



“The Five Books of Moses:  
Contemporary Issues and Classic Perspectives”

By Dr. Bonna Devora Haberman

39 Hukat — Song to an Underground Spring

Text

במדבר יט

א וידבר יהוה אל-משה ואל-אהרן לאמר. ב זאת חקת התורה אשר-צוה יהוה לאמר דבר אל-בני ישראל ויקחו אליך פרה אדמה תמימה אשר אין-בה מום אשר ל'א-עלה עליה ע'ל. ג ונתתם א'תה אל-אלעזר הכ'הן והוציא א'תה אל-מחוץ למחנה ושחט א'תה לפניו. ד ולקח אלעזר הכ'הן מדמה באצבעו והזה אל-נ'כח פני א'הל-מועד מדמה שבע פעמים. ה ושרף את-הפרה לעיניו את-ע'רה ואת-בשרה ואת-דמה על-פרשה ישר'ף. ו ולקח הכ'הן עץ ארז ואזוב ושני תולעת והשליך אל-תוך שרפת הפרה. ז וכבס בגדיו הכ'הן ורחץ בשרו במים ואחר יב'א אל-המחנה וטמא הכ'הן עד-הערב. ח והש'רף א'תה וכבס בגדיו במים ורחץ בשרו במים וטמא עד-הערב. ט ואסף איש טהור את אפר הפרה והניח מחוץ למחנה במקום טהור והיתה לעדת בני-ישראל למשמרת למי נדה חטאת הוא. י וכבס הא'סף את-אפר הפרה את-בגדיו וטמא עד-הערב והיתה לבני ישראל ולגר הגר בתוכם לחקת עולם. יא הני'גע במת לכל-נפש אדם וטמא שבעת ימים. יב הוא יתחטא-בו ביום השלישי וביום השביעי יטהר ואם-ל'א יתחטא ביום השלישי וביום השביעי ל'א יטהר. יג כל-הני'גע במת בנפש האדם אשר-ימות ול'א יתחטא את-משכן יהוה טמא ונכרתה הנפש ההוא מישראל כי מי נדה ל'א-ז'רק עליו טמא יהיה עוד טמאתו בו. יד זאת התורה אדם כי-ימות בא'הל כל-הבא אל-הא'הל וכל-אשר בא'הל יטמא שבעת ימים. טו וכל'כלי פתוח אשר אין-צמיד פתיל עליו טמא הוא. טז וכל'אשר-יגע על-פני השדה בחלל-חרב או במת או-בעצם אדם או בקבר יטמא שבעת ימים. יז ולקחו לטמא מעפר שרפת החטאת ונתן עליו מים חיים אל-כלי. יח ולקח אזוב וטבל במים איש טהור והזה על-הא'הל ועל-כל-הכלים ועל-הנפשות אשר היו-שם ועל-הני'גע בעצם או בחלל או במת או בקבר. יט והזה הטה'ר על-הטמא ביום השלישי וביום השביעי וחסאו ביום השביעי וכבס בגדיו ורחץ במים וטהר בערב. כ ואיש אשר-יטמא ול'א יתחטא ונכרתה הנפש ההוא מתוך הקהל כי את-מקדש יהוה טמא מי נדה ל'א-ז'רק עליו טמא הוא. כא והיתה להם לחקת עולם ומזה מי-הנדה וכבס בגדיו והני'גע במי הנדה יטמא עד-הערב. כב וכל'אשר-יגע-בו הטמא יטמא והנפש הני'געת תטמא עד-הערב.

במדבר כ

א ויב'או בני-ישראל כל-העדה מדבר-צ'ן בח'דש הראשון וישב העם בקדש ותמת שם מרים ותקבר שם. ב ול'א-היה מים לעדה ויקהלו על-מ'שה ועל-אהר'ן. ג וירב העם עם-מ'שה וי'אמרו לאמר ולו גוענו בגוע אחינו לפני יהוה. ד ולמה הבאתם את-קהל יהוה אל-המדבר הזה למות שם אנחנו ובעירנו. ה ולמה העליתנו ממצרים להביא א'תנו אל-המקום הרע הזה ל'א מקום זרע ותאנה וגפן ורמון ומים אין לשותות. ו ויב'א מ'שה ואהר'ן מפני הקהל אל-פתח א'הל מועד ויפלו על-פניהם וי'רא כבוד-יהוה אליהם. ז וידבר יהוה אל-מ'שה לאמר. ח קח את-המטה וקהל את-העדה אתה ואהר'ן אחיך ודברתם אל-הסלע לעיניהם ונתן מימיו והוצאת להם מים מן-הסלע והשקית את-העדה ואת-בעי'רם. ט ויקח מ'שה את-המטה מלפני יהוה כאשר צוהו. י ויקהלו מ'שה ואהר'ן את-הקהל אל-פני הסלע וי'אמר להם שמעו-נא המ'רים מן-הסלע הזה נוציא לכם מים. יא וירם מ'שה את-ידו ויך את-הסלע במטהו פעמים ויצאו מים רבים ותשת העדה ובעירם. {ס} יב וי'אמר יהוה אל-מ'שה ואל-אהר'ן יען ל'א-האמנתם בי להקדישני לעיני בני ישראל לכן ל'א תביאו את-הקהל הזה אל-הארץ אשר-נתתי להם. יג המה מי מריבה אשר-רבו בני-ישראל את-יהוה ויקדש בם. . .



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#### במדבר כא

טז ומשם בארה הוא הבאר אשר אמר יהוה למשה אסוף את-העם ואתנה להם מים. {ס} יז אז ישיר ישראל את-השירה הזאת עלי באר ענו-לה. יח באר חפרוה שרים כרוה נדיבי העם במח קק במשענתם וממדבר מתנה. יט וממתנה נחליאל ומנחליאל במות. כ ומבמות הגיא אשר בשדה מואב ראש הפסגה ונשקפה על-פני הישימון

#### Bamidbar 19

<sup>1</sup> The Lord spoke to Moses and Aaron, saying: <sup>2</sup> This is the ritual law that the Lord has commanded: Instruct the Israelite people to bring you a red cow without blemish, in which there is no defect and on which no yoke has been laid. <sup>3</sup> You shall give it to Eleazar the priest. It shall be taken outside the camp and slaughtered in his presence. <sup>4</sup> Eleazar the priest shall take some of its blood with his finger and sprinkle it seven times toward the front of the Tent of Meeting. <sup>5</sup> The cow shall be burned in his/her sight—its hide, flesh, and blood shall be burned, its dung included—<sup>6</sup> and the priest shall take cedar wood, hyssop, and crimson stuff, and throw them into the fire consuming the cow. <sup>7</sup> The priest shall wash his/her garments and bathe his/her body in water; after that the priest may reenter the camp, but s/he shall be unclean until evening. <sup>8</sup> S/He who performed the burning shall also wash his/her garments in water, bathe his/her body in water, and be unclean until evening. <sup>9</sup> A person who is clean shall gather up the ashes of the cow and deposit them outside the camp in a clean place, to be kept for water of lustration (ritual purification) for the Israelite community. It is for cleansing. <sup>10</sup> He who gathers up the ashes of the cow shall also wash his/her clothes and be unclean until evening. This shall be a permanent law for the Israelites and for the strangers who reside among you. <sup>11</sup> S/He who touches the corpse of any human being shall be unclean for seven days. <sup>12</sup> S/He shall cleanse himself with it on the third day and on the seventh day, and then be clean; if s/he fails to cleanse him/herself on the third and seventh days, she shall not be clean. <sup>13</sup> Whoever touches a corpse, the body of a person who has died, and does not cleanse him/herself, defiles the Lord's Tabernacle; that person shall be cut off from Israel. Since the water of lustration was not dashed on her/him, s/he remains unclean; his/her uncleanness is still upon her/him.

<sup>14</sup> This is the ritual: When a person dies in a tent, whoever enters the tent and whoever is in the tent shall be unclean seven days; <sup>15</sup> and every open vessel, with no lid fastened down, shall be unclean. <sup>16</sup> And in the open, anyone who touches a person who was killed or who died naturally, or human bone, or a grave, shall be unclean seven days. <sup>17</sup> Some of the ashes from the fire of cleansing shall be taken for the unclean person, and fresh water shall be added to them in a vessel. <sup>18</sup> A person who is clean shall take hyssop, dip it in the water, and sprinkle on the tent and on all the vessels and people who were there, or on him/her who touched the bones or the person who was killed or died naturally or the grave. <sup>19</sup> The clean person shall sprinkle it upon the unclean person on the third day and on the seventh day, thus cleansing her/him by the seventh day. S/He shall then wash his/her clothes and bathe in water, and at nightfall he shall be clean. <sup>20</sup> If anyone who has become unclean fails to cleanse him/herself, that person shall be cut off from the congregation, for s/he has defiled the Lord's sanctuary. The water of lustration was not dashed on her/him: s/he is unclean.



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21 That shall be for them a law for all time. Further, s/he who sprinkled the water of lustration shall wash his/her clothes; and whoever touches the water of lustration shall be unclean until evening. 22 Whatever that unclean person touches shall be unclean; and the person who touches her/him shall be unclean until evening.

#### **Bamidbar 20**

1 The Israelites arrived in a body at the wilderness of Zin on the first new moon, and the people stayed at Kadesh. Miriam died there and was buried there. . . .

#### **Bamidbar 21**

16 And from there to Beer, which is the well where the Lord said to Moses, "Assemble the people that I may give them water." 17 Then Israel sang this song: Spring up, O well—sing to it—18 The well which the chieftains dug, which the nobles of the people started with maces, with their own staffs. And from Midbar to Mattanah, 19 and from Mattanah to Nahaliel, and from Nahaliel to Bamoth, 20 and from Bamoth to the valley that is in the country of Moab, at the peak of Pisgah, overlooking the wasteland.

#### **Context**

Parashat Hukkat deals with death, water, and war. The first chapter describes an elaborate ritual to purify from contact with a dead body. In the next chapter, Miriam dies, and the Israelites complain about the wretchedness of their condition and thirst for water. Moshe loses his privilege to enter the Promised Land on account of striking a rock to bring forth water when he was meant simply to speak his command. After Edom refuses the Israelites passage through their land, Aharon transfers the high priesthood to his son Eleazar and dies. The Israelites are forced to fight Canaanites, and emerge disillusioned. Moshe quells the ensuing plague with a copper serpent on a staff (that becomes a symbol of the medical profession). At Be'er, the people sing a song to a well that brings forth water. The parasha concludes with decisive battles against the kings Sihon of the Amorites and Og of Bashan.

#### **Explorations**

The intricate ritual of the *parah aduma*-red heifer that opens the parasha contains some of the strangest elements in the purity code of the Torah. One of the mysteries is that the ritual status of the priests alternates between purity and impurity in the process of preparing and administering - sprinkling - the special potion made from the ash from the burning of a red heifer mixed with water. The *parah aduma* is considered an exemplary and inexplicable statute. Many contend that it is to be performed without understanding its reasons, and therefore requires pure love and faith. It also resembles pagan rituals.



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The following midrash expresses both of these views,

A certain gentile (idolator) asked Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai: These acts which you do appear like sorcery!

You bring a heifer and burn it, and crush it, and take its ashes, and if one of you is impure from a corpse you sprinkle upon him two or three drops and you tell him he is pure!

He (Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai) said to him: Have you ever had a *ruach tezazit*-frenetic spirit enter you in your life?

He said to him: No

He (Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai) said to him: Have you ever seen someone whom a *ruach tezazit*-frenetic spirit had entered?

He said to him: Yes.

He (Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai) said to him: And what do you do for him/her?

He said to him: We bring [medicinal] roots and cause them to smoke under him, and we inundate it with water, and it [the *ruach tezazit*-frenetic spirit] flees.

After he [the idolator] left, his students said to him (Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai): To this one [the idolator] you have pushed away with a reed [that is, engaged in apologetics]; to us [who know better], what will you say?

He said to them: By your lives! The corpse does not cause ritual impurity and the water [of the ashes of the *parah adumah*-red heifer] do not cause him to be ritually pure!

Rather, the Holy One, Blessed Be S/He, said: A statute I have established, a decree I have decreed, and you are not permitted to violate my decree. As it states [in the second verse of the parasha]: וְזֶאת חֻקַּת הַתּוֹרָה - "This is the statute of the law." (Midrash Rabba on Hukat)

Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai seems to suggest that blind obedience to the statute is required. The ritual transmits divine instructions purely so that the people will accept and fulfill them. In themselves, the instructions have no specific significance or purpose beyond strengthening the divine-human connection. Though the Torah appears to be talking about purifying from the impurity of contact with death, in Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai's view, death and impurity are an occasion for divine prescription of behavior. As the young generation inherits the burden of society from elders who are passing on, in preparation for entry to the Promised Land, the Torah emphasizes the need to perform the divine will.

Alternatively, a different midrash tries to make sense of the red heifer.

Why are only male animals valid for all the sacrifices, while here a female is required? Rav Ivo said: It can be compared to the son of a maidservant who dirtied the king's palace. The king ordered, "Let his mother come and clean up the filth!" Likewise did G-d say, "Let the heifer come and atone for the act of the golden calf!" (Yalkut Shimoni, 759).

This symbolism is striking and painful. Though the message is delivered as a parable, following the analogy, the mother is expected to fix the damage caused by her errant son, even to sacrifice her life. This midrash – so different in this respect from the previous text --



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demonstrates how it is possible to attribute meaning to all aspects of the ritual. These meanings reflect the attitudes, values, biases of the reader.

The transmission to Moses of the details of the *parah aduma* ritual marks the transition from the desert generation that departed from slavery to the generation that will enter into the land, and, thereby, into the full responsibility of free choice. As the text indicates, nostalgia for the past and fear of the unknown future still grip the people at the time of the deaths of Miriam and Aharon in our parasha, and soon Moshe.

Miriam is known as a prophet among the People of Israel though the record of her life and leadership is sparse. Our parasha recounts her death in one short verse, “[The Israelites arrived in a body at the wilderness of Zin on the first new moon, and the people stayed at Kadesh. Miriam died there and was buried there](#)” (Bamidbar 20:1). No mention is made of mourning her. Here we trace one of the themes that flows through Miriam's life, particularly as it culminates in events in our parasha - water.

When Pharaoh issues his edict to drown the male Israelite babies, Miriam watches over her brother Moshe whom their mother had placed in a basket and floated on the river Nile. Miriam convinces Pharaoh's daughter who discovers him to hire their mother as a wet nurse (Shmot 2:4-9). From the same Nile that is meant to drown him, under Miriam's supervision, Moshe is drawn from the water into a momentous life.

In parashat BeShalach, the Torah explicitly refers to Miriam as prophet. Miriam initiates the Song at the Sea after the Exodus from slavery in Egypt and passage through the water of redemption (Shmot 15:20-21, *see commentary on BeShalach*). In this case also, from deadly water (for the Egyptians) the Israelites emerge triumphant into life.

In Parshat BeHa'alotkha, with Aharon at her side, Miriam speaks against Moshe (Bamidbar 12:1ff). The occasion for the confrontation has to do with Moshe's relationship with a “Cushite woman” - something that Miriam criticizes. She and Aharon substantiate the rightfulness of their rebuke, “[Has the Lord spoken only through Moses? Has S/He not spoken through us as well?](#)” Without entering into the complex details, suffice to say that God responds by punishing Miriam with a skin disease for which she must remain out of the camp. Moshe prays to God for her healing. For seven days, the people delay their departure until Miriam rejoins them.

In our parasha, a tremendous thirst follows Miriam's death. The people sink into doubt and remorse about leaving better lives in Egypt for a place bereft of promise, of grain, grapes and dates, and even without water to drink. From the loss of water that follows on the heels of Miriam's death, the sages derive the legend of Miriam's Well.

Rabbi Yose bar Yehuda says: The people of Israel had three excellent leaders – Moshe, Aharon and Miriam. Three good gifts were extended to the people of Israel on their behalf – the well, the clouds, and the manna. The well was provided due to the merit of Miriam, the clouds of glory because of Aharon, and the manna on account of Moshe. When Miriam died, the well disappeared, as it says: “The people of Israel, all of the congregation, came to the wilderness of Zin, and the people dwelt in Kadesh. Miriam died there and there she was



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### “The Five Books of Moses: Contemporary Issues and Classic Perspectives”

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buried." Immediately afterwards, the text states: "The congregation had no water, and they gathered against Moshe and Aharon..." When Aharon died, the clouds of glory disappeared...when Moshe died, all three were gone... (Ta'anit 9a).

This midrash explains the leadership of the Israelites in a very grounded and basic manner; together, the three leaders attend to their People's needs for food, water, and shelter.

After Moshe strikes the rock, an act of desecration that, according to this parasha, costs him his privilege to enter the Promised Land, the people are still thirsting. When they arrive in Be'er, they sing the “well-song” to arouse underground water in the dry desert. The opening formula of the well-song is identical to the Song at the Sea, even the use of the masculine singular, future tense of the verb,

After the Exodus, the Israelites sing at the sea: "Then Moses and the Children of Israel *will sing this song*." (Shmot 15:1)

In our parasha, the Israelites sing to the well: "*Then Israel will sing this song*" (Bamidbar 21:17)

The well-song continues,

*Spring up, O well—sing to her [the well].  
The well that the chieftains dug,  
Which the nobles of the people started  
With maces, with their own staffs.* (Bamidbar 21:17-18)

This song is an antidote to striking the rock; hitting does not nurture sanctity in the midst of the community. Rashi comments on the passage from Ta'anit about the well – it was,

a rock from which would issue forth water. It would roll along and accompany the people of Israel (in their wanderings from place to place). It was the very rock that Moshe struck, for it had initially refused to give forth its water on his behalf, since Miriam had died.

According to Rashi, Miriam's well springs forth from the same stone that Moses had struck with his rod and had ceased when Miriam died, refusing to give its water for Moses. The cure for striking is *song*; speech would have been insufficient to heal Moshe's breach. God responds immediately with ample fresh spring water for the remainder of the desert journey. Miriam rouses future generations to song, and bequeaths the miracle of life-sustaining, gushing fresh water in the parched desert.

In the Talmud, Miriam's well numbers among God's ten creations at twilight before the original *Shabbat* of Genesis (BT Pesachim 54a). The underground water source was first revealed to Hagar when Sarah twice sends her away into the desert. On the first occasion,



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An angel of the Lord found her by a spring of water in the wilderness, the spring on the road to Shur”; “Therefore the well was called Be'er-lahai-ro'i; it is between Kadesh and Bered (Bereishit 16:7 & 14).

On the second occasion, Hagar is with her son Yishmael bewailing imminent death,

“Then God opened her [Hagar's] eyes and she saw a well of water. She went and filled the skin with water, and let the boy drink” (Bereishit 21:19).

The well blessing irrigates the unions of each generation of the biblical forebearers. Avraham's servant meets Rivka at a well and discovers there her lovingkindness and suitability for Yitzchak; Yitzchak returns from Be'er-lahai-ro'i to meet Rivka (Bereishit 24:62). It is to there that he returns again after the death of his father (Ber. 25:11). Yakov falls in love with Rachel by a well (Ber. 29:9-11). Miriam carries the water blessings of life and sustenance forward with song.

The prophet Micha unequivocally names Miriam among the triumvirate of Israel,

For I brought you up out of the land of Egypt, and redeemed you from the house of bondage, and I sent before thee Moses, Aaron, and Miriam. (Micha 6:4)

Miriam leads irrespective of her biology and traditional women's roles - not as a spouse, nor as a mother or daughter. Despite her non-conformist identity, Israelite society embraces her leadership and innovation.

The prophet Jeremiah speaks of redemption referring to Miriam,

Yet again will I rebuild you, then you shall be built, O maiden Israel! Yet again you shall take up your timbrels, and you shall go forth to the rhythm of joyous dancers. (Jeremiah 31:4)

The long-defunct ritual of the *parah aduma*-red heifer mixes life-giving water with the ashes from a sacrificial death. Miriam's song continues to invoke the flow of life force, union, and joy, and bind us to liberation.

### Questions for Discussion

- Discuss the extent to which you are comfortable performing rituals, behaviors, or observances for which you have no clear reasons or understanding about why you do them. Give examples.
- Under what conditions do we explain religious practices differently to different people (as Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai does in the midrash above)? Discuss why this might be or might not be appropriate or justified.



## ICJW Bea Zucker Online Bible Study Program

### “The Five Books of Moses: Contemporary Issues and Classic Perspectives”

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- In view of the midrash about the leaders of the Israelites, Moshe, Aharon and Miriam, how do you regard your leaders' responsibility for basic needs - food, water, and shelter? To what extent are these responsibilities private, individual, or public, that is, societal? In relation to the approach of the midrash, consider current attitudes toward basic needs and how they are and are not met.
- What changes in values, attitudes, responsibilities do you perceive in the current transition of generations that might be compared to the transfer from the desert generation to the generation that enters the Promised Land? What responses do you perceive to these changes – fear, apathy, evasion, readiness, desire, creativity etc.? Discuss examples and compare them with the Torah generations.
- How much responsibility do parents bear for their children's acts – at different stages of their lives? Discuss whether children are ever responsible for their parents' acts.
- Now that religious ritual sacrifice is officially over in our societies, what kinds of rituals perform that cultural function? Compare and contrast the Torah rituals with those in your culture, particularly in terms of their purposes, and the goal of sanctifying life. Consider the roles of sacrifice and death in your culture and how they affect life - personally, and in society.
- How do you interpret the meaning of (life-giving) water in your symbolic system – personally, in your family, and society? What behavioral consequences might flow from these meanings?
- How do you or do you not view Miriam as a role model?

#### Study Links

“Exploring the mystery of the red heifer - to eliminate death we need to eliminate evil which is accomplished through cutting off its original power supply. The spiritual origins of the red heifer is connected to the last stage of divine transmission before it descends into the realms of evil to give them life. Through this amazing process that the Torah describes of burning the red heifer we assure that the flow of G-dly energy remains channeled toward holiness. Evil's power supply is then permanently halted and the evil itself is fully eliminated.”

[Here](#) is a podcast of a current hasidic interpretation of the *parah aduma*- red heifer.

[This organization, Small Sacrifice Society](#) has the motto, “live simply so others may simply live,” a contemporary vision for giving meaningful offerings to society.



## ICJW Bea Zucker Online Bible Study Program

### “The Five Books of Moses: Contemporary Issues and Classic Perspectives”

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[This website](#) contains the entry “Miriam's Well” from Louis Ginzberg's *Legend's of the Jews*, a ritual, Miriam's Cup for the Passover seder, blessings, and other resources. [This](#) is one of the original versions of the *Kos Miriam* ritual.

Penina Adelman published a book, [Miriam's Well: Rituals for Jewish Women Around the Year](#) – it records rituals for celebrating Rosh Hodesh created by a group of Jewish women in the Boston area. The book has become a standard Jewish feminist resource.

There is very little written about Jewish women prophets on the web. [This is a general article](#) about prophets with a list of them and the text references where they are found in the Tanakh. The women are listed separately, at the bottom (!).

*'Water symbolizes the whole of potentiality; it is fons et origo, the source of all possible existence'* - Mircea Eliade.

[This site](#) celebrating goddess-oriented religion discusses some symbolism of wells, and offers links to “holy well websites”.

### Summary of Issues

The ritual of the *parah aduma*-red heifer processes the passage of generations from the desert wanderers to those who will enter into the Promised Land. After her death, the prophet Miriam's blessings of song and water flow on, invoking sustenance and life.

### Methods & Observations

The statute prescribing the *parah aduma*-red heifer purification from contact with death may be understood as a divine command for blind obedience, or as sublimely meaningful, touching mysteries of life. Prompted by this approach to the text, we can take our responsibility to choose how to interpret, and learn to refine our own values and priorities.

### Contact

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