DEAN BELL AND MICHAEL HOGUE: RELIGION, VULNERABILITY, AND
RESILIENCE

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Joshua Holo: Welcome to the College Commons Podcast, passionate perspectives from
Judaism's leading thinkers, brought to you by the Hebrew Union College Jewish
Institute of Religion, America's first Jewish institution of higher learning. My name is
Joshua Holo, Dean of HUC's Jack H. Skirball campus in Los Angeles and your host.
You're listening to a special episode recorded at the URJ Biennial in December of 2020.

JH: Welcome to this episode of the College Commons Podcast where we will have the
pleasure of conversing with Dean Philip Bell and Michael. S. Hogue. Dean Phillip Bell is
President and CEO, as well as Professor of Jewish history, at the Spertus Institute for
Jewish Learning and Leadership. He served on the Board of the Association for Jewish
Studies, and is the author or editor of 10 books in Jewish studies and Jewish history.
Michael. S. Hogue is Professor of Theology, Ethics, and Philosophy of Religion at
Meadville Lombard Theological school in Chicago. He has authored several books,
most recently, 'American Immanence: Democracy for an Uncertain World' which came
out in 2018 by Columbia University Press. Together, Dean Bell and Michael Hogue are
co-investigators on the Religion, Vulnerability, and Resilience project. Dean and
Michael, if I may use first names, welcome and thank you for joining me.

Dean Bell: Thank you for having us.

Michael Hogue: Thank you. Good to be here.

JH: I wanna start off by asking both of you to introduce us to the Religion, Vulnerability,
and Resilience project. And the title alone is pretty interesting.

MH: Well, the Religion, Vulnerability, and Resilience project started over coffee, and as
many things do. A colleague of mine ran into Dean on an elevator and discovered that
Dean was doing work in environmental history, and knew that I was doing work in eco-
theology and religion and the environment generally, and suggested we should meet.
And so we met for coffee and started talking about shared research, and I was at the
time... I thought I was towards the end, but it turned out I was in the middle of a book in
which I was using resilience and vulnerability as categories in political theology. And so
I described that to Dean, talked about how I was making use of them for constructive
purposes in thinking about democracy and climate change and building religious
community. And we just continued the conversation and Dean discovered, "Well, maybe
these are also relevant historical categories for thinking through inter-religious relations
in early modernity through Jewish responses to environmental disaster, to various kinds

of trauma." The current version of this is that we're working on a book and a larger project funded by the Arthur Vining Davis Foundation to develop these ideas for their value and utility in inter-religious work.

JH: On climate change?

MH: Well, not climate change specifically, but any kind of inter-religious engagement. And the idea is that vulnerability and resilience provide a framework for thinking through the various dynamics and levels of inter-religious engagement.

DB: Yeah, one of the things I'll add is that being a... We're both alumni of the University of Chicago in different capacities, and there is a famous quip there that "That's well and good in practice, but how does it work in theory?" And I think I was taken by these theoretical constructs of vulnerability and resilience and wondered whether they added a kind of analytical component or some nuance to the work that each of us was doing in our different areas. I particularly was interested at the time in the plague and how do we rethink communities that are engaged with responding to plague and how they developed resiliency in the midst of vulnerability. So they seemed like they had not only theoretical but historical applications. And as we began to have more and more conversation, given our own religious backgrounds and our own academic backgrounds, we really thought that the idea of an inter-religious conversation was quite important, particularly in today's environment. From my standpoint, one of the most exciting things aside from the delicious coffee that we've had is the course that we taught ended up bringing together students who were Christians, Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus, Jews, Pagans, and there might have been some other groups as well.

DB: We had 29 students from North America, South America, Africa, Asia, and Europe. And for us it was a real interesting opportunity to present theories around vulnerability and resilience and ask questions about whether that could afford opportunities for discussion of leadership and relations between different groups in a different more complex, systematic kind of way. So it really opened a lot of conversation, I think, for both of us in a certain way beyond our fields, though obviously connected to them in some interesting ways.

JH: I think vulnerability is a compelling category for a lot of us who care about inter-religious understanding because, until you get to the vulnerability, it's all window dressing it seems to me. The easy fraternity of monotheists, and then even when you go off into pagans and everything, there's a kind of a facility that is in fact superficial until you cut to the vulnerabilities, I think. So...

DB: I think we've found that the vulnerability conversation was a way of having people open up to themselves as well as to engagement with others, and it was a space that was really useful for thinking about transformation as well as susceptibility to harm. And so the more complex notion of vulnerability was something that we grappled with in a number of different settings, and from my perspective, not having thought about these concepts, vulnerability seemed much more like a Christian concept until I started exploring medieval Jewish thought and Rabbinics, and there clearly is a sense of

vulnerability that's really important as we think about ourselves and our relationship with the divine. And so it really ended up seeming to me to be a Jewish as well as a broader conversation.

JH: It does seem that vulnerability insofar as itself, imposed or self-excavated, really is a necessary precondition for resilience, I would think.

MH: Yeah, I think that that's one of the key lessons that our students have learned and that we wanted to emphasize is that vulnerability and resilience are not antithetical to one another, but the vulnerability, a passage through vulnerability is a pre-condition for building resilience.

JH: Yeah. It seems to follow.

DB: Yeah, the challenge is though, it's interesting, we did a session yesterday here at the URJ. And I think based on some of the feedback and the comments we got from the folks in the audience, oftentimes, the idea of resilience, certainly in the new liberal environment leads us to believe that the goal is to be invulnerable, and we wanna be resilient. What we mean is we don't want things to change; we wanna bounce back to a status quo. We have a much more complicated notion of what resilience is in terms of, again, bringing ecology and organizational behavior conversations into play as being something that's about adaptiveness to change and agility rather than just going back to a previous state. If you take that kind of sense of resilience then vulnerability is really important, but if you have the very traditional notion of resilience where actually after invulnerability we don't wanna open up in any kind of significant way.

JH: It seems to me that that hinges, however, on two non-overlapping types of vulnerability. One is the self-excavation and cutting to the quick voluntarily and of oneself versus the outwardly imposed vulnerability, which is about safety and about other dynamics. I think if we're talking about the former then, yes. If we're talking about the latter, people do want inviolability. Thank you very much. I'd rather have my kids be safe.

DB: Right. Well, then I think there are obviously different forms of vulnerability in any event. A lot of the discussion we've had with colleagues in law, for example, is about ontological vulnerability, and there's... What's the physical vulnerability that obviously everybody shares, but we're all vulnerable in different kinds of ways, and that's related to racial and ethnic and sexual. All sorts of questions that we have today and we have different census of vulnerability in what that means.

MH: One of the distinctions we make is between creatural or given vulnerability that we would say is ontological. To be is to be vulnerable.

JH: Ontological being the study of being.

MH: The study of being, so to have existence in some form of life is inevitably to be vulnerable, given the type of lives that we have embodied, exposed to the elements, dependent on others for well-being and flourishing. There's inevitable given vulnerability

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in being alive, and that's universal. But there's also contingent vulnerability which is not given. It's constructed or assigned and it has to do with all kinds of external dynamics. So not just being embodied but being embodied with a particular skin color or sexual orientation or gender expression or religious identity. Given a surrounding context, some of us are more vulnerable than others because of all of those constructed ideas about identity. So there's given universal vulnerability that we think is really important in any kind of inter-religious dialogue to understand and we think that the different religions have... That vulnerability is a category for doing comparative work across the traditions.

MH: What is vulnerability in a Buddhist sense, in a Christian sense or in a Jewish sense? And a lot of that is the universal given stuff, but we also need to bring in the contingent vulnerabilities that are asymmetrical that help us to look at social systems and political context and historical moments, and so to get a more granular understanding of the kinds of differences that really impact people's lives in various ways.

JH: And even more pointedly, some of those contingent vulnerabilities might actually be mutual predation among the participants.

MH: Yeah.

JH: Which could... That ramps it up a bit. Yeah?

DB: Yeah, and I think there's a really interesting conversation to be had about how the mechanisms by which we engage in inter-religious conversation and the extent to which we're open to challenging traditional assumptions, truth statements. Religion as Mike likes to point out is about truth, at least the way we perceive truth in our own particular traditions. How do we open ourselves up to truths in other traditions, or an openness that there might be multiple aspects of truth? And so I think it opens up a vulnerability on the individual but also on a kind of a community and organizational level in many ways, and you can't really enter into a conversation to really grapple with that question. There's lots of ways you can come down in responding to it, but I think if you're unwilling to begin with that sort of pre-supposition, it makes for a non-starter when it comes inter-religious conversations.

JH: And what I'm poking at is the fact that given interlocutors under the [unintelligible] of your project might in fact be the perpetrators of harm that have rendered contingently vulnerable Muslims and Jews, Christians and Jews, Christians and Muslims, I don't know. That's just amongst the Abrahamic faith. I'm just pointing out that it's not just a vacuum of vulnerability; it may actually be you who's making me vulnerable.

MH: Yeah, there's all kinds of complicated dynamics, yeah.

JH: Yeah, I'm poking because I'm asking if you guys encounter some fireworks or...

DB: Well, yes and no. I think the people who are attracted to this kind of conversation are willing at least to broach the conversation and be vulnerable themselves and open to this discussion. There's clearly quite a few people who're not gonna wanna have

such a discussion because we like to point out that inter-religious conversations are not necessarily positive. There's plenty of inter-religious activity and engagement over the years that has not been positive. And as for evangelical kinds of reasons, it's for persuasion, it's for... Sometimes leads to violence and ideas of supremacy and the like. So we're aware that there's a complexity to that, and obviously one of the challenge is to get people open to... Enter into conversation in a really constructive kind of a way rather than simply to advance a particular point of view. And the challenge I think with inter-religious work is that you have to be comfortable in your own religious skin, and you have to be aware of your tradition and knowledgeable enough to be able to both advocate for it and compare it with other traditions, and yet you have to be open to the truth statements and the positions and context of other traditions. And that's a difficult balance to find.

MH: There is a real irony in a lot of the inter-religious conversation and, in particular, the approach that we're taking to it. So one of the ways we've articulated the motivation for our work is that we are concerned about fear and loathing in our world, how pervasive it is, and religion is a source of some of that and always has been, right? But one of our thesis is that religious supremacy is an amplifier of other kinds of supremacy, has been a vector for other kinds of supremacy, racial and otherwise, and tends to amplify others. It's entangled with all different types of othering and hierarchy and superiority complexes and that inter-religious dialogue can be a direct path to undoing religious supremacy. Religious supremacy is characterized as we've defined it, based on some of the literature that we've read, monopolistic claims about the truth, oppositional religious identities, and exclusionary logics of religious community. Those three ingredients are the ingredients of religious supremacy and they show up across traditions. It's not like any particular tradition has a strangle hold on this.

JH: Clearly, if you get human beings involved...

DB: It's the one thing that we share.

JH: That's right, that's right.

MH: And that inter-religious dialogue is a direct path to undoing that, that resilience and vulnerability as a framework can aid the work of inter-religious engagement. The irony, though, is that most of the people and the communities that you could characterize as holding religious supremacist views are the ones that are least likely to get into the inter-religious dialogue engagement.

JH: Before we return to the podcast, we wanna let you know about digital learning on the College Commons platform. Beyond this podcast, which is available to the public at large, check out the online courses at collegecommons.huc.edu for in-depth learning, digital syllabi, assignments, inspiration for teaching, and one of our most influential courses called Making Prayer Real. Subscribe with your synagogue for all this and more. Just click Sign Up at collegecommons.huc.edu. Oh, and one more thing, help us up and rate us on iTunes. But whatever you do, do not give us five stars, unless we deserve it. Now, back to our podcast.

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DB: What we've found is, through these kinds of case discussions, we can actually enter the discussion about inter-religious issues from the back side and say these things about vulnerability and resilience are important for us today, we hear a lot about it, what does it mean in terms of your...

JH: They're consequential, you mean, it's not...

DB: That's right. And what do you do for that in your own life or in your congregational life, your relations with others, which then lead through these case conversations to much bigger kinds of questions, I think.

JH: So this begs my question, then. Give us an example of a particularly fertile case that you may use, and then I'd love if you would share a particularly important response among your students and participants that has shaped you two.

MH: We just, in yesterday's session here at the conference, we used a case that was about space sharing, a conservative Jewish congregation leased space to a progressive liberal Christian community. So two religious communities whose numbers had dwindled through the years and needed to, for financial purposes and otherwise, to find new ways to be... To have an institutional space. So they entered into an agreement and, initially, things were going well. People were getting along, things were working out, and then there was a leadership change in the Christian community, and the new leader was engaged in a number of political projects and was verging on what the Jewish congregation perceived as antisemitic concerns and discourse about Israel.

MH: So this provoked all kinds of conflict in the community. What do we do? We're in a four-year arrangement with these folks. So what next, right? And so that's essentially the case. And then we shaped some conversation with the participants yesterday around, after having laid out some general ideas about resilience and vulnerability, how can these lenses help us to think through next steps or to think through the case from the beginning? Could things have been done differently, for example. And there were some interesting comments and ideas that came out of that.

DB: Yeah, some of them were around questions of at what point do the various different denominational congregations of leadership engage with each other. And so we had a really fruitful conversation. Clearly somebody in the audience who was a lay leader said, "Well, the lay leaders of both communities need to get together and talk this through," and someone else, clearly more democratically-oriented said, "Well, are they representing the congregations? Does everybody feel the same way?" And then somebody added, "Well, is there a broader community context outside of the congregations that needs to be considered?" And I think one of the things it pointed to was this complexity of systems that are at play in these kinds of interactions.

DB: And though ostensibly it seemed fairly simple, there was a lot playing at this, and

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coming from a lot of different perspectives and people's concerns. So one of the things that came out of it was, how do we open ourselves to be vulnerable? To ask the questions about, "Well, could we have done things a little bit differently? Is there a way to engage and communicate a little bit differently? What's the nuance of a relationship? Are there opportunities actually for us to have a conversation with them and do a joint program that might in fact raise questions of interest and challenge both of us?"

DB: So I think these kinds of questions started coming up. And what we've found is that the issues, the sort of theories of vulnerability and resilience, aren't necessarily always so much different than what I might call common sense and traditional approach, but they offer this kind of nuance and reflectiveness that oftentimes is missing in these conversations. There's one other sort of dimension we've been playing about whether keeping in this case or not. Around the same time that this was happening, there was sort of more mechanical and facility kinds of issues that came up.

DB: So the one congregation was leaving the door open, it was a security issue, they were mixing up the kitchen utensils, it was causing the Jewish congregation the biggest concern. And somebody raised the question for us yesterday, "Would those have been an issue had we had not had the bigger theological or theoretical or community issues, and how do we navigate between those?" 'Cause obviously they're of a different nature. Because when we think about inter-religious, we can think about programmatic, we can think about institutional, we can think of larger theoretical issues, and we often conflate those and then I think we run into trouble. And so sometimes it's important to separate those out.

JH: Parse it out a bit, and do the engineering thing of breaking down a problem. And...

DB: And we had good people who suggested, "And by the way, why didn't they ask all these kinds of questions and feel comfortable before they entered into the agreement?" But we know, right? "I gotta pay the bills at the end of the month, I need a renter in here. They seem okay, let's just move forward." But how do you build this sort of sense of conversation and engagement on the front end, too?

MH: So three things coming to mind in this exchange just now. One, that we discovered that spatulas can be a site of inter-religious engagement, right?

DB: Right, right, right. Right, exactly.

MH: These are... So the little things can be freighted with bigger things. Right?

JH: That's well said.

MH: So that's one thing. The idea about what kinds of questions to explore in advance. I mean, if one brings a vulnerability and resilience framework to thinking about space sharing as a systemic challenge, then one can ask the sorts of questions like, "Where are the potential vulnerabilities in our community in sharing space with this other community?" Asking those types of questions in advance is part of what we think the power of the vulnerability resilience stuff... It helps us to think strategically ahead of time

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about where are the weaknesses? And are these weaknesses ones that are gonna lead to some kind of breakdown, or can they actually be leveraged for learning and change, right?

MH: And so that's where the third point I wanted to make about this is that resilience is not... As we're talking about it, it's not just a return to an original state or a status quo, but it's a dynamic... It's a dynamic and learning kind of ideal, so that the aim for inter-religious resilience is not just to endure and to tolerate religious others, whether we're sharing space or having dialogue, but it's to mutually transform. And I think that that leads to, not a diminishment of our own religious identities and convictions and pieties, but it leads to a kind of reframing of them that deepens them in different ways. So that's the aim.

DB: We tend to think about religious communities as learning communities, and they're learning within their own faith traditions, but how do we embed in them a sort of a notion of learning for other purposes as well, in terms of being self-reflective and engaging with others? And this really does open a lot of other conversations because there's obviously a lot of past traditions, there's a lot of inherited, let's call it wisdom or biases or other things within our own denominations in a religious faith traditions. How do we come to terms with those, how do we learn from those, how do we move forward from those?

DB: So some of the other cases we're beginning to look at are around issues of what happens when we have certain representations of other groups? Are they ingrained in us, and how do we address those when those come out in a ploy that's not particularly constructive or could be damaging to others? In a camp setting, for example, in an interfaith pastoral setting, where we might have somebody who's serving as a Chaplin. Maybe end-of-life issues, where we have somebody of one religious background who's working with somebody who has a very different faith tradition. What are the sensitivities? How do we learn about those traditions in order to engage with each other more constructively?

JH: You raised, Dean, the issue of responding to part of this resiliency... I mean, resiliency built into the ideas, the notion that you can respond adaptively, etcetera, to changing in difficult situations. Which brings me to the next topic I wanna raise, which both of you have worked on in very different forms of climate change. And I just wanna ask one question of each of you, with the regard to your work. Michael, yours... The work I'm aware of in your realm is much more recent. It's your book, "American Imminence". It seems to argue that democracy is the best form of government to deal with climate change, such as we're experiencing it today. Presumably, if I understood, again, it's because of its resilience, to go back. Democracy's capacity, at least, potential for resilience. Do I understand you to be optimistic?

DB: That's a great question, and I think...

MH: He's just gonna say yes.

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JH: Well, if it's a yes, we're good.

[laughter]

DB: The simplest response is, "No, I'm not optimistic." But yes, I have hope, and the kind of hope that I'm talking about is not a hope in some expected outcome or the righteousness of a particular moral principle that's unfolding in the universe. It's not a kind of a eschatological hope. It's an agonistic...

JH: Friends, that was eschatological not scatological, meaning messianic.

MH: But it's a... But I guess it's an agonistic hope, the way I've phrased it...

JH: Meaning a striving.

MH: A striving. The hope in struggle itself, not so much the resolution of struggle. The way I described it recently was that it's not a hope rooted in reasons, but it's hope that can be generative of reasons, right? And I think the idea... The reduction of hope to optimism, I think, is unfair to hope. I think hope, as much... And I'm not saying that that's what you are doing, but I'm saying a lot of people when they think hope are thinking, "So do you think things are gonna inevitably get better?" And no, that's not... That's not where my argument is going or coming from. And I'll say that the democracy work that I'm doing in that book is not making a case for democracy as the best mode of government, but as a way of life. And so that's really what I'm trying to advance in the book is this idea of resilient democracy as a context for responding to planetarium political emergency. Not as a solution to them, but as the, I guess, the generative context for developing responses to emergency.

JH: The fertile case, if you will.

MH: A fertile case.

DB: Yeah.

JH: Good. Great. Thank you. And here's to hope, then. And to you, Dean, I have a question about an article you wrote 11 years ago.

DB: The AJS Review.

JH: Yes, that's right. A book... A review we all have business dealing with and reading. You wrote about the 17th century's mini ice age, and it turns out that you described in this article all kinds of anomalies and extreme weather, with concomitant social and economic upheaval, including a religious sense of the end of the world. This eschatological component affecting relations, not surprisingly, among groups. In the case of Germany, where you study, it's particularly amongst Christians and Jews. All of which, of course, feels very timely today with respect to climate change and all the implications. I wanna know if you think there's a lesson to be learned from a 400-year-old experience.

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DB: I'm hopeful that there is. It's interesting. I came across the topic for two reasons. One is, as I was reading late medieval chronicles looking very specifically for stuff about Jews, I made a mental note at one point that people talk about their weather a whole lot. And they care about the weather, they care about Jews, right? So I kept reading about Jews, and I tucked that away at some point. And then years later, a colleague of mine in Germany, Wolfgang Behringer, who was a great scholar of witchcraft, published a book on the Little Ice Age and climate change, and connected it with witchcraft because, in his mind, the sort of cultural transformation that occurred in part in a climate context also had social implications as well, particularly, witches being accused of changing the weather or doing some sort of malicious things to affect people.

DB: And Wolfgang had written a really sort of provocative book afterwards, which was then translated into English. It was published by Polity Press. And he made a sort of an interesting argument. Part of which was climate change in and of itself isn't particularly bad. We've had lots of climate change in the history of the Earth, and in fact, there's been times when it's been much warmer than it is today. And as a good medievalist as you are, would know that the Medieval Warm Period was actually quite productive to European expansion, so maybe it's not such a bad thing at the end of the day, anyway. And then I think he went down a kind of a political slippery slope when he suggested that, if we're looking at today, it's not much different. Sort of discounting the idea of the acceleration of change that we obviously are aware of in the last couple of decades.

DB: But for me, this whole Little Ice Age question raised a provocative idea about the relationship between politics, the way we represent others, and sort of the changes in climate and in Earth and other kind of environmental conditions. And for me there's sort of two sets of issues. One is the actual change, the actual environmental transformation, and that's true in flooding as well as in climate change, and in plagues and in fires and all sorts of other things. So there's one part of it which is about the actual transformation that... The events that we have. But a large part of it is also how we respond to these things. And so I can't neglect the first, particularly in our contemporary age where these are massive changes that we can't control anymore, I think, in a certain kind of way.

JH: Right. More and more.

DB: And yet, there's a part of the conversation that is really about how we represent ourselves and others, how we demonize others, how we talk about these things in political contexts. So the witchcraft thing is... Has a sort of play in it today. Because I think oftentimes, and what I show for the 16th and 17th centuries, is there was no such thing as a simple recounting of environmental events or climate change. Every time you read one of these events, it was connected to some other social, cultural, political transformation. Oftentimes, a religious one, as well.

DB: And that was true even in these limited Jewish responses to climate, where oftentimes they would recount from a Christian or a Latin narrative, or a German

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narrative, some climatary change that happened, and then they would put it in the context in which it was essentially anti-Christian. And Christians did a similar kind of thing within their own denominations, across Protestants and Catholic divides, and certainly when it came to Jews as well. And so for me, this sort of climate conversation is really important because it reminds us not only about the actual events that are taking place, but the way that we think about others and the way we think about causality and we assign a responsibility to others. It's easier to do that than to think about whether or not we have any kind of agency in this as well, or whether things are beyond our agency, but it's easy to find somebody else against... A sort of a scapegoat or a whipping boy or something like that.

DB: And I think that, if you start thinking about environmental history as a discipline, it's imbued already from the '60s and '70s with the kind of political context. That's true in Germany, and it's true here as well. And so for me, the whole climate conversation from a historical perspective has application today to think about those kinds of issues and the way that we talk about these topics which are really, really relevant.

JH: And in the democratic context where we have built into the idea of a democratic way of life, the jostling and the welcoming, effectively, of some sharp elbows, your effectively admonition is to remember that, to resiliently thrive in a quickly changing moment, we should be thoughtful about how we throw our elbows around and talk about each other, if indeed the ultimate goal is for shared success 'cause we're all in this together.

DB: Together. That's right.

JH: I wanna thank you both for joining me, Michael and Dean. It's been a pleasure to get to know you, and thank you for your time.

DB: Thank you for having us.

MH: Thank you for having us, yeah.

[music]

JH: You've been listening to the College Commons podcast. Produced and edited by Jennifer Howd, and brought to you by the Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion. For this URJ Biennial series, special thanks to Mark Pelavin, URJ Chief Program Officer and Biennial Director, and Liz Grumbacher, Director of North American Events. We hope you've enjoyed this episode, and please join us again at collegecommons.huc.edu.

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