LOSS AND BEREAVEMENT AMONG ISRAEL’S MUSLIMS: ACCEPTANCE OF GOD’S WILL, GRIEF, AND THE RELATIONSHIP TO THE DECEASED*

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ABSTRACT

The manner in which people manage their grief and mourning for loved ones who have died is a window into a culture and people. The beliefs and practices of Muslim citizens in Israel stem from a cultural-religious worldview that organizes the public and private experience of loss and bereavement. Prolonged public expression of grief and ritualized mourning are discouraged in Islamic practice which places great value on the acceptance of God’s or Allah’s will with restraint and understanding. The distinction between the return to functioning following loss and the management of memories and attachments to the deceased are fundamental to the Two Track Model of Bereavement (Rubin, 1999). The distinction is also relevant to the analysis of Israeli Muslims’ responses to loss. Following an introduction to Islamic attitudes to death and loss, a number of basic elements of response to loss are considered. The Islamic emphasis on acceptance and a return to functioning is clear cut. The myriad ways in which the memory of the deceased and the relationship to him or her is bound up with the life lived following death is an area that leaves significant room for individual variation.

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In a world characterized by significant cultural, economic, and military tensions, many thinkers have noted a fault line or sphere of tension that divides Western and Islamic cultures and civilizations (Huntington, 1996; Lewis, 2002). In the United States, this perspective has become more pronounced in the wake of September 11 and the recent war in Iraq. Without doubt, there are many important ways in which Western and Islamic societies differ. For example, these societies differ in their degree of emphasis upon individualist versus collectivist values, their championing of traditional versus “modernist” values, and their degree of tolerance for diversity and pluralism (Lewis, 2002; Sacks, 2002). In trying to understand a culture and its ways of structuring the world, much can be learned from addressing the manner in which intimate human relationships are ordered and the manner in which human crises are channeled. Significantly, both Western and Islamic societies recognize the significance and worth of the individual person, and have elaborate and detailed ways to deal with the impact that the death of that person has on those left behind.

In Israel, a small country whose Jewish majority co-exists with a sizable Muslim minority (and which is physically located within the Islamic geographic sphere of influence), there is insufficient understanding of the Muslim approach to loss and what it involves. The ability of cultures to live side-by-side without having access to the keys to understanding deeply rooted approaches to human experience serves to maintain estrangement and to hamper the development of respectful informed relationships. As true as this may be on the local level, it also characterizes much of how the international Western communities seek to co-exist, but still do not understand, significant features of their Islamic counterparts’ cultural worldview. While it is quite likely that Western approaches to loss are not well understood in many Islamic countries, there is a sizable literature available in the social sciences on Western approaches to loss. The growth in published material on loss and bereavement of the West has yet to see significant literature addressing Islamic loss.

The manner in which people manage their losses and how they deal with grief and mourning for loved ones who have died is a particularly helpful window into a culture and people. When focused on losses that are part of everyday life (and here the focus is on losses that are not part of the society’s approach to conflict, sacrifice, or religious duty), we can learn a lot about a culture and about our shared humanity. As the management of grief and bereavement are universal tasks confronting all persons, fuller understanding of Islamic approaches to handling loss has the ability to stress our similarities without minimizing or overlooking our differences. Ultimately, we have a window into the nexus of human relationships that comes by learning about the society’s religious and cultural belief system regarding how to manage grief and bereavement.

In the present article, we examine the philosophy of the bereavement responses of Muslims in Israel together with aspects of their beliefs regarding death and loss. Our goal in this article is to acquaint the reader with the beliefs of Muslim
citizens in Israel and to link them to the worldview they represent. In so doing, we hope to demystify the social, cultural, and religious framework which organizes loss in this population and to provide an introduction into the general beliefs regarding loss. While the attitudes here are most representative for the Muslim minority in Israel, they are part and parcel of the general Islamic approach to loss.

Given the shared Islamic overview, this article begins with an introduction to important features of the religious and cultural traditions and practices of Muslims with regard to loss and bereavement. The information we present served us as the basis for an empirical study on aspects of Israeli Muslims’ attitudes to loss and bereavement being prepared for publication (Yasien-Esmael, 2000). In the present article, we include material from texts reviewed by the authors in Arabic, Hebrew, and English. The religious texts were checked in discussions with various Muslim religious leaders in the north and center of Israel. While it is possible to set forth a number of recognized features of approaches to death, loss, and bereavement among Muslim in Israel, we do not mean to assert that there is a monolithic and uniform set of beliefs and practices. The Muslim citizens of Israel span a wide range of subcultures, as well as educational, socioeconomic, rural, and urban locales that shade their practice and understanding of the religious tradition. Their interpretation as well as degree of adherence to religious doctrine varies as well. As a dynamic linguistic, religious, and cultural minority within the state of Israel (according to official government statistics, they comprise 82% of the 1.2 million non-Jewish segment of the population of 6.4 million persons (Yafee, 2000)), they share many ties with the majority Arab culture of the Middle East as well as with the Palestinians of the territories occupied since 1967.

The Western approach to loss and bereavement is not monolithic and also has a long and distinguished history in religion, philosophy, literature, and science. The Western psychological literature has considered death, dying, bereavement, and mourning from many perspectives (Bowlby, 1980; Malkinson, Rubin, & Witztum, 1993, 2000; Stroebe, Hansson, Stroebe, & Schut, 2001). In discussing cultural and psychological approaches to mourning, it is often useful to organize and specify various aspects and domains of the grief, mourning, and religious experience. Rubin’s organization of the psychological processes of responding to loss via a paradigm that views overt and covert responses along two particular axes has proved useful in allowing the observer to chart what aspects of response to loss are being considered at what period following death. In the approach labeled the Two-Track Model of Bereavement, the outcome of both successful and problematic mourning is deemed to occur along two distinct but interrelated tracks (Rubin, 1981, 1984, 1999). The mourning response consists of public and private responses to loss that span a broad range of situations and dimensions. With the loss of a loved one, the bereaved’s very biopsychosocial self is shaken and thrown off balance.

In the Two Track Model of loss, the first track of the bereavement response addresses the difficulties and competencies in functioning following loss. One
might say that the “goal” of this aspect of the mourning process is to achieve a return to function that allows the bereaved to deal with and live in a reality in which the deceased is no longer together with the bereaved. Such a return to functioning is often what people mean when they talk of someone as having “gotten over” the loss.

The second track of the model addresses the unique emotional bond with the deceased and what is intertwined with that. How one thinks about the deceased and the impact of loss upon the nature of the experience of the relationship to the other is the primary focus. On this track, one could say that the goal of the bereavement process is to achieve a reorganization of the relationship to thoughts and memories of the deceased. Longing for the deceased, sadness at his or her absence, and an intense involvement with those things that link one to the deceased may be pronounced or less so. Following loss, the mourning process serves as a way to rework the bonds with the deceased so that they are reworked and re-integrated into the current life narrative of the bereaved (Klass, Silverman, & Nickman, 1996; Rubin, 1984; Rubin, Malkinson, & Witztum, 2000, 2003).

Distinguishing how one returns to the demands of living following loss as represented on the functioning track (I) from how one manages the relationship to the complex representations and memories of the person who has died as represented on the relational track (II) provides a useful perspective on social and psychological questions related to loss. From a social level, we ask what does a society or culture expect of bereaved persons as normative? Without a doubt, there are implications for societal attitudes and expectations of response to loss that are reflected in what a culture emphasizes and de-emphasizes in its dealing with bereaved individuals (Asmar-Kawar, 2001; Rubin & Schechter, 1997). We shall return to these points later on.

INTRODUCTION TO ISLAMIC ATTITUDES ON DEATH AND LOSS

Coping with the loss of a loved one has the potential to be a difficult emotional transition for the bereaved, but religion serves to help the bereaved to deal with his or her loss. The topic of death and mourning has received much attention in religious Islamic literature, beginning with the Qur’ān. Islam focuses on specific adjustment to loss and provides a complex set of beliefs and a worldview that treats loss as a normal milestone in the individual life cycle.

Central to Islam is the notion that how the prophet Muḥammad responded to loss, how he counseled others to respond, and what he said are worthy of emulation and point the way for believers to behave. The Qur’ān, the Ḥadith (sayings of/attribution-to the prophet Muḥammad), and the Sīra (life history of Muḥammad) tell the believer much about life and death. In Islamic thought are six basic beliefs required of the faithful: The unity of God (Tawḥīd); the chain of prophecy culminating in Muhammad (Nubūwwa); eschatological ideas (Maʿād) dealing
with the realm of the afterlife; belief in angels as presented in the tradition (Malā‘ika); belief in the divinity of the holy books (Kutub Samā‘iyya); and importantly for our discussion, the belief in “fate” (Qaḍā‘ wa-Qadar). The idea that the time of death (unless by one’s own actions) is predetermined and that God has acted to set that time also carries an expectation that one accepts God’s actions and will.

Unity of God and the place of Muhammad are expressed in the belief statement Al-Shahadatun (Al-Shahāda) “There is no God/Allah but God/Allah, and Muhammad is the Messenger of Allah.” The Qur’ān says that all creatures/things come from God and are to return to him, although how they are received will reflect how they lived their lives. “Who when misfortune falls upon them say: Verily we are Allah’s and to him do we return” (Bell, 1937-1939, p. 22). “But it is not given to anyone to die except by permission of Allah written and dated; to him who desires the reward of this world we shall give (a share) of it, and to him who desires the reward of the hereafter we shall give (a share) of it; who show gratitude” (Bell, 1937-1939, pp. 58-59).

In the pre-Islamic-period, the Arabs believed that death was the destruction of the living spirit. Those who were not buried and those who were not avenged became wandering spirits. Leaving the dead to such a fate was considered a disgrace. Blood revenge and attention to funerary detail were the ways to prevent such a fate from befalling the deceased. On the basis of these ideas, the requirement to do one’s utmost to assist the deceased was pronounced. Such actions were also consistent with the ethical ideal that the Arab culture placed honor of oneself and one’s reference group above the value of one’s own life (Abdesselem, 1991).

Under Islam, the perception of death changed. Birth and death were considered divine decrees. Parents did not bequeath life, God did. Events did not cause death, they were the means by which God’s will was enacted. Man’s life became holy, and the Arabs were not dependent on the tribal ruler. From this point, every man was responsible for his actions before the judges of this world and ultimately to God on judgment day. Previous ways of understanding one’s role and responsibility following loss dealing underwent significant shifts.

The idea of an afterlife became a dominant theme in the Qur’ān. The death of the body was not the end of life, but a fixed time whereupon God specified the end of a person’s test in this world. The nature of the death rituals changed as well. While earlier habits of washing the body, wrapping the body, and burial continued, the keening and offering of sacrifices that had characterized the earlier periods were forbidden. Prayers to the mercy of God for the deceased replaced the focus on the glorification of the person who had died (Abdesselem, 1991).

1 From here on, Allah, the Arabic word for God, will be used in quotations. At other times, we retain the use of the more familiar English term God.
Muslims believe that death is a step forward on the way back to God. Death frees the Muslim from the confusion and distortion of the living process and helps him or her see what is important and how. The Qur’an speaks of dead people’s sight as “perceiving,” emphasizing that the dead are able to see the truth in ways that the living cannot. Muhammad said, “People are asleep, and when they die, they wake up” (Chittik, 1992, p. 136). In quotes from the Qur’an: “And the drunken sleep of death comes in truth”; “This is what thou hast been avoiding.” A blast is blown on the trumpet: “This is the day of the promise.” Each soul comes accompanied by a driver and a witness. “Thou hast been in neglect of this; but we have lifted thy covering off thee, and to-day thy sight is sharp” (Bell, 1937-1939, p. 529).

No wonder that Muslims believe that the transition to come closer to God begins with the funeral. In the period between interment and the final judgment, a number of things happen. They begin shortly after burial, when the deceased are to be questioned by two angels (named Munkar and Nakir) about their beliefs. At that time, the spirits of the recently deceased will be placed in a pleasant or unpleasant situation, depending on their answers. The idea that there is punishment in the grave is an idea that coincides with the idea that there is continuing awareness and consciousness of the deceased in the grave. As a result, the angels can conduct an investigation of the beliefs of the deceased (Wensinck, 1965; Wensinck & Tritton, 1960).

From the burial onwards, the body itself will remain in the grave until the Day of Resurrection, when all will be judged. Only after the final judging will people be given a final residence in Paradise or its opposite (Smith & Haddad, 1981).

Mourning for the deceased is sometimes described as contrary to the Islamic religion:

> The question of mourning for the deceased . . . [it is] clear from the traditions that the Prophet forbade it. Nonetheless, grieving normally takes the form of clear and outward lamenting and sometimes loud and prolonged wailing. Traditionally, this has been a role played by women (Smith, 1998, pp. 136-137).

A non-Muslim visitor even somewhat familiar with the culture will easily observe a characteristic tension between the two sides of the response to loss in Islamic society. On the one hand, the bereaved’s and society’s acceptance of God’s will are manifested in an emphasis on control of emotions and limited involvement in the grief response. On the other hand, the typical behavioral expressions of lamenting, wailing, and other powerful or prolonged expressions of grieving convey the power of attachment and kinship ties, and acceptance of this. The basic tension between these forces resides within the Islamic response to loss, as well as between the genders within the Islamic faith (Abu-Lughod, 1993). As a general characteristic, women are allowed much greater latitude in expressing emotional turmoil following loss.
Abu-Lughod conducted an interesting study of tent-living Awlad Ali bedouin practices in Egypt. She believed that there is much value in the attempt to encompass minority and majority views and practices within the religion. This is because religious traditions often make ideological distinctions between what are considered accepted practices and variations and deviations from these norms. These deviations frequently reflect significant trends and elements that owe their existence to the continued expression of important and meaningful forces within society. Perceiving a speedy accommodation to loss as acceptance of God’s will is one aspect of the culture. Still, tolerating expressions of emotional grieving in ways inconsistent with speedy accommodation reflects the existence of a minority position within the religion and culture. The existence of both traditions also attest to the inherent duality of human experience and is typical of the multi-layered and manifold experienced responses to loss in any religious tradition.

It is a basic truth of human nature that acceptance of the loss of a loved one requires time and a shift in cognitive and emotional approaches to living. Nonetheless, acceptance of loss can also be influenced by a heavily “constructivist” and active approach by the mourners to “get on with their lives” (Attig, 1996; Soloveitchik, 2003). When religious tradition places a strong emphasis on the restraint of emotion, we would do well to pay attention to where the “repressed” experience and tradition is expressed. The notion of continued attachment to the deceased and the acknowledgment of the pain of loss are expressed in the two quotes below. Note too the emphasis on restraint and obedience to the will of God in the second quotation.

Death is the bridge that leads the beloved to his lover (Al-Qurtubi, 1997).

Here the emphasis is on continuity of attachments. In the next quote, however, the emphasis shifts to behavior and functioning. When he lost his son, the Prophet Muhammad said:

The eye weeps and the heart is sad, but we shall say nothing except what shall make Allah pleased, and we are sad about your lost Ibrâhim (Al-Bukhārī, 1985, pp. 219-220).

Acknowledging inner sadness is contained within the expectation that behavioral expression regarding the loss and emotions of anger, disappointment, and the like are not acceptable. Such emotions convey a lack of harmony or acceptance of God’s will.

Basic Themes in the Response to Loss among Muslims in Israel

The Islamic approach to death is organized into a set of rituals and communal norms that structure the initial response to death, the funeral, and the formal mourning periods. The underlying belief is that one should and can take comfort
knowing that life and death are in accord with God’s will, that the soul returns to God, and that the community is supportive of the bereaved. The nature of the private experience of grief, and the extent to which the individual grief is expressed publicly, are related to an interpretation of the Islamic worldview of what is acceptable and desirable (Giladi, 1993; Rubin & Nassar, 1993).

There are several implications of current practices. Overall, prolonged public expression of grief and ritualized mourning are discouraged in Islamic practice. The society’s belief is that prolonged grief and mourning interfere with the rapid return to living that is deemed normative and adaptive. This is based upon, and complemented by, the interpretation that anything but the quick return to acceptance of the loss and the tasks of living is construed as lack of acceptance of God’s will. Accordingly, an individual who persists in what the culture sees as an ongoing concentration on mourning the deceased limits social acceptability and possible social support. In addition, it puts one at odds with religious practice and cultural practice: a heavy price indeed to one who responds “slowly” to the pain of loss.

The response to death and loss among Muslims is strongly influenced by and manifested according to the general Islamic style of dealing with these events. As indicated above, beliefs about death and life after death, and acceptance of fate or the divine decree in all its variations, affect the form of response of individuals and society. Acceptance of fate and belief in its being the expression of God’s will are a basic tenet in Islam. A good recent Arabic-language exposition of dealing with death is presented in the Sunna-ritual volume entitled *Fiqh al-Sunna*— (understanding the religious law) (Sabeq, 1988/9). This volume is a modern work based on the early texts of religious law in Islam.

In the state of Israel, Islamic mourning practices are similar in most areas and are generally part of the overall Islamic worldview. Locally, minor differences exist but they generally are due to religious and social influences arising from the interactions of multicultural society. As has always been the case, religious-cultural worldviews influence one another and this is true for the Muslims in Israel. The Muslim in Israel’s encounter with members of Christian, Jewish, Druze, and other cultural-faith communities results in mutual influence.

In a similar vein, Wikan (1988), writing on Arab and non-Arab Muslims, suggested that Islamic practice is integrated and perceived differently in different societies and different countries. Religion influences culture, sets boundaries, and lays the foundation for appraising and integrating new information and situations. In addition, these ways of responding are in turn acted upon by cultural influences that affect interpretation and shape the meaning of what transpires. The religious and cultural features of Islamic bereavements in Israel balance a number of features. The basic distinctions between the cultures of bereavement in responding to death are mediated by social forces as society has expectations regarding the mourning and behavior of the bereaved (Rubin & Schechter, 1997). In particular, the pronounced attention to memory and ritual at later periods in the response to
loss among Jewish and Christian practices has given rise to Islamic practices in Israel that take place much later than the three day mourning period which is religiously sanctioned. The cultural beliefs color the response of religion in various cultures and influences the religious response to some degree reflects the dynamic evolution of cultures and religions. In another example, Jonker (1997) writing in Germany, presented another instance where the Muslims’ interface with broader society influenced the cultural expressions of Islamic bereavement among persons of Turkish ancestry in Germany.

Within its own system, however, there are tensions and social constructions that reflect the manner in which the Arab culture has balanced control and expression of strong emotions triggered by bereavement. The Arab culture is characterized by a relatively strict definition of gender roles which takes into account the significance of gender in the organization of society. Men are generally expected to master their emotions, to express their grief in a quiet and controlled manner, and to maintain composure in the face of the reality of loss. These traditional perceptions of the masculine role were fairly widespread in the western world until recent years as well. By contrast, women receive societal legitimacy to express their grief in various ways, although here too with constraints. An example of a constraint would be the prohibition on attending funerals. Nevertheless, women may scream, keen, and their responses are tolerated even when they are unable to quickly return to their societal roles and normal function. It is generally accepted that women seek ways in which to maintain an emotional tie with the deceased. These gender roles are congruent with women being perceived as more sensitive and more defined by relationships, and less able to separate from either the living or the dead. Women are allowed the freedom to be less constrained, while men face a more rigid role expectation (Yasien-Esmail, 2000).

The following brings the notion of restraint in sharp focus:

At the death of his son Ibrāhīm, the Prophet wept. Someone said to him, O Messenger of God, did you not forbid weeping? He replied, I forbade raising one’s voice in two instances, both equally impulsive and impious: a voice raised in a state of happiness (which shows itself) in celebrations, disporting and diabolical chantings and a voice (raised) in times of misfortune (which shows itself) in mutilating one’s face, tearing of clothes and a diabolical mourning cry. My personal tears express my compassion. Whoever has no compassion (for others), (these last) will have no compassion for him (Ibn S‘ad, 1905-1918, p. 88).

The religious tradition emphasizes acceptance of God’s will, and is built on the religious texts that exemplify the need for control while at the same time leaving room for some expression of emotion. The quiet crying in the story of Muḥammad when he lost his son conveys both the pain and the management of that pain in the prototypical response to loss—the Prophet himself.
The Islamic religion sets forth a clear period during which one can mourn. This is generally three days and is known as “Ḫidād” (mourning). During this period, the religion allows one to express grief, but the expression is modulated within the bounds of tradition. The Prophet’s sayings that emphasized control over emotion and tolerance at the time of the tragedy is epitomized in this quote: “The person of deep understanding (alternative wording = restraint) and the wise-person are those who respond on the first day as the more impulsive (alternative wording = naïve) person responds on the third day.” The expectation is that by the third day, the more naïve and impulsive person will have calmed sufficiently so as to accept the loss.

CONCLUSIONS

The culturally sanctioned response to loss in Islam is a complex system designed to support, structure, and assist the bereaved and the community to deal with loss and integrate it into the worldview of the faith community (Morgan, 2002; Sakr, 1995). In psychological terms, the dual nature of the bereavement process allows us to determine what are the individual’s psychological response as well as the community-sanctioned responses to death. As conceptualized in the Two-Track Model of Bereavement, the response to loss of Muslims in Israel places different emphasis on overt and covert responses to loss (Rubin, 1999). Along the first track of the bereavement process, one can characterize the religious world view as follows: It is to shape the mourning process so as to achieve a return to function within the three day mourning period. Following this time, the bereaved is set to return to the community and to accept the reality in which the deceased is no longer together with the bereaved. Along the second track of the bereavement process—the reorganization of the relationship to the deceased—the expectations are more nuanced. While the bonds with the deceased are open to being reworked, there is room for an ongoing interaction directed toward the deceased (Rubin, 1984; Rubin et al., 2000).

The extent to which the bereaved may remember and long for the deceased in Islamic tradition at the level of private psychological experience is not clearly set forth. It would seem that the bereaved is allowed to experience the complex of memories and emotions vis-a-vis the deceased from a generally positive psychological valence, and with a sense that the beloved is with God.

In the Islamic response focused on Track I, or functioning, there are many activities whose goal is to support the bereaved, to strengthen him or her, and to assist in the return to normal functioning in a very short time. Islamic demands, vis-a-vis Track II focused on the nature of the relationship to the deceased, are more limited and concentrate on lack of acceptance of the loss, its relationship to God’s will, and the avoidance of strong emotions reflecting lack of acceptance of
the loss. The ongoing relationship to the deceased is sanctioned in a number of ways. There are private practices which allow the continuation of a relationship to the deceased such as giving charity in his or her name. Theologically, one may be comforted by the belief in the continuity of the life force of the deceased. The particular meanings of the ongoing relationship to the memories and thoughts regarding the deceased are a complex topic that extends far beyond the manner in which symbolic activities regarding the deceased are constructed. The interested reader is referred to additional sources to consider the issues related to representation and interaction with the memories of the deceased, the meanings of loss and the lost, and the psychological and physical locations attributed to the deceased (Bowlby, 1980; Neimeyer, Keese, & Fortner, 2000; Rubin, 1999; Rubin et al., 2000).

In Israeli Muslims approach to loss, religious belief and practice are basic to the organization of the death and mourning rituals and behaviors. In loss, the ultimate focus remains on the relationship to God. Proper behavior by the mourner following loss never takes precedence over the closeness to God and seeking the Islamic way of mourning. The link to God, religion, and the community of believers serve to heal the sense of loneliness and bereftness that the bereaved feel so acutely. Religiously, one is to cope with the loss by accepting the will of God, which is demonstrated by expressing one’s internal grief in a controlled and calm manner. One may continue the relationship to the deceased, however, not only in the realm of covert thoughts and emotions, but also through actions taken in the world in the name of the deceased. Consolation and a place for the relationship to the deceased is also available when one is in contact with supportive persons who are open to this aspect of human bonds.

Ultimately, the love and connection between people is something validated by religion, by the community, and by the individual. Mourning practices and their place in the psychological, communal, and religious life of Muslims within Israel today leave room for ongoing interpersonal attachments to the deceased. The religious and behavioral focus is on acceptance of fate, the reality of the loss, and the primacy of following Islamic practices in the relationship to God, even at one’s moments of great pain and upheaval. From our analysis and understanding of the material reviewed, we stress the acceptance of the ongoing and dynamic relationship between the living and those who have died. They live on inside the hearts and minds of those who love them (Kasher, 2003). While the notion of the deceased living on in the hearts of those who love them may be strongly paralleled in religious beliefs in the afterlife, this phenomenon is so powerful so as to transcend religion. The Israeli Muslim’s responses to loss deepen our appreciation of the nuances of human interconnectedness and how people deal with its loss. The significance of interpersonal relationships in life and after death should serve as a reminder of our common humanity even as we explore our similarities and differences.
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