BE YOND EYE SIGHT

Mrs. Rochel Yenti Bodek
is giving blind members of the frum
community more autonomy

By Chaya Silber

It is a rainy and humid morning when I knock at the door of the modest Bodek home, a sweet Colonial on a private cul-de-sac in Monsey. Rochel Yenti greets me warmly and tells me to make myself at home amid the chaos.

And what a happy chaos it is! For my visit is taking place right in the middle of her summer program, a week-long peer mentoring program for blind and visually challenged teens and adults from *frum* communities in the tri-state area. Some of the participants are being hosted in the Bodek home, while others, who live locally, shuttle back and forth, coming in the morning and returning home each evening.

FILLING A NEED

Rochel Yenti is a doer with a mission, a soft-spoken powerhouse. She is no stranger to the world of blindness, having experienced significant vision loss herself and now being the mother of a child who is visually challenged. Her primary passion and focus is advocating for fellow Jews with visual impairments, helping them live as productive members of their communities.

Rochel Yenti is the cofounder of the Insight Beyond Eyesight organization, which provides support, advocacy and events for *frum* families with visually challenged members. She works closely with Computer Services for the Blind (CSB Care), which supplies *frum* blind and visually impaired individuals with adapted learning and reading materials. She is also involved with other Jewish and national organizations for the blind, both for advocacy and networking purposes. Rochel Yenti has a special interest in improving access to reading materials for blind members of the *frum* community, which includes adapted formats such as audio, digital, large print and Braille. To that end, she partners with Kol Halashon on a reading project in a password-protected section of its database that is designed for those who are not able to read regular-sized print books. More than 80 books, a mix of novels and non-fiction, are already available. On her website insightbeyondeyesight.org, she also provides updated lists of adapted *frum* books that are available through other resources.

There is a great need for a *frum* program that teaches blind people a range of life skills, says Rochel Yenti. "There are many tasks that a sighted person takes for granted and learns by observation. I realized more and more how many gaps there are for visually challenged people, especially those who are totally blind from birth."

Unfortunately, many blind people have to be dependent on others their entire lives, and Rochel Yenti is invested in trying to change this. "I've been to conventions in the non-Jewish world, and I have met very independent blind people, so I know it's possible," she says. Currently, there are no centers that offer intensive skills training for *frum* people who are blind. Rochel Yenti's new summer program is a step towards changing that.

I first heard about the program through an ad in a local Monsey paper for an event featuring Miriam, a *frum* woman who would be speaking about living with blindness. Al-

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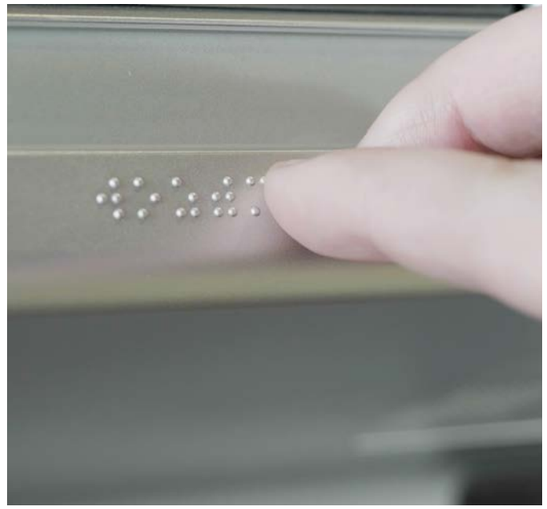
though I couldn't make it to the presentation, the ad intrigued me, and I'm here today to meet Miriam in person—and also to learn about Rochel Yenti's program, an outgrowth of years of activism on behalf of the visually challenged.

Miriam, who was born in a DP camp shortly after the Holocaust, has a degenerative eye condition. She was diagnosed shortly after she was married and lost her vision gradually, becoming completely blind a few years ago. Despite her declining eyesight, she has lived a full and productive life, raising seven children, marrying them off alone after her husband's passing, and working in a school, where she served lunches, for over a decade. An excellent cook and baker, she enjoys puttering about her kitchen, cooking and baking in large quantities to feed her extended family and friends.

As Miriam's vision deteriorated, she had to teach herself to do everyday tasks in different ways. It helped that she had done many of these activities prior to losing her vision—it was a matter of transitioning the methodology, not learning completely new tasks. Vision rehabilitation specialists guided her with this process over a period of years, and she remained determined to keep up her usual activities in spite of the difficulty and complications involved. By nature, Miriam is not a quitter, a trait that she says has served her well.

As I sit and schmooze with Rochel Yenti, I observe the organized activity in the kitchen. Miriam is teaching the group (which includes a young newlywed, a mother of six, and several teens) a safe and efficient way to make a popular comfort food: spaghetti and cheese. She explains how she cooks by using her other senses—for example, listening for the sound of boiling water, smelling the food to check whether it's ready, and touching ingredients to ensure that they're the right texture (she washes her hands frequently or keeps a wet paper towel and a dry paper towel in her apron pocket).

"Before you turn on the flame, make sure the pot is full of water and sitting on the gas range, with the handles turned outward," Miriam instructs.



"Next, wait until it boils—until you sense the heat—and then turn off the fire and pour in the spaghetti." She continues her demonstration, teaching the participants how to make a great marinara sauce, which involves using spices in the correct measurements without eyeballing them. The group uses Braille measuring cups and spoons, and Miriam gives tips along the way, such as scooping salt out of a container instead of pouring it. She tells the participants about her HI Mark tactile pen, which contains a substance similar to puff paint, that she uses to mark her stove and other appliances at home so that she can operate them independently. Other kitchen solutions include using the HI Mark to label spice containers and using an Eye-Pal Reader (a scanning and reading appliance) to differentiate between food packages.

Next, Miriam guides the participants in baking chocolate chip cookies. They ooze chocolate and are shaped perfectly evenly, as if they came from a bakery. The trick? A two-tablespoon cookie scoop, and feeling the top to make sure it's full. The cooking class ends with clean-up. As Miriam sweeps the floor, she describes her method to the group: Sweep around the edges of the room, towards the center, and then get down on hands and knees to scoop up the debris with a paper towel. Finally, everyone sits down for lunch, enjoying the results of the class. As we sit around the table, Rochel Yenti shows me the basics of Braille with a print-Braille Hebrew/English letter card that she uses as teaching material in her workshops.

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Some of the participants need to leave for home at this point, including Sarah, whose two-year-old came along today and quietly played with LEGOs while she experimented in the kitchen. There is a feeling of quiet serenity around Sarah, who manages to raise six children, cook, bake and clean, all while legally blind.

(The term "legally blind" refers to people who have less than 20/200 vision in the better eye, or a limited field of vision that is 20 degrees or less at its widest point. Most people with vision loss are not completely blind.)

The summer program is not limited to teaching independence in the kitchen. Participants are also trained in assistive technology such as magnification or screen-reader computer software, VoiceOver (which gives audio descriptions of an iPhone screen), BlindShell (a line of phones designed for the blind and visually impaired), and the Victor-Reader Stream, a device that plays various types of audio files and podcasts.

The program also introduces personal exercise training, as many people who are blind or visually impaired don't exercise enough.

"I know what it feels like to be isolated, not to be able to read and do activities that most people take for granted," Rochel Yenti explains. "I want people in our visually challenged community to have the same access as everyone else."

DETERIORATING VISION

Rochel Yenti reminisces about her childhood and the experiences that shaped her life.

"I was born into a large family in Monsey," she begins. "My father, Reb Moshe Lefkowitz, is well known for selling *kaparos* in Monsey for many years. He is blind with the same eye condition that I have. My mother is a courageous polio survivor who raised us without any full-time help. Both are pillars of *emunah* and *bitachon*. They are my role models.

"I had fairly decent vision until I was about 12 years old, though I always sensed that it might deteriorate, as my sight was never perfect, even with glasses. I loved the written word, and I taught myself to read when I was in pre-1A. In the beginning, the letters were blurry, and soon the vibrant colors outside began to fade."

Rochel Yenti has a congenital, degenerative eye condition called cone-rod dystrophy, which means that her peripheral vision is stronger than her central vision. "I can see the bigger picture, but I find it hard to focus on details, colors and small print," she explains. "My parents took me to traditional eye doctors and alternative healers to try to halt the progression of the disease, but ultimately, there was little they could do. By the time I reached my teens, I was pronounced legally blind.

"I was in denial, and then I was depressed. I didn't feel I was the disabled type, and I wasn't ready to face the obstacles that came with vision loss. I saw a therapist to help me adjust, but I don't think I ever accepted my blindness—if there were a cure, I'd be first in line. However, I did come to terms with it, especially when I decided as a teenager that I was going to become a social worker. That goal kept me going for a long time."

Today, Rochel Yenti describes her peripheral vision as "fairly usable, albeit very blurry. I have no depth perception, so I can't always see obstacles in my path or differentiate between surfaces. I am grateful for every bit of vision I have for as long as it lasts. I like to say that I am sighted to the blind, and blind to the sighted."

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AS INDEPENDENT AS POSSIBLE

Rochel Yenti admits that the challenges of living with a visual impairment can feel overwhelming, even after so many years. "I especially despise having to rely on others for help," she says. "My best coping mechanism is to be as independent as possible and constantly give to others. Sometimes I overextend myself—I'm learning to maintain a balance."

She emphasizes the importance of training in order to gain independence. "When I became legally blind, a TVI (teacher of students with visual impairments) helped me keep up with my school work through adaptations and modifications. She introduced me to the Braille alphabet as well as various devices and techniques. I also received orientation and mobility (O&M) training so that I would be able to get around outdoors independently. I learned how to use a cane, but I refused to use it for a long time, because I was embarrassed to be seen with it in public. I don't wear glasses, as they don't help me anymore.

"I used to think that if I didn't use the cane, I could avoid being identified as having a visual challenge, but eventually I realized that most people will notice something is wrong anyway because I don't make eye contact. I am still not perfectly comfortable using the cane at all times, but I am getting there, and I do use it whenever I walk the streets independently. These days, I encourage others not to wait as long as I did. I try to convince my friends that the reward outweighs the stigma, and the more people use canes, the more our community will be aware of people with visual impairments."

Rochel Yenti also received vision rehab training (VRT) to improve her homemaking and daily living skills. "I use specific techniques to sort my clothes, clean my house, and keep things organized so that I don't have to search for things, which I generally do by touch or looking at something up close," she says. "I can usually tell the difference between items of clothing by the way the fabric feels, and I can tell the difference between contrasting colors and designs. To make things easier for myself, I dress simply, and I try not to buy too many tops or skirts in similar colors or textures. When I cook, I try to read the large print on spice bottles, and I label some of them in Braille. I also use the Be My Eyes app, which is manned by volunteers who read labels remotely for users." Assistive technology not only helps a blind person with the tasks of everyday living, it also opens up opportunities for hobbies. "I enjoy reading and listening to *shiurim*, along with swimming and exercising," she says.

With the support of her TVI and life skills training, Rochel Yenti graduated from high school and moved on to the next stage of her life. "I had my heart set on going to seminary after graduation," she says. "I ended up getting engaged the summer after 12th grade, but

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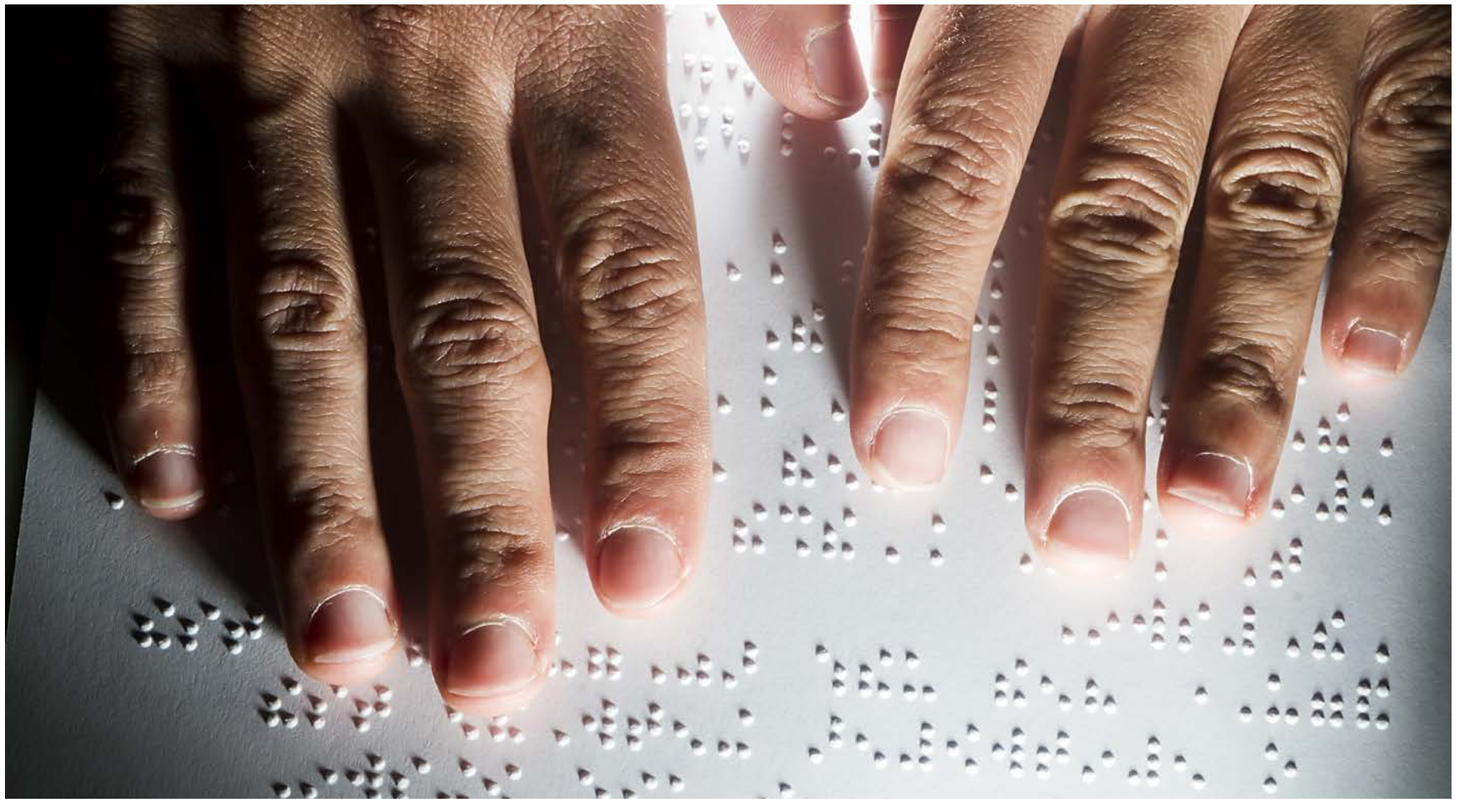
I attended a local seminary anyway, as a *kallah*, and I continued there after I was married. It was an unusual decision—I was the first one in my entire extended family to do this. But with the support of my husband, seminary principal and teachers, I finished the school year as a married woman.

"My husband, Yoel Yitzchok Bodek, is a wonderful person, an entrepreneur, and the founder of Brokers Central, a company that services life insurance professionals. He is a paraplegic cancer survivor who is a wheelchair user, but with his positive and determined personality, he accomplishes more than many people who don't face a life of daily challenges.

"Although every marriage is an adjustment, it is an even bigger adjustment when both spouses are physically challenged. *Baruch Hashem*, we've been married for nearly 20 years now, and we enjoy a beautiful partnership. We help each other. For example, I have a lot of energy, and I do a lot of the physical work such as taking out the garbage and shlepping things. My husband helps me with visual tasks such as checking if clothes are clean or specific cooking tasks like frying, as it's not easy to smell when fried foods are ready and it's unnerving for me to bend over a hot pan of oil."

Although Rochel Yenti's goal of becoming a social worker helped her through a difficult time, she ultimately decided to pursue a different career. "I am very solution-oriented," she says. "I realized that social work wasn't for me. After many grueling years of schooling, with breaks in between and shifting majors before I started graduate school, I finally fulfilled a lifelong dream and graduated with a master's degree in education, with advanced certification in teaching the visually impaired. My challenges in college were compounded. I had many struggles because of my visual limitations, and I constantly had



to self-advocate and fight for assistance and accommodations, even in the last leg while I was learning to be a TVI. It is so upsetting that a place where they are teaching others to help the blind is not 100 percent accessible to the blind."

As she continued her education on and off for 16 years, Rochel Yenti worked as a service coordinator at a local office. "I loved my job," she enthuses. "I worked there for many years, even while raising my children. I used a big magnifying machine called a CCTV to read and write (although as my vision continues to worsen, it's harder for me to use it). I also use Fusion software, which is a combination of magnification and screen-reading."

After being married for a few years, Rochel Yenti developed a new set of life skills: caring for twins, one of whom is also visually impaired. "The first few years after my sons were born were very challenging and hectic, though glorious. For a few months, I had a nurse during the nights, and I managed mostly on my own during the daytime. I learned on the job, figuring out how to feed, change, bathe and entertain two active little boys in spite of my limited vision. I relied on my other senses, and I came up with tricks like keeping sets of clothing together and taking the tag off my older son's coat so that I could quickly feel whether the coat I had grabbed was the right one.

"As the boys grew older and became more independent, the physical challenges became easier, but emotionally, I needed to be there for them. Especially with my visually impaired son's challenges, it's even harder than going through it myself. My son has been legally blind since he was about five years old. I was determined to give him as much as I could to help him succeed in life. It hasn't always been easy and smooth, but he has accomplished so much. He is the one who created and maintains the website for Insight Beyond Eyesight.

"Having a visually impaired child was the catalyst for my involvement with other mothers of visually impaired children, and that led to founding the organization. Insight Beyond Eyesight has grown to serve visually challenged individuals of all ages, and we offer teleconferences, outings, informational e-mails and networking opportunities. Over the years, I have become good friends with many of our participants.

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"Today, with my sons away at *yeshivah* much of the time, I still find certain aspects of cooking and shopping to be a challenge. With regard to cooking, the challenges are not necessarily related to my visual impairment, although that certainly complicates matters. But the truth is that I am much more interested in keeping busy with other things, such as working and helping others. I have blind friends who are great cooks—just look at my friend Miriam.

"Shopping is more of a global issue for people who don't see well. Even if they can get to the store, finding the products they need is difficult. Some of my blind friends have found it helpful to shop online, but I never mastered that skill. It gets frustrating, especially with websites that are not fully accessible, which is very often the case. I try not to rely on my husband too much, as he has a busy schedule and I don't want to be a burden on him. Although family, friends and neighbors will gladly help me when I reach out, I appear so capable and independent that it usually doesn't occur to people to offer something like taking me shopping. Sometimes I feel like a beggar, calling around to find someone to shop with.

"Otherwise, I mostly manage very well, both in my home and outside, taking public transportation, car services, and walking to work or to run errands. I use a cane to detect obstacles and uneven surfaces and for identification purposes, to be safer while walking the streets. I use apps with audio input and output like Google Maps and Lazarillo to navigate streets in Brooklyn."

Getting around Brooklyn independently is crucial for Rochel Yenti, as she commutes there several times a week for work. "I couldn't find a proper full-time job in my area that used my credentials, so I had to expand my job search to a wider geographical area," she says. "It was a huge disappointment when I realized that I would have to commute, but I'm grateful to be working with only *frum* students, and I love what I do.

"I work primarily with children, though I also have some adult students. I knew most of my students before I started working with them one on one, as they are part of our support group at Insight Beyond Eyesight. I teach my students a variety of skills, from academic skills to what is known as expanded core curriculum (ECC) skills. These are the things people need in order to function on their own in society: technology, self-advocacy, socialization and daily living activities. During the school year, I don't have time to focus enough on the ECC skills, and that's why I started the summer program. Sometimes, I feel that I go way beyond the call of duty—most TVIs don't become half as involved with their students as I do—and I have to make sure not to overstep my boundaries. Because I'm visually challenged myself, I am that much more driven to see my students succeed and become productive members of society. I feel that my success with them reflects my own success."

For Rochel Yenti, helping other blind Jews is clearly not just a job. "This is my life's mission," she says. "It is my career, my volunteer work, and everything in between. Insight Beyond Eyesight is my dream come true, unmatched in the Jewish world. Our visually challenged community is very close-knit, and I know we are making a big difference in people's lives."

TEN THINGS NOT TO SAY TO A BLIND PERSON

1

"IT'S OVER THERE" (while pointing). Be specific when giving directions to a blind person. For example: "Your keys are on the tray on the coffee table" or "Walk straight, then turn left, and the door is on your right side. It opens to your left." It's better to say too much than too little. And make sure you know the correct verbal directions yourself or you'll misdirect them!

2

"DO YOU WANT TO TOUCH MY FACE SO YOU CAN IMAGINE WHAT I LOOK LIKE?" People usually only do that in plays! Faces don't feel that different from one person to another. Instead, you can ask: "Do you want to feel my dress/bag/hairstyle?" Blind people may need extra clues about what's going on around them. Think about things around you that are interesting and share them with your blind friend.

3

"I'LL DO IT FOR YOU." Don't assume that just because a person is blind, he or she can't do something. Blind people can often do things you don't think they can—sometimes even if they say they can't! Try to think of ways to help them do it on their own. For example, if they need to hang up a coat, tell and show them where to hang it and encourage them to do it, even if it takes longer, and even if it looks funny when they feel around for the hook. You will help them become more independent, and this can help them for the rest of their lives!

4

"DID YOU FEEL WHAT SHE JUST DID?" (instead of "Did you see what she just did?") You don't have to avoid using words like "see," "look" and "blind." Generally, these words do not make a blind person uncomfortable. You should use these words as you would in a conversation with a sighted person. You can also say, "See you later!" or "Did you watch that play?"

5

"YOU MUST HAVE HEARD/SMELLED WHAT EVERYONE ELSE COULDN'T." People think that a blind person's other senses are very strong. Sometimes they are, and sometimes they aren't. If what you are saying is not true, you can make the blind person feel very uncomfortable. They might even feel like they have to pretend that they *did* hear or smell it. At other times, it may seem like the blind person cannot hear properly or is not as smart because he/she doesn't react appropriately. It might be that the background noise makes it difficult for them to hear the person talking, or they don't see something funny, so they don't laugh along with everyone. Put yourself in their shoes and try to understand their reactions. Remember that you generally don't need to raise your voice when talking to a blind person!

6

"GUESS WHO I AM." No matter how close you are with a blind person, it is considered impolite to make them guess who you are based on your voice. Always say your name when you begin speaking to your blind friend. If the blind person is not someone you know, and he or she is with another person, don't ask the other person questions that are really for the blind person. Ask him/her directly. Equally importantly: Before you walk away, make sure to say goodbye to your blind friend or he may end up having a conversation with himself!

7

"I ONCE KNEW A BLIND PERSON WHO WAS SO SKILLED THAT HE DIDN'T EVEN USE A CANE." Walking without a cane takes guts, not skill. A cane increases a blind person's safety, which enables him or her to remain independent. A cane is a tool, like glasses. It helps blind people navigate their surroundings, and it helps others identify them as individuals with a visual impairment so that they can offer help if needed.

8

"YOU DON'T LOOK BLIND" or **"HOW MUCH CAN YOU SEE?"** There are many kinds of eye conditions, and they may or may not be obvious. These comments can make blind people feel awkward and put them on the spot. They may not want to describe their visual impairment, and it's no one's business to judge or question it. Have you ever met anyone who faked blindness?

9

"I'M SO SORRY YOU ARE BLIND" or **"LET ME GRAB YOUR ARM SO I CAN WALK YOU THERE."** If you really care about the blind person and want to help him, think twice about making personal comments or doing things that *you* think are helpful. Instead, ask if he needs help and how he would want you to help him.

10

"YOU'RE AMAZING!" or **"YOU ARE SO INSPIRING!"** It is embarrassing for a blind person to be told that he or she is amazing or inspiring for doing something that would be perfectly ordinary for a sighted person. Gushing about how inspiring he or she is can also feel meaningless. Treat blind people like the capable individuals they are, instead of putting them on a pedestal. Instead of saying, "It's so amazing that you can read!" try: "It's so interesting to see how you use this device to read," or "I admire your courage in learning a skill even when it's hard." Even better, hire a visually challenged person. As Rochel Yenti says: "We are competent, responsible, dedicated individuals who have worked very hard to get where we are today. Treat us normally, without kid gloves, and recognize the contributions we can make."

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