilad. In the postface of the English edition, Galit, as the author of the short story, describes as follows the event that inspired it:

One afternoon, when Gilad was about two years old, our family was in the backyard. It was a hot day and my father went to look for one of our dogs he had seen disappear at the far end of the yard [...]. On his way he passed by our blue fiberglass wading pool and heard heavy spattering. He thought he had found the dog, but it was Gilad, fighting for his life in the half-meter-high chlorinated water. I saw him in my father's arms, fully dressed in his toddler clothes and wet to the bone. Both of them were quiet. The silence broke when my mother started screaming (Galit Seliktar 2011).

From Galit point of view, the short story could have been written only in one way: "Of course I had to kill Gilad when

I wrote this story” It is the Derrida’s “deuil possible” that inspires the creative work of Galit:

La terrible solitude qui est la mienne ou la nôtre à la mort de l’autre, c’est elle qui constitue ce rapport à soi qu’on appelle “moi”, “nous”, “entre nous”, “subjectivité”, “intersubjectivité”, “mémoire” [...]. On pleure *justement* sur ce qui nous arrive quand tout est confié à la seule mémoire “en moi” ou “en nous”, mais il faut aussi rappeler, autre tour de mémoire, que l’ “en moi” et l’ “en nous” *ne surgissent et ne s’apparaissent pas avant* cette expérience terrible ou du moins avant sa possibilité effectivement ressentie, inscrite en nous, signée. [...] Nous le savons, nous le savons, *nous nous souvenons, avant la mort* de l’aimé, que l’être-en-moi ou l’être-en-nous se constitue depuis la possibilité du deuil. Nous ne sommes nous-mêmes que depuis ce savoir plus vieux que nous-mêmes, et c’est pourquoi je dis que nous commençons par nous en souvenir, nous arrivons à nous-mêmes par cette mémoire du deuil possible (Derrida 1988: 53, emphasis added).

Maybe, we use to think precisely the opposite. Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas reflect in the introduction to *The Work of Mourning*: “In mourning we find ourselves at a loss, no longer ourselves, as if the singular shock of what we must bear had altered the very medium in which it was to be registered” (Derrida 2001: 5). However, the creative tension coming from the loss - both of the other and of the self as the medium registering this loss - can make mourning a way to represent the self. It wouldn’t be enough to describe the process of definition of the self from a mourning point of view; on the contrary, it is necessary to define the self as the mourning process of becoming himself/herself, namely, becoming what is left after the death of the other in a performative approach. Looking at an empty room, looking for what or who is no longer there, de-

fines the self as the mourner, as the space that keeps “en moi” the other, as the tiny red mark on the wall. When the others leave, their story becomes the one of the images they left in us, even if we are fully aware of the mourning aporia according to Derrida: it's only when this process of internalization fails that the mourning is successful.

#### 4. Conclusion

The room full of mourners is the starting point of Seliktar's *Farm 54*. This room is not accessible to the readers because the double autobiographical stand is articulated precisely from this room. This room full of mourners tells only one story, the story of person who left. But in order to let this story unfold, what is needed is an empty room, a void. This is the kind of space that will allow the readers to ask and project questions about who is missing, who was there and no longer is. And someone, or something, is always missing in any contemplative act that implies the notion of loss:

Is it absurd to say that when we stand in front of Notre Dame on a brilliant Sunday afternoon in July the building is lost to us? Surely it looms over us - lapidary, dependable, unmoving? Yet what does it mean when we turn away and continue on our path across Paris with the thought 'Yes, I really am here,' as though the 'really' were an affirmation rescuing us from our drab quotidian existence [...]? If Notre Dame causes the everyday to slip away for an instant, can the very power of its presence nevertheless also be described as a kind of withdrawal? Is it beautiful precisely as a ruin, and is all beauty always running to its ruin, hence, in a sense ruinous? (Krell 2000: 7).

Even if these words in the spring 2019 resonate with unexpectedly dramatic images and emotions, the notion of con-

templation of beauty as mourning for something that will be lost define the self as the mourner, as the one who will keep in him/her the images of what is lost. By setting the *shivah* as the space of the preface, the siblings Seliktar choose the process of mourning as an artistic manifesto defining thus creativity as the inversion of the process of creation. Therefore, the process of representing the self through the stories defining it cannot but be the story of the other lost, making every life-writing a tale of ruin and loss.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> See also Chaney (2011; 2017); Kunka (2017); Pedri (2013); Whitlock (2006).

<sup>2</sup> Adelman (2004); Amihay (2015); Feldman (1988); Hess (2016); Lightman (2014); Mintz (1989; 2008); Moseley (2006); Pelli (1990); Royal (2016); Shem-Tov (2018); Stanislawski (2004); Zakai (2011); Zierler (2012).

<sup>3</sup> Just to mention some other literary examples in David Grossman's *The Book of Intimate Grammar*, this day is associated with "Tuesday-night bananas-in-sour-cream" because "on Tuesdays Mama served bananas in sour cream with sugar on top in those orange dessert dishes, and while he wasn't so crazy about squashed bananas, he liked to see the expression on Mama's face when she served it to him" (Grossman 1991, ed. 1995). Likewise, it is on what seems just a common Tuesday to people who are not paying much attention to the fact that Tuesday is a twice blessed day that Etgar Keret's Lior can finally win against the "Backgammon Monstar" (*Mifleset ha-šeš-beš* in Keret 1992, ed. 2008; however the reference to the Tuesday is not mentioned in the English translation).

<sup>4</sup> Even if this short story was previously published in 2007 in a literary magazine, here I will refer exclusively to the version published in *Farm 54* and I will not address the issue of the differences between the two versions.

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