

PARASHAT HASHAVUA

PARASHAT YITRO

Studies in *Parashat Yitro*
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I. From Miraculous Governance to Governance by way of words¹

God's first words to Moshe after the Israelites arrive at Mount Sinai describe and explain the comprehensive and revolutionary change in God's governance of Israel – transition from miraculous governance to governance by way of words.

By miraculous governance we refer to the way that God revealed Himself during the exodus from Egypt – with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, with signs and wonders. The staff in Moshe's hand, like the pillar of fire and cloud that went before the people, are the clearest expressions of this governance.

God's miraculous governance of Israel revealed itself in the plagues that struck Egypt, and especially in the plague of the firstborn, and it appeared again in the pillar of fire and cloud at the splitting of the Yam Suf. The water, the manna, and the quails were the products of this miraculous governance. It revealed itself for the last time in Israel's victory over Amalek through the "hand" that held the staff of God – "The hand upon the throne of the Lord: the Lord will have war with Amalek from generation to generation" (*Shemot* 17:16). The name that Moshe bestowed upon the altar was "The Lord is my miracle" – emphasizing God's miraculous governance on the eve of its disappearance.²

This was also the final appearance of the staff in Moshe's hand (or anywhere else) in the book of *Shemot*!

Miraculous governance is connected by its very essence to the idea of trial and testing.³ God tests Israel, and they test Him. We find this explicitly in the passage relating to the manna – "that I may test them, whether they will walk in My law or not" (16:4) – and in the story of Refidim, in which water is made to come out of the rock – "And the name of the place was called Massa and Meriva, because of the striving of the children of Israel, and because they tested the Lord, saying, Is the Lord among us, or not?" (17:7).

Miraculous governance is associated with an absence of trust. When the people see a miracle, they are impressed and excited, but when there is no food or water and the miracle disappears, they cry and complain. This is also what happens in the war against Amalek – "And it came to pass, when Moshe held up his hand, that Israel prevailed; and when he let down his hand, Amalek prevailed" (17:11).⁴

This is the way a young child behaves. When he sees his father and mother, he is all smiles, but when he sees them leaving, he bursts out in bitter tears. The same is true of a young nation that lives from minute to minute, by way of miraculous and trying governance.

The principle of recompense for proper conduct is explained in the context of the miraculous governance reflected in the sweetening of the water in Mara:

There He made for them a statute and an ordinance,⁵ and there He tested them; and He said "If you will diligently hearken to the voice of the Lord your God, and will do that which is right in His eyes, and will give ear to His commandments, and keep all His statutes, I will put none of the diseases upon you, which I have put upon the Egyptians; for I am the Lord who heals you. (15:25-26)

God as healer instructs Moshe how to heal the bitter waters by way of a tree that is thrown into them. He provides the Israelites with the meat of the quails to eat in the evening and with manna with which to satiate themselves in the morning (see *Shemot* 16:8), and He instructs Moshe to extract water from the rock by hitting the rock with his staff. But these miracles depend on behavior. The Israelites are commanded not to leave over from the manna to the morning, but they are also commanded to leave over from the manna received on Friday for Shabbat; they may not go out to collect manna on Shabbat. On a weekday, if someone left over manna until the morning, it would become wormy, but on Shabbat, no manna fell, and the leftover manna from the day before "did not rot, neither was there any worm therein" (16:24). This is the medical governance of miracles and testing. Sin leads to an immediate medical result in the material realm, and so does listening to the healer – that is, God.

Entirely different is the principle of recompense in the context of governance by way of speech, which does not depend on miracles or on testing. Listening to the voice of God will lead to the sanctification of the people as "a kingdom of priests and a holy nation" (19:6), a result that reflects a permanent and unconditional state. The obligation to listen to and keep God's law on the level of "words" is not based on the provision of sweet water and food that does not spoil as long as the people are listening to God. Rather, it is a fixed and eternal moral obligation, whether or not we have food to eat, and even if the food is spoiled and the people are hungry. This is the stage of the spiritual maturation of the people who left Egypt; it is the foundation of the Torah's *mitzvot* from Sinai. Miraculous and testing governance is temporary – a stage in growing up – while governance by way of words is fixed and forever.

The change from miraculous governance to governance by way of words is formulated as follows:

And they departed from Refidim and came to the wilderness of Sinai... and the Lord called to him out of the mountain, saying...

"You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles' wings, and brought you to Myself. Now therefore, if you will hearken to My voice indeed, and keep My covenant,

¹ From *Mikra'ot Le-Farashat Yitro*, pp. 124-127.

² See my father's article, "*Hashem Nisi*," in *Eretz Moriya – Pirkei Mikra Ve-Lashon* (Alon Shevut, 5766), pp. 89-105.

³ See Rambam, *Guide of the Perplexed* 3:24.

⁴ See the words of Chazal in the Mishna, *Rosh Hashana*, chap. 3; and compare to *Mekhilta*, end of *Beshalach*.

⁵ See the Ramban's commentary to this verse.

then you shall be (*ve-heyitem*) My own treasure from among all peoples; for all the earth is Mine;

[that is to say,] and you shall be (*ve-atem tehiyu*) to Me a kingdom of priests, and a holy nation.

These are the words which you shall speak to the children of Israel." (19:2-6)

The words, "You have seen what I **did** to the Egyptians," concisely summarize miraculous governance with a mighty hand, through the plagues of Egypt and on the journey to Sinai, which is Chorev, "the mountain of God": "And I brought you to Myself."

The transition in the words, "now therefore," creates a new situation – listening to the voice of God involves keeping His covenant, the covenant of the Torah from Sinai, which is the permanent manner of God's governance of Israel, for all time.

The letter *vav* in the words *ve-heyitem*, "then you shall be," and *ve-atem*, "and you shall be," denotes a result ("if – then"), like the *vav* of contrast,⁶ and the result is explained by way of the parallelism: "a treasure from among all peoples" (*segula mikol ha-amim*) is "a kingdom of priests and a holy nation."

The expression *am segula* means "chosen people," like a precious piece of jewelry. Rashi explains: "*Segula* means a cherished treasure, as in the verse, 'and treasures (*u-segulat*) of kings' (*Kohelet* 2:8) – costly vessels and precious stones that the kings store." The Ibn Ezra writes that it refers to "something distinguished and desired, nothing else like it to be found." And the Ramban writes: "And the king would not hand it over to anyone else." The Ramban adds another explanation, relating to devotion; *ve-heyitem li segula* implies that the relation is like that of a king who is devoted to his special ornament. R. Yehuda Ha-Levi explains similarly in his *Kuzari*.⁷

The summation – "These are the **words** which you shall speak to the children of Israel" – leads directly to the Ten Commandments, the heading of which: "And God spoke all these **words**, saying." Indeed, the book of *Devarim*, which opens with, "These are the **words** that Moshe spoke to all Israel..." and sets as its foundation the revelation at Mount Sinai (chap. 4) and the Ten Commandments (chap. 5), is based entirely on the governance of words.

A true prophet for all generations is tested by the words that he utters (*Devarim* 18:18-22), and not by signs and wonders that he performs, because "a sign or a wonder" can exist in an idolatrous setting. When an idolatrous prophet rises and performs a "sign or a wonder" for idolatry – "You shall not hearken to the words of that prophet, or to that dreamer of dreams; for the Lord your God is testing you, to know whether you do love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul" (13:2-4). The desire to return to miraculous and trying governance, to signs and wonders, is liable to lead to idolatry. God will test us through the fact that the prophet will succeed in performing a "sign or wonder," and yet it will be forbidden to listen to him.

The Rambam formulates this principle as follows:

The Jews did not believe in Moshe, our teacher, because of the wonders that he performed. Whenever anyone's belief is based on wonders, [the commitment of] his heart has shortcomings, because it is possible to perform a wonder through magic or sorcery.

All the wonders performed by Moshe in the desert were not intended to serve as proof [of the legitimacy] of his prophecy, but rather were performed for a purpose. It was necessary to drown the Egyptians, so he split the sea and sank them in it. We needed food, so he provided us with manna. We were thirsty, so he split the rock [providing us with water]. Korach's band mutinied against him, so the earth swallowed them up. The same applies to the other wonders.

What is the source of our belief in him? The [revelation] at Mount Sinai. Our eyes saw, and not a stranger's. Our ears heard, and not another's. There was fire, thunder, and lightning. He entered the thick clouds; the Voice spoke to him and we heard, "Moshe, Moshe, go tell them the following."

Thus, it is stated, "Face to face, God spoke to you" (*Devarim* 5:4) and it is stated, "God did not make this covenant with our fathers, [but with us, who are all here alive today]" (*Devarim* 5:3).

How is it known that the [revelation] at Mount Sinai alone is proof of the truth of Moshe's prophecy that leaves no shortcoming? It is stated, "Behold, I will come to you in a thick cloud, so that the people will hear Me speaking to you, [so that] they will believe in you forever" (*Shemot* 19:9). It appears that before this happened, they did not believe in him with a faith that would last forever, but rather with a faith that allowed for suspicions and doubts. (*Hilkhot Yesodei Ha-Torah* 8:1)

II. Fear vs. Fear By choice⁸

The Torah notes two objectives of the awe inspiring atmosphere at the time of the revelation at Mount Sinai – the thunder and the lightning and the strong blast of the shofar, along with fire and smoke and great fear. The first is stated explicitly at the outset, while the second is hidden in the conclusion. Both of them serve as foundations for the Torah.

The assembly begins not with the first set of God's words at Mount Sinai ("You have seen" [*Shemot* 19:4]), the gist of which is His selection of Israel as His treasured nation, "a kingdom of priests and a holy nation." Rather, it begins with the second set of God's words, which explicitly define the objective of the entire revelation:

Lo, I come to you in a thick cloud, that the people may hear when I speak with you, and may also believe you forever. (19:9)

This hearing – "that the people may hear when I speak with you" – is intended to forestall claims brought against Moshe, as if the commandments and statutes were his personal creation and as if he were the lawmaker and source of authority, such that anyone who had any antipathy for Moshe (as we hear about in the book of *Bamidbar*) would not see himself bound by the covenant of the Torah. Similarly, in the absence of this personal "hearing," those who would later think that prophets greater than Moshe arose after him (such as the Christians and the Moslems) would think that the validity of the covenant of Sinai already lapsed. Therefore, the Rambam (in *Hilkhot Yesodei Ha-Torah* 8 and 10) bases belief in the Torah on the foundation of "Our eyes saw, and not a stranger's; our ears heard, and not another's" (as we saw in our discussion of the transition from miraculous governance to governance by words). This grounds the matter for future generations much more than any sign or wonder, and even more than any prophecy. By virtue of this faith, Jews remained true to their religion even in the most difficult periods of history.

⁶ See my father's explanation in *Eretz Ha-Moriya – Pirkei Mikra Ve-Lashon*, pp. 208-213.

⁷ *Kuzari* 1:27ff.

⁸ From *Mikra'ot Le-Farashat Yitro*, pp. 135-138.

The second objective is connected to great fear and terror. One might argue that it was this goal of the revelation that led the talmudic Sages to conclude that "the Holy One, blessed be He, overturned the mountain upon them like an [inverted] cask, and said to them: If you accept the Torah, it is well; if not, there shall be your burial" (*Shabbat* 88a). However, this conclusion cannot be correct – not in understanding the Torah, nor in understanding the talmudic passage, for several reasons:

1. If the people of Israel entered into the covenant and received the Torah consensually and of their own free will – "All that the Lord has spoken we shall do" (19:8); "All that the Lord has spoken we will do and obey" (24:7) – it is a meaningful covenant. If, however, they reacted out of a fear of death, this is not a covenant at all.

2. Indeed, this is exactly what the aforementioned talmudic passage says: "From here there is a strong protest against the Torah," and as Rashi explains (ad loc.): "For if [God] summons them to court, [asking], 'Why did you not fulfill what you accepted upon yourselves?' they have an answer – that they accepted it under duress!" And the *gemara* answers: "Yet even so, they re-accepted it in the days of Achashverosh" – that is to say, of their own free will. It is clear from this that the overturning of the mountain like an inverted cask in the passage is an objection and not the conclusion.

3. Every person is afraid to die; there would have been no need for the special revelation at Mount Sinai to fill the people's hearts with fear of death. A severe earthquake and other calamities, such as plague, war, thirst, and hunger, all suffice to impose fear of death. Does the Creator and Giver of the Torah really want us to serve Him as the "Angel of Death"?

A simple reading of the verses that follow the Ten Commandments (both in *Shemot* and in *Devarim*) clearly reveals the supreme goal of the great terror. When all the people experienced the thunder and the lightning and the great fire and the mountain smoking, they recoiled and retreated: "And when the people saw it, they trembled and stood afar off. And they said to Moshe, 'Speak you with us, and we will hear; but let not God speak with us, lest we die'" (20:14-15). As the Sages formulated it: "Their souls left them" (*Shabbat* 88b).

Moshe's answer contains what appears to be an internal contradiction, a paradox: "And Moshe said to the people, 'Fear not; for God is come to test you, and that His fear may be before you, that you sin not'" (20:16). Does God want them to fear Him or not? Why "Fear not," if the goal of the great terror is "that His fear may be before you, that you sin not"?

Clearly, we are dealing with two different meanings of the fear of God – the fear of death, on the one hand, as opposed to fear that involves free choice, on the other. Moshe tells the people: "Fear not" that you will die, because that is not the fitting way to stand before God. Rather, God comes to elevate you⁹ – "and that His fear [by free choice] may be before you, that you sin not."

This is a wondrous innovation in the level of man, for which it was worthy to bring about the unique event of the revelation at Mount Sinai – the transformation of the base, natural fear of man by virtue of his being a mortal, his fear of death, into fear by free choice. As *Chazal* put it: "Everything is in the hands of heaven, except for the fear of heaven" (*Berakhot* 33b).

It may indeed be asked: When did God rescind His control of the fear of heaven? And isn't man free by the nature of his creation (as the Rambam writes in *Hilkhot Teshuva*, chap. 5)? Doesn't every person fear death by his very nature? Although every person is free by nature, at the revelation at Mount Sinai, a higher degree of free will was revealed among the people of Israel, based on which the Torah could be fulfilled in the world at the highest level, so that the people of Israel would worship God not out of the base fear of death, but out of the fear of His majesty, which is a free choice. From here it follows that God brought the people of Israel to the great terror experienced at the revelation at Sinai in order to refine that fear and liberate it from the fear of death!

This understanding of the purpose of the revelation, which is only hinted to in the words of Moshe (in *Shemot*, after the Ten Commandments), is clear and explicit in the words of the people to Moshe, cited by Moshe in the book of *Devarim* (5:19-23, after the Ten Commandments):

And it came to pass, when you heard the voice out of the midst of the darkness, while the mountain did burn with fire, that you came near to me, even all the heads of your tribes and your elders; and you said, "Behold, the Lord our God has shown us His glory and His greatness, and we have heard His voice out of the midst of the fire; we have seen this day that God speaks with man, and he lives."

In other words, until now we were on the level of mortal men; we knew that any encounter with God meant death and that his voice could not be heard in the life of this world. But now we have discovered that God came and spoke with us out of the fire so that we might live while He speaks! However, we have remained mortals, and we cannot free ourselves entirely of the fear of death, to be like Moshe or like the angels:

"Now therefore why should we die? For this great fire will consume us; if we hear the voice of the Lord our God any more, then we shall die. For who is there of all flesh, that has heard the voice of the living God speaking out of the midst of the fire, as we have, and lived?"

This reversal of the words of the elders from life to death and from death to life indicates that they were standing on the border between the two. As *Chazal* formulated this idea: "At every word which went forth from the mouth of the Holy One, blessed be He, the souls of Israel departed... He brought down the dew with which He will resurrect the dead and revived them" (*Shabbat* 88b). God brought them to this point so that they would know that God came to revive them with His words and so that they would be liberated from the fear of death. However, they could not be completely liberated from it, and so they asked that Moshe, who was completely liberated from the fear of death, should fully realize this elevated level and continue to hear the word of God on their behalf.

In this way, the two objectives of the revelation at Mount Sinai became joined – the confirmation of Moshe's mission, which would allow the continuation of the giving of the Torah through him, and the partial and limited liberation from the fear of death, with the recognition that a human can hear the voice of God and yet live, this being the ultimate goal of the revelation of God's word in this world – "for our good always, that He might preserve us alive, as it is at this day" (*Devarim* 6:24).

The result of these words is explicit in God's response:

⁹ As in, "Lift up an ensign (*nes*)" (*Yeshayahu* 62:10), as Rashi explains there.

And the Lord heard the voice of your words, when you spoke to me; and the Lord said to me, "I have heard the voice of the words of this people, which they have spoken to you; they have well said all that they have spoken. O that they had such a heart as this always, to fear Me, and keep all My commandments, that it might be well with them, and with their children forever!" (Devarim 5:24-25)

Let us listen attentively. God says: "O that they..." like a father whose children have grown up and he says: "O that shall always follow the good path!" Indeed, the Ramban writes here in his commentary: "Scripture says this because man is given the choice to act righteously or to act evilly, and everything is in the hands of heaven except for the fear of heaven, and this is the language of human beings." But we must add to the Ramban's words that this is the clear result of the (partial and limited) liberation from the fear of death. As long as a person serves God out of the fear of death, there is no fear by free choice, and there is no point in the revelation at Mount Sinai for the giving of the Torah (as it will be kept out of compulsion, and this is "a strong protest against the Torah," making punishment impossible).¹⁰ The moment that God refined His people on the border between life and death and they understood that God did not come to kill them, but rather to revive them with His word, this was enough to allow them to free the fear of God on their faces, to fear by free choice. In this way, God removed from His hand the absolute control over the fear of death that was implanted in them as mortals, and He therefore must say: "O that they had such a heart as this always, to fear Me." This free fear should also bring the people of Israel to the recognition that God's commandments were given to us not for His benefit, but for our own good, and to allow us to live in the good land that God gives us.

Thus, the revelation at Mount Sinai was a revelation of liberation, a continuation and climax of the exodus from Egypt. The exodus from Egypt involved liberation from Pharaoh (from the bondage of other nations), whereas the revelation opened the door of liberation from the Angel of Death, to the service of God out of the fear of His majesty: "Read not 'engraved' (*charut*) on the tablets, but rather freedom (*cherut*) on the tablets" (*Eiruv* 54a)

III. The Ten Commandments - Twelve Prohibitions¹¹

"The Ten Things"

The numerical pattern of the ten *devarim*, the "ten things" (what we commonly call the Ten Commandments), is explicitly mentioned in the Torah in three places:

And He wrote upon the tables the words of the covenant, the ten words. (*Shemot* 34:28, regarding the second set of tablets)

And He declared to you His covenant, which He commanded you to perform, even the ten words; and He wrote them upon two tablets of stone. (*Devarim* 4:13, regarding the first set of tablets)

And He wrote on the tablets according to the first writing the ten words, which the Lord spoke to you in the mount out of the midst of the fire in the days of assembly...

(*Devarim* 10:4, regarding the second set of tablets, like the first set).

But how many prohibitions are there in the ten words?

It is mistakenly thought that there are seven prohibitions. This is due to the flawed shape of the tablets that are found above many Torah arks, which cut off God's words and force them into two-word formats ("You shall not have" – what?; "You shall not take" – what?; "Remember" – what?; "Honor" – what?)

In truth, there are six prohibitions on the first tablet, corresponding to six prohibitions on the second tablet. They are arranged in a simple structure, as can be seen below:

| | |
|---|--|
| 1. You shall have no other gods before Me. | 7. You shall not murder. |
| 2. You shall not make to you a graven image, nor any manner of likeness, of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. | 8. You shall not commit adultery. |
| 3. You shall not bow down to them. | 9. You shall not steal. |
| 4. And you shall not serve them. | 10. You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor. |
| 5. You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain. | 11. You shall not covet your neighbor's house. |
| 6. In it you shall not do any manner of work, you, nor your son, nor your daughter, nor you man-servant, nor your maid-servant, nor your cattle, nor your stranger that is within your gates. | You shall not covet your neighbor's wife, nor his man-servant, nor his maid-servant, nor his ox, nor his ass, nor any thing that is your neighbor's. |

In four places in the Torah we find a structure of twelve that is divided into two – six against six. Three of these are well known – the shewbread, the garments of the High Priest, and the blessings and curses at Mount Gerizim and Mount Eival – whereas this instance in the Ten Commandments is hardly known at all. It would appear that the pattern of ten "commandments" forces itself into our consciousness to the degree that we no longer consider the fundamental pattern.

The very fact that there are two numerical patterns in the same chapter should not surprise us. The "ten statements" used in *Bereishit* 1 to create the world, however we count the tenth one, fit into six days, which are also subject to the seal of the seventh day (Shabbat). Similarly, the twelve prohibitions fit into the Ten Commandments. Before we try to clarify why twelve prohibitions were made to fit into the Ten Commandments, we must first examine the "mystery of twelve." What are the special virtues of this numerical pattern?

The Mystery of Twelve

Both 6 and 12 are numbers that divide very efficiently (into 2 and 3, and regarding 12, also into 4 and 6). In addition, a month is approximately 30 days, and twelve lunar months are approximately a solar year, so these numbers were also given astronomical significance. This is the basis for the hours of the day (2 x 12), the division of a circle into 360 degrees, and also the yearly calendars developed by the Egyptians, the Sumerians, and the Babylonians, even before the period of the patriarchs.

¹⁰ Unless "overturning the mountain upon them like a cask" was meant to split the mountain like a cask, so that they could see the opening of freedom on the tablets.

¹¹ Synopsis of *Mikra'ot Le-Farashat Yitro*, p. 202ff.

The various yearly calendars known to us, with all the differences between them, all have 12 months, and they are divided into two sets of six months (winter and summer). In the calendar that is familiar to us, each set begins with a month of holidays – Tishrei and Nissan. These are considered two New Years in both the Torah and in the Mishna (*Rosh Hashana* 1:1), even though the holidays of the seventh month are primarily holidays that mark a conclusion (Yom Kippur, *Assif*), and it is only from the conclusion that a new beginning emerges.

Similarly, the twelve tribes of Israel are arranged, not by chance, in a number adapted to the pattern of perfect and complete multiplicity in nature and in the human mind.

This idea is stated explicitly in connection with Eliyahu's altar on Mount Carmel:

And Eliyahu took twelve stones, according to the number of the tribes of the sons of Yaakov, unto whom the word of the Lord came, saying, "Israel shall be your name." (I *Melakhim* 18:31)

Twelve stones made up one whole altar, just as the twelve tribes of the sons of Yaakov created together a whole Israel.

The pattern of twelve that divides into two sets of six is found four times in the Torah:

1. Regarding the shewbread in the *Mishkan*, there were twelve loaves, divided into two sets of six (*Vayikra* 24:5-6).

2. Regarding the garments of the High Priest: The breastplate had twelve stones in a single array (*Shemot* 28:17-21), whereas on the onyx stones that were placed on the shoulder pieces of the *efod* were inscribed the names of the children of Israel, six names on each stone (*Shemot* 28:9-10).

3. In the covenant relating to the Torah in *Eretz Yisrael*, the covenant of Mount Gerizim and Mount Eival, there are twelve verses beginning with the word "cursed," in a single array, with no divisions, and after each of them the people would respond with "Amen" (*Devarim* 27:15-26). For the twelve curses, representatives of the twelve tribes of Israel were divided into two groups of six: six stood for the blessings on Mount Gerizim, while six stood for the curses on Mount Eival (*Devarim* 27:12-13). *Chazal* learned from this division that twelve verses beginning with the word "blessed" were also recited there, corresponding to the twelve verses beginning with the word "cursed" that are explicit in the Torah (*Sota* 7:5).

4. In parallel fashion but with a difference, we find also in the covenant at Sinai, "and twelve pillars, according to the twelve tribes of Israel," in a single array, with no divisions (*Shemot* 24:4). The prohibitions in the Ten Commandments are divided into two groups of six, in a way that makes it easy to see the relationship between them, both the parallels and especially the differences – six "between you" (the people of Israel) and "the Lord your God," and six "between you" and "your neighbor," other humans.

This difference between the two tablets is also evident in the fact that the first five commandments (which include six prohibitions) are accompanied by extensive explanations and a whole system of recompense, whereas the last five commandments consist solely of an absolute and comprehensive imperative. There are no explanations, no additions, no punishments – only the absolute force of the prohibitions themselves:

You shall not murder! You shall not commit adultery! You shall not steal! You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor! You shall not covet your neighbor's house! You shall not covet your neighbor's wife... nor any thing that is your neighbor's!

Translated by David Strauss

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