THE WIVES OF ESAU

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The Bible mentions Esau's three wives in two different chapters, yet the names given to them are inconsistent. In Genesis 26, Esau is said to have taken Canaanite wives, Judith daughter of Beeri the Hittite and Basemath daughter of Elon the Hittite (Gen. 26:34). In addition, Esau later married Mahalath daughter of Ishmael (Gen. 28:9). However, when the Bible details the genealogy of Esau's descendants in Genesis 36, it gives other names for Esau's wives – Adah daughter of Elon the Hittite, Oholibamah daughter of Anah daughter of Zibeon the Hivite, and Basemath daughter of Ishmael (Gen. 36:2-3). The traditional commentators find various ways of reconciling this discrepancy. At one end of the spectrum, Rashi explains that both accounts discuss the same three women and for various reasons they are referred to by different names. At the other end of the spectrum, some explain that Esau took the wives mentioned in Genesis 36 in addition to those mentioned earlier, making the number of Esau's wives six in all. Other commentators take intermediate approaches, declaring that some of the wives named on the two lists are identical, while others are not.

	Genesis 26:34; 28:9	Genesis 36:2-3
1.	Judith daughter of Beeri the Hittite	Adah daughter of Elon the Hittite
2.	Basemath daughter of Elon the Hittite	Oholibamah daughter of Anah daughter of Zibeon the Hivite
3.	Mahalath daughter of Ishmael	Basemath daughter of Ishmael

RASHI'S APPROACH (THREE WIVES)

Rashi (to Gen. 36:2-3) understands that Esau had only three wives and that the same women are mentioned in both Genesis 26 and 36, but they are referred to by different names. He explains that Adah daughter of Elon the Hittite was previously referred to as Basemath daughter of Elon the Hittite. She was first   called Basemath because she regularly offered incense

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(*besamim)* to false gods. Oholibamah daughter of Anah daughter of Zibeon the Hivite was previously referred to as Judith daughter of Beeri the Hittite because Esau called her Judith to trick his father Isaac into believing that she had rejected idolatry.[1] He further identifies Basemath daughter of Ishmael with Mahalath daughter of Ishmael, so named because Esau's sins received forgiveness (*mehilah*)[2] when he married her. Without delving into such hermeneutics, Kimhi (to Gen. 36:2) also understands that the Bible is referring to the same three women. He merely explains that each of Esau's wives had two names and that were listed under different names in different places.[3]

R. Nathan Ashkenazi ben Samson Spiro (1490-1577)[4] brings textual support for Rashi's explanation. When the Bible lists Esau's wives in Genesis 36, it states: *Esau took his wives from among the Canaanite women – Adah daughter of Elon the Hittite, Oholibamah daughter of Anah daughter of Zibeon the Hivite, and Basemath daughter of Ishmael* (Gen. 36:1-3). Spiro reasons that since the Bible states that "Esau took *his* wives" (and not simply "Esau took wives"), one can infer that the wives listed here had been mentioned previously. This, according to Spiro, is why Rashi felt compelled to explain that the three wives mentioned in both places are identical.[5]

On two occasions, Josephus refers only to the three wives of Esau mentioned in Genesis 36, namely, Oholibamah, Adah, and Basemath. He does so in the section of his *Antiquities* which roughly corresponds to Genesis 26 and again in the section corresponding to Genesis 36.[6] Josephus thereby ignores the names mentioned in Genesis 26. He evidently preceded Rashi in his effort to reconcile the two Biblical accounts, assuming that the three wives mentioned in Genesis 36 are identical with those mentioned in Genesis 26.

RASHI'S APPROACH: DIFFICULTIES AND RESOLUTIONS

Several difficulties arise from Rashi's approach. Firstly, if Adah was Basemath daughter of Elon the Hittite, why is she listed as first among Esau's wives in Genesis 36, but second in Genesis 26? Likewise, if Oholibamah is Judith, why is she listed as second in Genesis 36 and first in Genesis 26? Secondly, if Oholibamah and Judith are one and the same, why is Oholibamah's lineage given as *daughter of Anah daughter of Zibeon the Hivite* and Judith's lineage as *daughter of Beeri the Hittite*? Thirdly, why in Genesis 26 did Esau change Oholibamah's name to Judith so as to trick his parents into

believing that she had rejected idolatry, but not do this for his other wife, Basemath, whose name alludes to her idolatrous practices?[7]

Shapiro explains that in Genesis 36 the order of Esau's wives reflects the order in which he built families with them. Adah/Basemath is therefore listed first in Genesis 36, because she was the first wife of Esau to bear him children (see Gen. 36:4). However, in Genesis 26, she is listed second because her name there is an allusion to her pagan incense offerings, which the Bible wanted to place immediately before the next verse, where the idolatrous practices of Esau's wives and his parents' disapproval are recorded: *They were a source of bitterness to Isaac and Rebekah* (Gen. 26:35).[8]

Similarly, R. Solomon Luria (1510-1573) observes that in Genesis 26 the Bible specifically refers to Adah/Basemath as Basemath, thus alluding to her idolatrous incense, despite the fact that Oholibamah is called Judith in the same passage to make her seem more righteous. Using the name Basemath serves to introduce the next story: *It came to pass when Isaac was old and his eyes were too dim to see...* (Gen. 27:1). *Midrash Tanḥuma* explains that Isaac's eyesight was impaired by the smoke from the pagan incense offered by Esau's wives.[9] It is therefore appropriate, when the names of Esau's wives are mentioned two verses earlier, for one of those names to hint at the idolatry that weakened Isaac's vision.[10]

R. David Pardo (1718-1790) notes that the name Basemath, which recalls the word for incense (*besamim*), has good and bad connotations. It can either refer to the incense of idolatry or to deeds as pleasant as incense.[11] The Tosafist Rabbenu Ḥayyim Paltiel,[12] in his Pentateuch commentary, does interpret her name in that virtuous way. Consequently, Esau felt there was no need to change Basemath's name as he had changed Oholibamah's, since "Basemath" could have a positive connotation.[13] R. Menaḥem ben Solomon (a twelfth-century exegete) furthermore suggests that Oholibamah's name alludes to the fact that her tent (*ohel*) was open to the public like an altar (*bamah*), and that she would fornicate there.[14] Since that name alludes to her sexual misdeeds, Esau wished to make her more acceptable to his parents by changing her name to Judith.

These explanations account for the inconsistencies in the order of Esau's wives and for Esau's alteration of Oholibamah's name to Judith without changing the name of Basemath. However, as mentioned above, Rashi's as-

sumption that Oholibamah was identical with Judith has still to explain why
Judith is called the daughter of Beeri the Hittite while Oholibamah's lineage
makes her the daughter of Anah daughter of Zibeon the Hivite. Hizkuni
maintains that, according to Rashi, one must accept that Anah and Beeri were
the same person.[15] R. Tobias ben Eliezer (an eleventh-century commentator)
supports this view, observing that their names have similar connotations:
Be'er means "wellspring" and *Ayyin* (phonetically similar to Anah) means
"spring."[16] Likewise, the term "Hittite" used to describe Beeri could be
equivalent to the term "Hivite" used to describe Anah and Zibeon. Indeed, R.
Abraham Maimuni (see below) declares that "Hittite" is a hyponym [an in-
clusive term] for "Hivite".[17]

    Luria offers another explanation as to why Esau's wife she is referred to as
a daughter of Beeri the Hittite when she is called Judith, and as a daughter of
Anah daughter of Zibeon the Hivite when called Oholibamah. He writes that
it was a known fact that Anah was a bastard[18] and so, in an effort to conceal
the illegitimacy of her family, Esau changed the name of his wife's father
from Anah to Beeri, just as he changed her name from Oholibamah to Judith.
Luria claims that the name Beeri alludes to Beer-lahai-roi, the place where
Hagar encountered an angel (Gen. 16:13-14). By changing her father's name
to Beeri, Esau meant to show his parents that his wife came from a righteous
family.[19] Luria also explains that Esau changed his father-in-law's nationality
from Hivite to Hittite because the Hivites were more given to idolatry than
the Hittites. His source for this explanation is the Talmud (TB *Shabbat* 85a),
which states that the Hivites were connected with the serpent (*hiviya* in Ara-
maic) that lured Eve into eating from the Tree of Knowledge. By associating
the Hivites with this reptile, the Talmud implied that they had a greater addic-
tion to sin than any other nation.[20]

    The Bible lists Anah among Zibeon's children (Gen. 36:24), which seems to
indicate that Anah was Zibeon's son. However, Rabbenu Tam (quoted by
Tosafot to TB *Bava Batra* 115b)[21] states that Anah was actually female. Rab-
benu Tam thus disposes of the contradiction regarding Oholibamah/Judith's
parentage. Beeri the Hittite was her father and Anah the Hivite daughter of
Zibeon was her mother.[22] This notion is at variance with Rashi's understand-
ing that Anah was a male.

Before telling how Jacob usurped the blessing Isaac promised to Esau, *Sefer ha-Yashar* (a midrashic work) states that when Esau was forty years old, he married Judith daughter of Beeri son of Aifer the Hittite.[23] Subsequently, after an account of how Jacob received the blessing, *Sefer ha-Yashar* relates that Esau married Basemath daughter of Elon the Hittite, whom he called Adah because the blessing had been stripped (*adah*) from him.[24] After describing Jacob's flight to Haran, *Sefer ha-Yashar* notes that Esau married Mahalath daughter of Ishmael.[25] Then, during Jacob's fifth year in Haran, Esau's wife Judith daughter of Beeri died; she had borne daughters (named Marzith and Puith) to Esau, but no sons. In the sixth year of Jacob's stay in Haran, Esau married Oholibamah daughter of Anah daughter of Zibeon the Hivite. Esau eventually moved to Oholibamah's place of origin, Mount Seir, where his family intermarried with the native Horites. *Sefer ha-Yashar* also relates that Esau married off his eldest daughter, Marzith, to Anah son of Zibeon,[26] who was his wife's brother.[27]

Sefer ha-Yashar appears to reconcile the Biblical accounts of Esau's wives by explaining that Basemath daughter of Elon the Hittite (mentioned in Genesis 26) and Adah daughter of Elon the Hittite (mentioned in Genesis 36) are one and the same person, which is close to Rashi's understanding of the texts. Unlike Rashi, however, *Sefer ha-Yashar* believes that Judith (mentioned in Genesis 26) and Oholibamah (mentioned in Genesis 36) are not identical. Judith's name occurs in Genesis 26 because Esau married her at that point in time, but it is not mentioned again in Genesis 36 because she had already died then and Esau had not fathered any male children with her. On the other hand, Oholibamah figures only in Genesis 36 because Esau had not yet married her during the period described in Genesis 26; by the point in time that Genesis 36 describes, however, they were already married and had male descendants. *Sefer ha-Yashar* does not seem to address the discrepancy concerning this daughter of Ishmael, but it is a reasonable guess that the book's author assumed that Mahalath daughter of Ishmael and Basemath daughter of Ishmael were one and the same. To sum up, therefore, *Sefer ha-Yashar* maintains that Esau had four wives: Adah/Basemath daughter of Elon the Hittite, Judith daughter of Beeri the Hittite, Mahalath/ Basemath daughter of Ishmael, and Oholibamah. This is the approach adopted by several medie-

val commentators:[28] Rashbam (to Gen. 36:2), Ibn Ezra (to Gen 26:34, 36:1), Ḥizkuni (to Gen. 36:2), Yosef Bekhor-Shor (to Gen. 36:1), and *Sefer ha-Gan* (to Gen. 36:1).[29]

THE APPROACH OF NAḤMANIDES (FIVE WIVES)

In his commentary to Genesis 36:2, Naḥmanides (Ramban) asks two questions about Rashi's exposition and then offers an alternate approach. Firstly, if, according to Rashi, Esau changed Oholibamah's name to Judith in an effort to make her seem less idolatrous, why does the Bible also change the name of her father from Anah in Genesis 36 to Beeri in Genesis 26? (This question has already been addressed above.) Secondly, Naḥmanides assumes that Basemath must either be a real name or a descriptive one; it cannot be both. If so, how does Rashi explain that Basemath is the proper name of Ishmael's daughter (Mahalath being merely a descriptive one that alludes to the absolution of Esau's sins) if he also claims that Basemath is a descriptive name for Adah daughter of Elon the Hittite, alluding to her idolatrous practices? Is "Basemath" a real name or simply a descriptive one?

These questions show that Naḥmanides adopts the approach of Ibn Ezra, with some minor modifications. He also affirms that Judith and Oholibamah were not the same person. However, since he regards Basemath as a proper name only, he rejects the view that Basemath daughter of Elon the Hittite and Adah daughter of Elon the Hittite were one and the same, having both a proper name (Adah) and a descriptive one (Basemath), thus concluding that they were two different people. According to Naḥmanides, Esau first married Judith daughter of Beeri the Hittite and Basemath daughter of Elon the Hittite, who both died childless. This might have been a punishment for the suffering they inflicted on Isaac and Rebecca. Esau then married another two wives: Adah daughter of Elon the Hittite, who was the sister of his deceased wife Basemath, and Oholibamah. Subsequently, he also married Ishmael's daughter, Mahalath. Since "Mahalath" has a dismal connotation (*maḥalah* signifying "malady"), Esau changed her name to that of one of his original wives, Basemath, which has a pleasant association (*besamim* signifying "fragrance"). Naḥmanides adds that Esau did so because Mahalath/Basemath daughter of Ishmael was especially dear to him, being his cousin and thus more acceptable to his father Isaac.

Accordingly, Judith and Basemath daughter of Elon are not mentioned in Genesis 36 because they had died by then without children, while Adah and Oholibamah are not mentioned in Genesis 26 because Esau had yet to marry them. The daughter of Ishmael is called Mahalath in Genesis 26 because Esau married her during that time and so the Bible uses her original name, but in Genesis 36 she is called Basemath because Esau had already renamed her by then. In summation, Nahmanides understands that Esau took five wives: Judith daughter of Beeri the Hittite, Basemath daughter of Elon the Hittite, Adah daughter of Elon the Hittite, Oholibamah daughter of Anah daughter of Zibeon the Hivite, and Mahalath/Basemath daughter of Ishmael.

This approach was evidently adopted by Targum Pseudo-Jonathan as well. By omitting any comment on the apparent discrepancy between Genesis 26 and Genesis 36, he seems to take the two accounts at face value. In other words, he considers all of Esau's wives to be different people. However, there is one exception: Targum Pseudo-Jonathan (to Gen. 28:9) writes that Mahalath daughter of Ishmael is Basemath daughter of Ishmael. He thus understands that Esau had five wives, one of whom was Mahalath/Basemath, which conforms with the opinion of Nahmanides.

THE APPROACH OF RABBI ABRAHAM MAIMUNI (SIX WIVES)

R. Abraham Maimuni (1186 - 1237), the son of Maimonides, has a different suggestion – that Esau took the wives mentioned in Genesis 36 in addition to those listed in Genesis 26. Since those mentioned in Genesis 26 never bore him children, they are not enumerated in Genesis 36, where Esau's descendants are recorded.[30] According to this explanation, Esau had six wives, the three listed in Genesis 26 and the three others mentioned in Genesis 36.[31]

CONCLUSION

The commentators offer several approaches to explain the inconsistency between the Bible's account of Esau's wives in Genesis 26 and Genesis 36, some closer than others to the plain meaning of the text. Rashi takes them to be the same women listed under different names. *Sefer ha-Yashar* and a slew of other commentators basically agree with Rashi, but maintain that Esau had four wives, since they refuse to identify Judith and Oholibamah as the same woman. Nahmanides mostly agrees, with the caveat that Adah daughter of

Elon the Hittite and Basemath daughter of Elon the Hittite were not identical but sisters. In his view, therefore, Esau took five wives. Abraham Maimuni utterly rejects the notion of the Bible mentioning Esau's wives under different names. His explanation is that the three wives in Genesis 26 and the three in Genesis 36 are entirely different people, indicating that Esau had a total of six wives.

NOTES

1. Rashi's possible source for this explanation is TB *Megillah* 13a, which states that whoever rejects idolatry is called a "Judean." By renaming his wife Oholibamah as "Judith," Esau implied that she had abandoned idolatry.

2. Rashi declares that his source for this is *Midrash Shemuel* (ch. 17). The same idea is also found in the Jerusalem Talmud (*Bikkurim* 3:1). Other early commentators state that she was first called Basemath because her deeds were as pleasant as incense before her marriage, but was later named Mahalath because her evil deeds after joining Esau were like a fearful disease (*mahalah*). See S. Sasson, ed., *Moshav Zekenim* (London, 1959) p. 46; and J. Klugmann, ed., *Peirush ha-Roke'ah* (Benei Berak, 2001) p. 216.

3. Kimhi writes that just as all three of Esau's wives had two names, so did Zibeon (who was also called Beeri). Kimhi apparently considered Adah and Basemath to be the same person because they are both mentioned as daughters of Elon the Hittite, and Mahalath and Basemath to be identical because they are both mentioned as daughters of Ishmael. Kimhi seems to have believed, like Rashi,   that Oholibamah was the same person as Judith and that Zibeon/Beeri was Oholibamah's grandfather. Thus, Oholibamah's lineage in Genesis 36 is traced to her father and grandfather (Anah and Zibeon), but in Genesis 26 only to her grandfather Beeri (also known as Zibeon).

4. In addition to his commentary on the Pentateuch, Spiro also wrote glosses to Alfasi and *Mevo She'arim*, a commentary on *Sha'arei Dura*. He was the grandfather and namesake of R. Nathan Nata ben Solomon Spira (c. 1585-1633), the famous Polish kabbalist and author of *Megalleh Amukkot*.

5. N. A. Spiro, *Imrei Shefer* (Lublin, 1591) fol. 59b.

6. W. Whiston, trans., *The Antiquities of the Jews* (Cambridge, 1737), 1:18; 2:1.

7. Another approach, suggested recently, follows Rashi's in many ways: Much to the chagrin of his parents, Esau married Judith and Basemath who were Canaanite idol worshipers. So as to become reconciled with his parents, he decided to marry a member of Ishmael's family whose lineage would be more acceptable, and therefore took Basemath the daughter of Ishmael as his wife. However, since Basemath had the very same name as one of his idolatrous wives, Esau changed it to Mahalath in an effort to show his remorse for having previously married Canaanite idolaters. To remain consistent, however, Esau then felt obliged to rename his first two wives as well, so Judith became Oholibamah and Basemath became Adah. For more details of this approach, see J. H. Abraham "A Literary Solution to the Name Variations of Esau's Wives," *Torah U-Maddah Journal* 7 (1997) pp. 1-14; and "Esau's Wives," *Jewish Bible Quarterly* 25 (1997) pp.

251-259. While this explanation is quite original and has some merit, its major premises are not supported by earlier commentators.

8. *Imrei Shefer*, fol.. 59b.

9. *Midrash Tanḥuma, Bereshit* 26, 8.

10. A. Y. Bernstein, ed., *Yeriyot Shlomo* (Benei Berak, 1984) p. 35.

11. D. Pardo, *Maskil le-David* (Venice, 1761) fol. 32b.

12. I. S. Lange, ed., *Peirushei Rabbenu Ḥayyim Paltiel al ha-Torah* (Jerusalem, 1981) p. 75.

13. Rabbenu Yoel (a medieval commentator) notes that her other name, Adah, alludes to the fact that she adorned herself (*ade'ii*) like a prostitute; see J. Klugmann, ed., *Sefer ha-Remazim le-Rabbenu Yoel* (Benei Berak, 2001) p. 106. It was thus appropriate for the Bible, in Genesis 26, to refer to her as "Basemath," which has both positive and negative connotations, as opposed to "Adah," which evidently has only a negative one.

14. S. Buber, ed., *Midrash Sekhel Tov*, vol .1 (Berlin, 1900) p. 205.

15. C. D. Chavel, ed., *Peirushei ha-Ḥizkuni al ha-Torah* (Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook, 1980) p. 134.

16. S. Buber, ed., *Midrash Lekaḥ Tov* (Vilna, 1880) fol. 92a.

17. S. D. Sasson, ed., *Peirush Rabbenu Avraham ben ha-Rambam al Bereshit/Shemot* (London, 1958) pp. 124, 126. R. Meyuḥas ben Elijah (a twelfth-century Greek commentator) writes that "Horite" is also a subset of "Hittite" because Anah is referred to as a Horite (Gen. 36:20-21), even though he is called a Hittite elsewhere. See A. W. Greenup and C. H. Titterton, eds., *Peirush Rabbenu Meyuḥas al Bereshit* (London, 1909) p. 97.

18. Anah is listed as a son of Seir (Gen. 36:20) and also as a son of Zibeon the son of Seir (Gen. 36:24). Rashi (to Gen. 36:24, citing TB *Pesaḥim* 54a and *Bereshit Rabbah* 82:15) reconciles this discrepancy by explaining that Zibeon son of Seir had incestuous relations with his mother, the wife of Seir, and Anah was born of that union. Anah is therefore listed as a son of Seir because Seir's wife was his mother, and he is also listed as a son of Zibeon because Zibeon was actually his father. This is the source for the notion that Anah was a bastard.

19. Another explanation can be gleaned from Rabbenu Yoel, who states that the name Beeri alludes to her immersion in the *mikveh* (*be'er* denoting a well). Thus, by changing his father-in-law's name to Beeri, Esau was trying to imply that his wife observed the laws of family purity. See J. Klugmann, ed., *Sefer ha-Remazim le-Rabbenu Yoel*, p. 107.

20. R. Judah Löw ben Bezalel (1520-1609), the celebrated Maharal of Prague, offers a similar explanation but maintains that because of their link with the serpent, the Hivites were regarded as the most cursed of nations while the serpent was regarded as the most cursed of beasts (Gen. 3:14). See J. D. Hartman, ed., *Ḥummash Gur Aryeh*: Genesis, vol. 2 (Jerusalem: Makhon Yerushalayim, 1990) p. 183. See also S. D. Sasson, ed., *Moshav Zekenim*, p. 64.

21. See also *Moshav Zekenim*, p. 65.

22. Ibid., p. 43.

23. *Sefer ha-Yashar* (Benei Berak: Mishor Publishing, 1984) p. 96. Though first printed in the 1600s, *Sefer ha-Yashar* is traditionally considered to be much older; see J. D. Eisenstein, *Otzar ha-Midrashim* (p. 251), where he claims that it was written in Geonic times (ninth or tenth century).

24. *Sefer ha-Yashar*, p. 98.

25. Ibid., p. 101.

26. Ibid.*, p. 131. Oholibamah's father is recorded there as Anah son of Seir, not Anah son of Zibeon, yet when describing Esau's marriage to her it traces her lineage as "daughter of Anah daughter of Zibeon." Additionally, this work mentions the story of Anah, *who discovered the hot springs   in the wilderness while pasturing the asses of his father Zibeon* (Gen. 36:24). Although there seems to be a contradiction here regarding the identity of Anah's father, one answer (as stated earlier) could be that Anah was the illegitimate son of Zibeon and Seir's wife.

27. Ibid., p. 103. The author of *Sefer ha-Yashar* appears to contradict himself once again, stating that Oholibamah was Anah's daughter, not his sister. He should have recorded that Esau married his daughter Marzith to Anah son of Zibeon, who was his wife's father, not her brother. It seems clear, however, that *Sefer ha-Yashar* agrees with the midrashic source referred to above (note 18), which states that Zibeon had incestuous relations with his daughter-in-law. Although Oholibamah is usually regarded as a daughter of Anah, she could also have been his sister.

28. However, these commentators differ from *Sefer ha-Yashar* on a few small points. They imply that Judith did not bear any children to Esau, whereas *Sefer ha-Yashar* declares that she gave birth to females. Nor do they consider Esau's marriage to Judith and to Adah as two separate events, but take the Bible literally when it speaks of Esau marrying both of them at the same time. They also explicitly identify Basemath daughter of Ishmael with Mahalath daughter of Ishmael, whereas *Sefer ha-Yashar* only does so implicitly by omission.

29. In one of his kabbalistic works, R. Eliyyahu ben Shlomo Zalman, the Gaon of Vilna (1720-1797), mentions "the four wives of Esau": see *Bi'ur Ha-Gra al Sifra de-Tzeni'uta* (Vilna, 1913) fol. 32b. A prominent contemporary mystic, R. Jacob Ades, writes that it is evident from this that the Gaon subscribed to Rashbam's view that Esau had four wives. See *Kabbalat Ha-Gra*, vol. 2 (Jerusalem, 2006) pp. 363-4.

30. S. D. Sasson, ed., *Peirush Rabbenu Avraham ben ha-Rambam*, p. 126.

31. Nevertheless, without explaining why, Maimuni concludes that Rashi's approach is the better one.

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