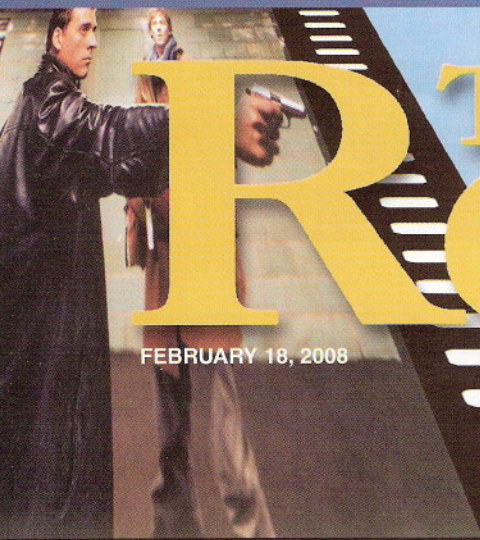


Israel Plugs into the Electric Car



FEBRUARY 18, 2008

# The Jerusalem Report

COVERING ISRAEL, THE MIDDLE EAST & THE JEWISH WORLD



## And the Award Goes to... Israeli Cinema



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PRIZE MATERIAL: A scene from the Israeli film 'Beaufort,' nominated for an Oscar



# Making the Cut

COURTESY: BAT COHEN COMMUNICATIONS

With one film competing for an Oscar, and many others garnering prestigious prizes over the last year, Israeli cinema has come of age

**Bernard Dichek**

**W**HEN THE ENVELOPE is opened on February 24 and a Hollywood star announces the winner of the Best Foreign Language Film, many Israelis will be holding their breath. But whether the Israeli film "Beaufort" — one of five contenders — wins an Oscar or not at this year's Academy Awards, the nomination itself is the latest coup in what has been a stunning year for Israeli cinema.

"Gobbling up prizes on the fest circuit, Israeli films have hit a new level of maturity," trumpeted a headline in *Variety*, the entertainment industry publication, in July 2007. By then, the year's list of prizewinning Israeli films already included: "The Band's Visit" (the Jury Coup de Coeur award at Cannes and the Grand Prix award at Tokyo); "Jellyfish" (the Camera d'Or award at Cannes); "My Father, My Lord" (Narrative Feature Award at

Tribeca); "Sweet Mud" (Grand Jury Prize at Sundance); "Noodle" (Special Jury Grand Prix at Montreal) and "Beaufort," a somber drama about a group of Israeli soldiers during the first Lebanon War that earned director Joseph Cedar the Silver Bear award for Best Director at the Berlin International Film Festival. Then came the Oscar nomination — the first time in 24 years that an Israeli film is competing in this category.

The surge into the international spotlight comes less than ten years after many thought Israeli cinema was on the verge of collapse. "The sensible thing would have been for me to quit," said Joseph Cedar, the director of "Beaufort," in a recent interview with *The Jerusalem Report*, recalling the five years he spent trying to raise money for his first feature film, "Time of Favor." "I was working as a researcher on a morning TV show for senior citizens and at other odd jobs, and there were

no takers."

Cedar's despair reflected the general gloom that hung over the entire industry in the late 1990s. Israel was producing less than five feature films a year — and even those few were shunned by the audiences. Veteran producers couldn't find backing and it was all but impossible for newcomers to break into the field. By 1998 the situation had hit rock bottom, and Israeli films took in less than one percent of local box office ticket sales.

But Cedar persisted and just before giving up on his filmmaking career, several sea changes reshaped the Israeli filmmaking scene.

First came the money. The infusion of new cash came from the Israel Cinema Law, explains Katriel Schory who heads the Israel Film Fund (IFF), one of several non-profit organizations that channel government funding into the film industry "The Israel Cinema Law made it clear that film was a legitimate child of





**LOCAL SUCCESS:** Israeli-made films like 'Beaufort,' 'Noodle' and 'Jellyfish' account for almost 14 percent of domestic box office sales, compared to less than 1 percent a decade ago

Israeli culture and for the first time gave Israeli filmmakers the breathing space they needed to grow and develop."

The law, which came into effect in 2001, committed the government to a steady flow of sizeable funds for the production of feature films, TV dramas and documentaries. In 2007, about 38 million shekels (\$10 million) was allocated for feature film production. The government also bolstered the industry by requiring commercial, cable and satellite TV station operators to funnel a portion of their revenues to feature film production. "By law their investment should reach about \$8 million a year, but many of the operators have found ways to evade paying their full portions, though the industry still ends up with a substantial \$5-6 million," says Schory.

The combined pot is further expanded by private investors who last year invested an estimated \$5 million. With the average cost of an Israeli film totaling about \$750,000, the industry now generates more than 20 films a year. By comparison, according to industry analysts, the average Hollywood film costs about \$30 million to make, meaning that all the feature films made in Israel in a year cost about half of a single major Hollywood movie.

**R**ECOGNITION OF THE NEED TO open up the industry to young filmmakers who had something new and often critical to say was the second major change to influence the film industry. "We decided to reach out to young filmmakers from diverse ethnic and geographic groups that weren't

being heard from," explains Schory.

Enter Joseph Cedar, an Orthodox Jew in his twenties with a film script that grew out of his personal struggle and a background that included being an active member of a religious youth movement that supported the Jewish settlements in the West Bank and Gaza. Cedar had studied film at NYU but had little profes-

**Unlike Hollywood, where producers are trying to duplicate a success story, most Israeli films reflect the screenwriter's personal vision**

— Joseph Cedar

sional experience when he approached the IFF for funding for "Time of Favor," a film about a youthful rebellion among the ranks of West Bank settlers. He didn't make a convincing first impression on the selection committee, recalls Schory. "But after much hesitation we sensed that because he seemed to 'feel the story in his bones,' he was worth taking a chance on."

The IFF granted Cedar \$457,000, which was enough to attract additional investors and produce "Time of Favor," a fast-paced film set in the West Bank that revolves around a scheme to blow up the Temple Mount.

Cedar, an enthusiast of mainstream

American drama films, worked hard on maintaining the film's suspense to the very end. "I wanted to overcome the way many Israeli films lost their dramatic tension in Act 3," he explains. The film drew large audiences and won the Israel Academy's Best Film Award.

"Time of Favor" went against stereotyped perceptions," says Yael Munk, who lectures on Israeli cinema at Tel Aviv University and at the Open University. "For the first time we got a glimpse of life inside a closed community that showed people in both a very human and critical way."

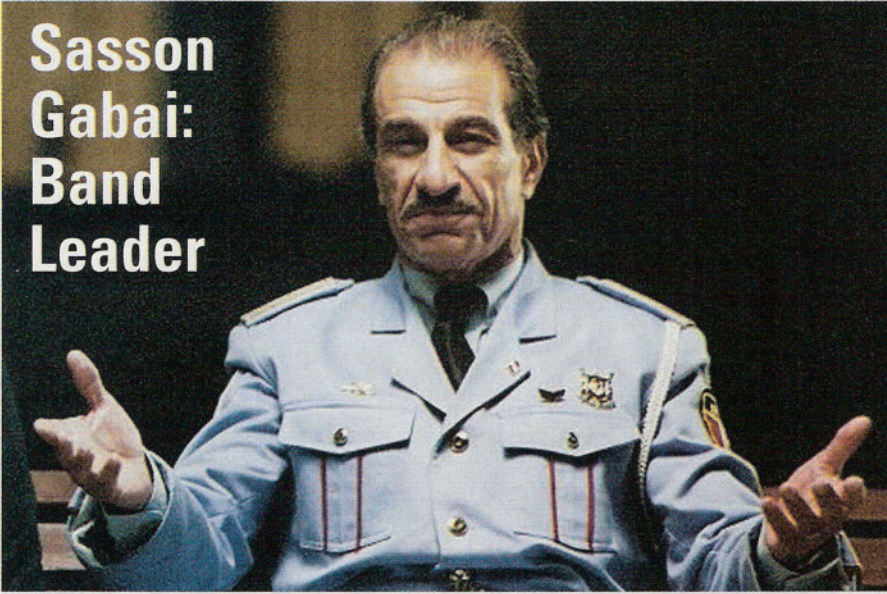
Munk believes that "Time of Favor" and a growing number of other soul-searching introspective films that emerged in the early 2000s struck a chord with audiences because they filled something that was missing in Israeli cinema during the previous decade.

"During the 1990s, filmmakers cut themselves off from audiences by avoiding the realities of life around them," says Munk. "The 1990s were a tumultuous period in Israel. There were the Oslo Accords, the Rabin assassination, terrorist bombings in cafés and buses. But films made in those days didn't touch any of those events." She believes that once filmmakers began to hold up a mirror to what was really happening around them they touched a nerve among moviegoers.

And audiences may also have stayed away from Israeli films because filmmakers seemed to feel it was their job to define the collective Israeli experience, suggests Etdar Keret, one of Israel's leading – and most widely translated – writers. "It was easy to tell an Israeli film in



## Sasson Gabai: Band Leader



COURTESY LATA COMMUNICATION

**S**ASSON GABAI, 60, IS AMONG ISRAEL'S BEST-KNOWN ACTORS AND IS CURRENTLY appearing in a theatrical adaptation of the film, "Rain Man." Although he has appeared in numerous Israeli, European and Hollywood films, including a part in Rambo III, he has his first leading film role in "The Band's Visit," in which he plays Tawfik, the conductor of the Egyptian police band that gets lost in a small Israeli town. The role earned him the European Academy Best Actor Award for 2007.

"As soon as I read the script I felt that I knew Tawfik instinctively," Gabai tells *The Report*. "He's someone of the old generation, who believes in traditions and who speaks in a very dignified, formal way. Suddenly the new generation wants to push him aside. He's a band leader but today there's different music. His position in the police force is threatened. He's lost his wife and son. He's carrying a heavy personal burden and he's having trouble keeping up with the world."

Gabai's voice saddens. "I guess for me Tawfik is a sad figure," he explains, "as really are all of the characters in the film. Even if the situations are funny, in the background of each character is something that has been turned upside down. The humor is the kind that derives from the authenticity of their situation, however painful it may be to them."

Gabai's own immigrant background helped him connect to the character. "He connects with me in many personal ways, from things that have happened to me in the past to how I today deal with my own age. I came to Israel from Baghdad as a young child and I experienced the difficulties that anyone who tries to fit into a new society experiences. I remember well how my parents struggled to be like everyone else."

At the Cannes Film Festival the film received a 15-minute long standing ovation. It has attracted large audiences in France and Israel. How does Gabai explain its appeal?

"So many films today are all about action and violence and then suddenly this film comes along about a group of naïve characters searching for love and communication," he says. "The film lets viewers be who they are, and I think it finds its way to their hearts because it reassures them that things like this can happen in life. And that these moments of connection between strangers still exist in the world."

Gabai hopes that other Israeli actors will break into foreign films. "Many of the roles I've played in international films were done by productions shot in Israel. There was a time when many foreign films were being made here to take advantage of the talent and scenery we have," he says. "I hope they start to come back here."

"Lately," he notes, "there has been a lot of interest by casting directors from the U.S. and Europe in Israeli actors. Many have conducted auditions over the Internet. For example, [Israeli actor] Yigal Naor got the part of Saddam Hussein for an HBO series after a worldwide audition and I also appeared in an episode."

*B.D.*

those days. There would always be a soldier, an Arab, a Holocaust survivor, a kibbutznik and a new immigrant," Keret quips to *The Report*. Audiences began to return to movie theaters, he says, the moment they no longer knew what to expect.

"Instead of trying to tell the story of the whole country, filmmakers started to say things like, 'I don't know what life in Israel is like' but I do know what life in my working-class Russian neighborhood is like," says Keret, who co-wrote the script for "Jellyfish," a film with three intertwining stories revolving around the Tel Aviv seaside.

During the early part of this past decade, while Cedar worked on his next film, "Campfire," which further explored themes relating to the Jewish religious-nationalist movement, other young and unknown filmmakers took engaging, often off-beat looks at life in neglected pockets of Israeli society. "Late Marriage," a film by Dover Kosashvili unveiled marriage mores in an immigrant Georgian community in a way that had a ringing sense of authenticity to it. "Broken Wings," written and directed by young film school graduate Nir Bergman, conveyed the mood and displacement of families who experienced the sudden loss of a loved one. And "The Syrian Bride" provided a rare portrayal of the reclusive Druze community in the Golan Heights.

Cedar believes that the free rein that Israeli filmmakers were given during this period led to the transformation of the industry. "Unlike Hollywood where producers are trying to duplicate a success story, most Israeli films reflect the screenwriter's personal vision and come from a very intimate and personal need to tell a story," he reflects.

**B**Y 2004 THE ATMOSPHERE IN THE Israeli film community had changed dramatically and was infused with excitement and dynamism. Six films made that year were seen by more than 100,000 viewers in Israel – the benchmark for box office success in the domestic market. Foreign distributors were calling.

As a result, Cedar was able to attract the large – by Israeli standards – budget of \$2.5 million that he needed to film "Beaufort," which is based on the best-selling book "If Heaven Exists" by Ron Leshem (published in Hebrew in 2005 and in English, by Random House, under the title "Beaufort: A Novel," in 2008).

"Beaufort" is the name of the strategic military fortress that the Israeli army held onto



during its 18-year occupation of southern Lebanon that began with the Israeli invasion in 1982. Rather than tell a heroic story of the capture of the fortress, Cedar, who himself served as a paratrooper during the war, chose to focus on the haunting ordeal of the soldiers stationed at the fortress during the war's final days. A war film with no battle scenes, "Beaufort" paints a stark picture of the Israeli army, showing soldiers in moments of fear and conveying their sense of abandonment.

"It took a lot of courage to make a film in which there is the suggestion that battles were being fought needlessly and that soldiers had become cannon fodder. Yet, as in his previous films, Cedar was not afraid to confront national myths," observes Munk.

"Beaufort" was one of the year's top box-office draws, selling more than 300,000 tickets and outdoing films like "Spider-Man 3." Cedar credits the film's success in part to the independence with which Israeli filmmakers are able to operate. "Because there's no central influence, what turns the Israeli industry into something very interesting is that it is full of surprises. Every year there are one or two films that just surprise you by being absolutely new in their idea or in their style," he says.

He mentions "Jellyfish" as an example of a film that doesn't fit into any recognizable film genre but "that could only be made in an industry like ours" that is open to films that lack big name movie stars. It may be hard to think of two films more unlike than "Beaufort" and "Jellyfish", but they are both critical of Israeli society, albeit in completely different ways, says Munk.

"Jellyfish" shows something about the difficulties involved with making a living in Israel and the poverty here — subjects not often looked at in films. The portrayal of the aloof divorced mother, Batya (the waitress protagonist played by Sarah Adler), is particularly incisive. She is seemingly preoccupied with helping others by working for a charitable organization yet she ignores her own daughter. This can be seen as a kind of metaphor for the way in which society is willing to help everyone except those closest to us."

"Jellyfish" was directed by Keret's actress wife Shira Gefen (her first attempt at directing), and produced by Amir Harel, a veteran Israeli producer who has garnered a reputation for being able to turn sacred cow-slaying projects into commercial successes. His productions include the 2003 films "James' Journey to Jerusalem," which deals with the plight of foreign workers, and "Walk on Water," the story of a Mossad agent's attempt to assassinate an

## Sarah Adler: From Strasbourg to Godard

**N**O HEADS TURN AS SARAH Adler walks into popular Café Tamar on a chilly Tel Aviv morning, proof perhaps that the alluring screen presence she evokes comes simply from portraying characters in a way that is uncannily true to the core. At 29, Adler has an enchanting wide-eyed smile that lets her pass for 19 as easily as 39.

The unglamorous café with its chipped formica tables is reminiscent of the down-and-out roles she has played in "Jellyfish" and two other Israeli films. Born in France, the granddaughter of a Polish Holocaust survivor who perfected a German accent in an attempt to pass as a gentile, she immigrated with her mother to Israel at age 10. After completing high school in Tel Aviv, she studied acting at the Lee Strasbourg School in Manhattan.

At 19, Adler starred in the American feature "Afraid of Everything" and then was chosen by legendary French director Jean-Luc Godard for a lead role in his film "Notre Musique." When Godard learned about her Israeli background, he rewrote her role to be that of an Israeli journalist and invited Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish to play alongside her as himself.

"With Godard it was not so much acting as being in a situation," Adler tells The Report. "Normally when you create a character you have to be secure with knowing who your character is, but in Godard's mind the more insecure you are the more you build something. The texts are like poetry, you wouldn't think of changing a word," says Adler, who is currently in rehearsal for a role in a new Israeli-French co-production set in Jerusalem during the first Gulf War.

In "Jellyfish," she plays the role of Batya, a waitress who loses her job, while looking after an abandoned child. Working on that film with director Etgar Keret and writer Shira Gefen was a very different experience than working with Godard, she notes.

"Shira and Etgar love acting and working closely with actors. It was a long rehearsal process before we got what we wanted."

Adler says that she was motivated to do "Jellyfish" as soon as she read the script. "I love Batya. She's someone who doesn't know who she is. She seems to be living in two parallel worlds. She is not synchronized with what is going on around her. She walks in a way that is odd, she will never volunteer to speak and when she does it is always too early or too late. She may be strange yet she seems almost normal. But in playing her you don't go all the way with her strangeness, it's very subtle."

For all of her experience acting in American and French films, Adler is not sorry to be working in Israel. "Something very exciting is happening here in such a small country," she says. "I feel lucky to be working with many amazing people. It's great to be able to be part of discovering all kinds of characters and making them come alive."

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COURTESY: LAMA FILMS / BARUCH FRIED



## Itay Tiran: 'Beaufort's' Anti-Hero



COURTESY BAT COHEN COMMUNICATIONS

**I**TAY TIRAN TAKES OFF HIS SUNGLASSES ON A SUNNY TEL AVIV AFTERNOON IN A deft way that brings to mind how a Washington Post reviewer described his work as Hamlet in an Israeli stage production that toured the U.S. "Tiran is always highly watchable...his physical ease is a match for princely entitlement." Yet it was exactly Tiran's Paul Newman-like blue eyes and deep baritone voice that kept him from getting the role he originally wanted in the film "Beaufort." "I auditioned for the part of the base commander but the director Joseph Cedar said he wanted an anti-hero, someone you wouldn't expect to rise in the ranks," says Tiran who himself has speedily advanced in the Israeli theater and film world, racking up numerous theater parts including his critically acclaimed rendition of Hamlet at the tender age of 23. Now 27, he has appeared in three Israeli films and in two more soon to be released.

In "Beaufort" he plays Koris, the outpost's medic who clashes with the commander. "Cedar and I discussed a number of parts but I was drawn to Koris," Tiran tells *The Report*, "because he is a kind of an outsider, sort of a prophetic figure, the conscience of the group. He's willing to break a taboo and suggest that soldiers are dying for no reason. He says things that the others don't want to hear and is resented for that."

In preparing for the role, Tiran spent a week at a military base in the Golan Heights on the border near Syria. "I remembered quite a bit from the stories of my brother Asaf who served as a medic in the first Lebanon War," he adds.

In his latest film, "The Debt," Tiran plays the role of Zvi, a Mossad agent who captures a Nazi surgeon in Germany in 1964. "One thing that interested me about the character of Zvi, who is a very restrained person, was how at a psychological level, no matter how controlled a person can be there is a point at which all hell breaks loose," says Tiran. "The Nazi doctor breaks those walls down in Zvi when he tells him that the reason the Jews didn't resist was because each was only interested in saving himself. As a member of the third generation – I grew up listening to the stories of my grandmother who survived Auschwitz – the feeling that there was a need to make up for what her generation hadn't been able to do reverberates in me. The clenched fist I used on the doctor in that scene was in a sense the fist of my grandmother."

Has Tiran set his sights on Hollywood?

"I want to stretch the limits of what I can do as an actor and the opportunity is here for me. I've just completed two more films, another one about Lebanon and a film done in Yiddish. I think they are the best things I've done so far.

"Maybe someday I'd like to work in productions with bigger budgets," he says, "but right now I want to be part of what is happening here. We have all the ingredients for stories here that artists in other countries can only dream about. When it comes to ideas for films, Israel is like a rich oilfield."

B.D.

aging Nazi war criminal. "Walk on Water" was the highest grossing Israeli film to date, taking in more than \$7 million at the box office worldwide.

"Although 'Walk on Water' is often categorized as either a Mossad suspense film or cited for its Holocaust-related themes, Harel recalls that it was another theme that caught his attention when he looked at the script. "What interested me was what happens when a real macho Israeli guy meets up with a homosexual. That for me was an important aspect of the film, providing social commentary on how a society deals with its minorities.

"What I think is important in a film script is that it has a unique voice, that you get the feeling that you haven't seen this before," says Harel, pointing out that it was exactly these qualities that the jury at Cannes liked about "Jellyfish." "The film showed them something that they hadn't encountered before. It's also a film with a lot of charm and a special atmosphere that uses surrealistic elements."

**S**HARING THE LIMELIGHT WITH "Jellyfish" at Cannes was another film by a first-time director, Eran Kolirin. "The Band's Visit" opens with a brief prologue that almost sounds like a disclaimer: "Once, not long ago, a small Egyptian police band got lost in Israel... Not many people remember this: It wasn't that important." Maintaining the self-effacement and irony throughout the film, Kolirin creates a bittersweet comedy about "a lost band in a lost town." The film was warmly received at the Cannes Festival where the audience responded with an unprecedented 15-minute standing ovation.

Sasson Gabai's restrained depiction of the dignified Egyptian orchestra leader [see box] earned him the European Academy Best Actor Award and the film swept up the Ophir (the Israeli Academy Awards), including the Best Picture award. Ordinarily that would have made it Israel's representative at the American Academy Awards. Ironically though, in a manner similar to the misfortunes that befall the film's lost characters, "The Band's Visit" was disqualified from the Foreign Film category because more than half of the dialogue is in English. The producers tried unsuccessfully to convince the U.S. Academy Award officials that the English spoken "wasn't really English" but rather an authentic portrayal of how Hebrew speakers and Arabic speakers miscommunicate, while using a poorly spoken third language. The officials weren't convinced.

Kolirin finds it especially ironic that it was



the use of language that tripped up the film. "We spent a lot of time working on the dialogue. Most of the sentences aren't complete and sometimes the spaces in between the words and the mistakes made are more important than the words themselves," he says.

Recalling his inspiration for the script, Kolirin, 33, notes that when he was growing up, there was only one TV station in Israel. He and his family would spend Friday afternoons watching Egyptian-made melodramas, the staple programming for that weekly slot intended for Israel's Arab citizens.

The growth of Israel's TV industry has also had a major impact on the film industry. Industry observers point out that as late as 1991 the country's entire output of original TV drama programming amounted to just 30 hours a year. With the arrival of commercial television, as well as with cable and satellite programming, the current level now stands at about 300 hours. The expanded increase in dramas has enabled an entire generation of new performers, writers, camera, sound, editing and other craftspeople to gain valuable experience.

The country's burgeoning TV commercial

industry, which now generates about 300 original ads a year, has also played a role. It was through this conduit that director Ayelet Menahami honed the skills that led her to develop "Noodle," a comedy that won the Special Jury Grand Prix at the Montreal World Film Festival.

"Sweet Mud" and "My Father, My Lord," two other films that have won major awards in the past year, draw attention to flaws in closed societies. "Sweet Mud" scathingly debunks romantic myths about kibbutz life. "My Father, My Lord," conceived by David Volach, who was excommunicated by his ultra-Orthodox family when he adopted a secular lifestyle, takes an unsparing look at the life of an ultra-Orthodox Jerusalem family.

The Oscar nomination for Beaufort comes at an important juncture. With the Israel Film Law under review by the Knesset, many in the local film industry fear that the entire success story could collapse like a house of cards, if the government cuts its support.

The local industry also continues to be threatened by the 200 new Hollywood and international films that inundate Israeli movie

screens each year. Israeli films, which account for only about 8 percent of the locally shown movies, now capture 13-14 percent of domestic box office ticket sales. This is both an all-time high and the cornerstone on which the entire industry is based.

"So long as we are able to produce a wide variety of films we will be able to enhance quality," says Schory of the IFF. "High-quality films bring in audiences here and abroad and create excitement in the industry, encourage private investors and draw international co-productions, which now account for 40 percent of the money invested in film productions."

At the same time, it's possible that the best is yet to come. Israeli films have not yet gained wide distribution in U.S. movie theaters. Ali Jaafar, a London-based writer for Variety, tells The Report that it takes only one break-out film for the U.S. market to become interested in the entire backlog of a country's films. "That was the case for Korean and Latin American films, which gained a large following in recent years after a single big hit."

For Israel, suggests Jaafar, "Beaufort" could be that film. ●

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