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HANUKKAH / MIKETZ

THE FOURTH CHAPTER OF AVOT AS AN EXTENDED REFLECTION ON EPICUREAN PHILOSOPHY

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Most of the chapters of Tractate *Avot* are tied together by a central theme or structural element. The first chapter tells the story of the transfer of the *Mesorah* through the five pairs or “*zugot*,” while the fifth chapter consists of a series of numerical teachings, beginning with ten and descending to three. The second chapter begins with the teachings of the *Nesi'im* of the late second temple period, the leaders of Rabbinic Jewry at the time from the family of Hillel and Rabban Gamliel (2:1-8), and then continues to the central figure of the transition following the destruction – Rabbi Yohanan ben Zakai – and his students (2:9-2:19). The third and fourth chapters, however, lack a central structure, and instead appears to be nothing more than a collection of teachings of largely minor sages.

This essay argues that a central argument ties together many of the teachings of the second half of chapter four (4:13-20), in that they respond to the principles of Epicurean philosophy, which were well known at the time. The key to seeing how the teachings relate to each other and why they belong in the same chapter is understanding the way they respond to Greek philosophy. Epicurus himself taught in Greece in the late fourth century, after Alexander had conquered Jerusalem. His works were therefore written at the time when Greek teachings were beginning to find their way to the Jews living in Israel.

An essential point of departure for Epicurean philosophy is the belief that the soul is entirely material, and that, as a result, the human being cannot live on (or have any experience or sensation) after death. When the soul dies, sensation is no longer possible, and so the human being ceases to exist entirely. As a result, Epicurus argues that the focus for human beings should be on how they spend their time on this Earth, without being distracted by what happens after death. This led Epicureans to focus on spending their time pursuing friendship or pleasure in this world (although the pursuit of the latter is often misunderstood, as we shall see below), and making the most out of their lives in this world.

It is impossible to know how many Hellenized Jews were adherents of Epicurean philosophy, although it is telling that a Hebraicized form of the philosopher’s name is used to refer to deniers of core principles in Judaism (*Avot* 2:14), who forfeit their share of the world to come (*Sanhedrin* 10:1). Though the Talmud later says that the term intends to be used to refer to something other than Epicurean philosophy

(*Sanhedrin* 99b), the use of this term for the paradigmatic heretic is telling of the impact this philosophy had at the time of the Jews of the Mishnah.¹

Epicurean Educational Philosophy

Avot 4:18-19

Epicurus’s “[Letter to Menoecus](#)” outlines many central tenets of Epicurean philosophy. The introduction contains a fascinating statement of educational philosophy, which runs exactly counter to that of Judaism. Epicurus writes, “Therefore, both old and young should study wisdom, the former in order that, as age comes over him, he may be young in good things in his pleasant memories of his past,² and the latter in order that, while he is young, he may at the same time be old, because he has no fear of the things which are to come.” In other words, the young must study so that they can gain the valuable wisdom and experience normally associated with age. The old, on the other hand, study merely to retain the vitality and memory of youth; they study to relive the past, and not because the study retains relevance for them at that stage in time.

One of Judaism’s more radical breaks with Greek thought is its contrasting emphasis on the value of wisdom and old age in and of themselves.³ Indeed, *Yevamot* 62b teaches (citing Rabbi Akiva) that if one studied Torah in one’s youth, one should again study in old age, for the two are equally good. The activities of old age are not subordinated to those of youth. To the contrary, they both retain inherent value; old age is not merely a memory of the past.

¹ Some commentaries still understand the word to refer to something closer to Epicurean philosophy; see Bartenura to *Avot* 2:14, and Tosafot Yom Tov to *Avot* 3:11. Regarding the shifting of Greek words when borrowed into Hebrew, see *Tiferet Yisrael* (in both *Yakhin* and *Boaz*) to *Pesachim* 10:8.

² This sentiment is echoed in the seventeenth of the [Sayings of Epicurus](#): “The young man at the height of his power is often baffled by fortune and driven from his course; but the old man has come to anchor in age as in a harbor, and holds in certain and happy *memory* the accomplishments which he once could only hope for.” In this statement, power is associated with the young man - who is only thrown off course by fortune and not his own limitations. In contrast, the old man possesses only memory and not more substantial ability.

³ See Ezra Fleischer, “‘The Gerona School’ of Hebrew Poetry” in [Rabbi Moses Nahmanides: \(Ramban: Explorations in His Religious and Literary Virtuosity\)](#), ed. Isadore Twersky (Harvard University Center for Jewish Studies, 1983), 44-45 for some discussion. Also contrast Ecclesiastes 11:6: “In the morning plant your seed, and at evening do not rest your hand – for you do not know which will succeed, this or that, or if the two are equally good,” cited by the Talmud *Yevamot* 62b.

Three teachings in the fourth chapter of *Avot* seem to debate this very question (4:18-19):⁴

Elisha the son of Avuyah says: One who teaches a child is compared to what? To ink written upon new paper. And teaching an old person is compared to what? To ink written on formerly erased paper [where the previously written and erased words leaves a less clear image when new words are written].

Rabbi Yossi the son of Yehudah – of Kefar ha-Bavli – said: One who learns *from* the young what is he like? To eating unripe grapes and drinking unfermented wine. One who learns *from* the elderly what is he like? To eating ripe grapes and drinking aged wine.

Rabbi Meir⁵ says – do not look at the bottle but in what is within it. There can be a new bottle filled with old wine, and an old bottle which has not even young wine in it.

The first view, offered by Elisha ben Avuyah,⁶ echoes the view of Epicurus: learning is a task ideally suited for the young, and the prime years for human intellectual achievement are in youth.⁷ Rabbi Yossi

⁴ There are numerous versions of numbering the *mishnayot* of this chapter. We adopt here the numbering found in the Kaufman Codex.

⁵ Some versions read “Rabbi.” Based on the discussion in *Hagigah* 15b, there is reason to prefer the text “Rabbi Meir.”

⁶ See *Mahzor Vitri* for a discussion why a Rabbi who is identified as a heretic appears in the Mishnah. This is the only time he appears in the Mishnah; see Reuven Margoliot “Concerning Rambam’s Introduction to Mishnah” (183-196) in *Peninim u-Margoliot* (Jerusalem: Mossad ha-Rav Kook, 2006), 193. Our solution to the problem is that the teaching offered here is intended to be rejected by Rabbi Meir, and is not normative.

Elisha is also cited in the Talmud; see *Moed Katan* 20a. His decision to ride a horse on Shabbat (*Hagigah* 15a) seems to be based on the Talmudic view that the prohibition of riding horses on Shabbat was a decree protecting the laws of *tehum Shabbat* (*Beitzah* 36b), which he had previously measured.

⁷ This view is echoed throughout the Talmudic teachings attributed to Elisha Ben Avuyah:

In *Hagigah* 15a, Elisha ben Avuyah opines that repentance is impossible. This is logical if one assumes that the human being’s primary focus is how lifetime is spent, repentance is meaningless because it cannot change the past years. Repentance only resonates if the measure of a person is what they become over the course of an entire lifetime, and not how they spend each day.

Yerushalmi *Hagigah* 2:1 (9b; also cited in *Ruth Rabbah*) cites Elisha’s discomfort with the simple reading of Ecclesiastes 7:8 “The end of something is better than its beginning” – rejecting Rabbi Meir’s view that all is well that ends well, instead inverting the verse into saying that the end is only good if the beginning was good. He expresses similar concern with the Job story for this reason as well.

Though some conventional Jewish sources also indicate that Torah study is best achieved when teaching the young (see, for example, Rashi *Kiddushin* 30a, based on Proverbs 22:7: “Educate a child at the onset of his path”), the Jewish sources are not as extreme as Epicurus and Elisha in totally rejecting the value of study for the old.

the son of Yehudah⁸ demurs somewhat. Older teachers have more to offer than young teachers – and so it reasonable to study from them; old age has value beyond a time to turn back to memory! Then, Rabbi Meir, Elisha’s student,⁹ rejects the dichotomy entirely: A person’s chronological age is an irrelevant category when it comes to Torah study, and it is worthless to consider the age of the ideal student and the ideal teacher.

This chain of *mishnayot* thus addresses the Jew who might think to adopt Epicurean educational philosophy. The *mishnah* concludes with a rejection: all can learn, and youth does not have primacy over age.

Epicurean Eschatological Philosophy *Avot* 4:13-15, 20

A more central tenet of Epicurean Philosophy is the denial of any level of existence for the soul after the death of the human body. Epicurus’ “[Letter to Herodotus](#)” and “Letter to Menoeceus” are both clear on that point: the soul is mere matter and therefore cannot be said to exist after the body’s demise. Since reward and punishment is a central tenet of Judaism, the only way that an Epicurean could simultaneously believe in the teachings of Epicurus and the biblical concept of reward and punishment would be to take all biblical accounts of reward and punishment to refer to this world, and deny that they refer to the world to Come.

A series of teachings in the fourth chapter of *Avot* debate this point as well. Clearly, these teachings all must accept the belief in reward and punishment, which is self-evident from the Bible, and follows from the conception of an omniscient, omnipotent, and just G-d. But they debate when the moment of reward and punishment takes place (4:13-15):

Rabbi Yanai says:¹⁰ We lack the ability [to explain] the serenity of the wicked, or the punishments of the righteous¹¹... Rabbi Yaakov says:¹² this world

⁸ This Sage also goes unmentioned elsewhere in the Mishnah (Margoliot, 193). Some mistakenly equate him with the Sage of the same name who appears often, but without the description of a place name. Little is known about his home, Kefar ha-Bavli, as well.

⁹ As per *Hagigah* 15a-15b above. Rabbi Meir’s decision to look at the content and not the casing is also echoed by the parable of his relationship with Elisha – Rabbi Meir found a pomegranate, ate the inside, and discarded the peel.

¹⁰ There are many Amoraim that go by this name, but this is the only Tannaic statement attributed to this older, otherwise unknown, Rabbi Yanai. See Margoliot, 193.

¹¹ This is the simple understanding of the statement. Some commentaries offer other interpretations, but this one is more in line with the simple text.

¹² The Kaufman Codex reads “Rabbi Akiva.” *Ruth Rabbah* 6:7 also reads Rabbi Akiva in the second half of this teaching, found in the Bavli under Rabbi Yaakov in *Kiddushin* and *Hullin* and in the Yerushalmi as Rabbi Yaakov in *Hagigah*. Reading Rabbi Akiva does pose a number of benefits:

First, it replaces an otherwise obscure or unknown sage (Rabbi Yaakov) with a known one. Second, Rabbi Akiva is the fourth sage to enter “*Pardes*” (*Hagigah* 14b), the other three having already been mentioned in the fourth chapter of *Avot* (see also 4:1-2). Third, having begun to study at age 40, Rabbi Akiva is the fitting counterpoint to Elisha’s educational philosophy as well; see also *Yevamot* 62b. Finally, Rabbi Akiva also is cited in the other Elisha ben Avuyah discussion in *Hagigah* 15a. Yet, most texts today still read

is like an ante-chamber before the World to Come. Prepare yourself in the ante-chamber, so you can enter the palace. He would say: One moment¹³ of repentance¹⁴ and good deeds in this world is better than all of the life of the World to Come. And better is one moment of tranquility of spirit in the World to Come, from all of the life of this world.

The chapter concludes (4:20) with an even more dramatic restatement of the principle of the revival of the dead, the day of judgment, and the inherent justice of divine reward and punishment following the moment of death.

What is Rabbi Yanai's view? Though the extreme Epicurean view would deny any reward in the World to Come, Rabbi Yanai may have felt that there was reward achieved both in this world and also in the World to Come. But since some measure of reward is still achieved in this world, we still have no ability to answer the question of theodicy, and why bad things befall the righteous in this world. Such a view of reward and punishment is the simple reading of two other *mishnayot* (*Peah* 1:2, *Kiddushin* 1:10), and is presented as the majority view in the Talmud in *Kiddushin* 39b. Rabbi Yanai's inability to explain the serenity of the wicked or the punishments of the righteous is rebuffed by Rabbi Yaakov's vision: We surely can explain them, since there is no reward in this world, a mere ante-chamber.¹⁵ We recognize that all of the hardship or serenity in this world is mere preparation for the world to come, and one moment of serenity there is a true reward, as opposed to anything that transpires in this world. Thus, we have three views: the radical Epicurean view which denies any reward after death, Rabbi Yaakov who asserts that there is no reward in this world before death, and a middle view of other *mishnayot* and possibly Rabbi Yanai that there is reward in both worlds.

Rabbi Yaakov. We should note that the name "Akiva" is a shortened form for the name "Yaakov" as well.

¹³ Translating "moment" as per the typical translation of the word in the Bible and Talmud, as opposed to "hour," a rarer usage.

¹⁴ Some read Torah, a likely confusion if the phrase was originally abbreviated since "*teshuvah*" and "Torah" would both be represented with the same letter, "T." See Tosafot Yom Tov to *Avot* 4:10-11. Rambam at *Hilkhot Teshuvah* 9:1 reads "*hokhmah*" and good deeds, which appears to be a restatement of this mishnah, but with the word *hokhmah* replacing Torah. On the word "*hokhmah*" in Maimonides, see Isadore Twersky, "Some Non-Halakhic Aspects of the *Mishneh Torah*," in *Jewish Medieval and Renaissance Studies*, ed. Alexander Altman (Harvard University Press, 1967), 95-118.

¹⁵ Most Jews today probably would identify Rabbi Yaakov's view as the authentic view of Judaism. This is likely because Rambam (*Hilkhot Teshuvah* 8:1 – as a tradition "*mi-pi ha-shemu'ah*", and 9:1, and also in his Mishnah Commentary to the tenth chapter of *Sanhedrin*), and to a lesser extent Ramban (Leviticus 18:4 and 26:11, Deuteronomy 7:10, and the start of *Sha'ar ha-Gemul*) accept this view as normative. But it is noteworthy that the other *mishnayot* and numerous biblical passages (many cited by Meiri to *Avot*) are associated with the other view, that some measure of reward is achieved in this world. Similarly, Rabbi Yaakov's biblical interpretation in *Kiddushin* 39b that "lengthy days" refers to "a day that is infinitely lengthy" is magnified through numerous citations in the *rishonim* and *aharonim* – but not in the Talmud or *midrashim*. See also Seforno to Deuteronomy 7:12 and 11:23.

A story found in the Talmud (*Hullin* 142a)¹⁶ supports the contention that these educational philosophies and eschatological philosophies are linked through their common Epicurean underpinnings. Not surprisingly, Rabbi Yaakov reprises his view in the Talmud that the true reward for commandments is only in the World to Come. More interesting is how Elisha ben Avuyah (his grandfather)¹⁷ is said to have held the contrary view – reward for the commandments comes in this world, only. Thus, in the *mishnah* in *Avot* we see Elisha adopting a view consistent with Epicurean educational philosophy, and in the Talmud we see him adopt the linked view in Epicurean eschatology.¹⁸

This chain of *mishnayot* thus addresses the Jew who might think to adopt Epicurean eschatological philosophy. The Mishnah concludes with a rejection: true reward comes in the world to come, and we should not be distracted on outcomes and "rewards" in this world.

Epicurus and Friendship

Avot 4:13-14

Two intervening *mishnayot* touch on one point where there is broad agreement between Epicurus and Jewish Thought. Epicurean philosophy is also known for the importance placed on friendship; indeed the twenty-seventh saying of Epicurus notes, "Of all the things which wisdom provides to make us entirely happy, the greatest is the possession of friendship."¹⁹ Two *mishnayot* in the middle of the chapter also focus on friendship in general, and in particular on the importance to live in communities with colleagues and peers.

The two authors of these *mishnayot*, Rabbi Mattia ben Heresh (*Sanhedrin* 32b,²⁰ Sifri Devarim 12:29) and Rabbi Elazar ben Arakh (*Shabbat* 147b) both moved away from the center of their Rabbinic colleagues, and both author *mishnayot* bemoaning the costs of separating from the core group (*Mahzor Vitri*): "Make sure if you are exiled to go to a place of Torah!" And "better to choose to be the tail of a group of larger scholars,²¹ instead of the leader in a place bereft of scholars, teachers, peers, and friends."²²

Epicurean Teleological Philosophy

Avot 4:19

¹⁶ Rashi and some versions of the Talmud only record the entire story in *Kiddushin*.

¹⁷ See Maharatz Hajes, loc. cit., who argues that this relationship may be incorrectly reported.

¹⁸ It is noteworthy that the Talmud is of the view that Elisha ben Avuyah originally believed in reward and punishment, although he limited it to this current world and not the next world; at first he did not deny reward per se, he only denied reward in the world to come.

¹⁹ For more on this topic, see John Rist, "Epicurus on Friendship," *Classical Philosophy* 75:2 (1980): 121-129.

²⁰ Although see an unusual interpretation in *Margaliot ha-Yam* (Loc. Cit.) for the meaning of the word "Rome."

²¹ Though a wide range of interpretations, from *Sanhedrin* 37a to Yom Tov Lipman Heller's "[Sermon on New Moons](#)," have understood this *mishnah* differently, our reading resonates more deeply when understood within the context of Rabbi Mattia's own life history. His teaching cited by Rashi to Exodus 12:6 also takes on greater meaning when seen as a teaching of a Rabbi living among Pagans and early Christians in Rome.

²² This motif occurs elsewhere in *Avot* as well, see 1:6, 1:11, and 2:9. A later *mishnah* in our chapter also shares the teaching of Rabbi Shimon son of Elazar about how one ought to treat a friend.

For Epicurus, if life was to be lived in youth, and if there was no future reward after death, it naturally followed that the pursuit of pleasure would be a major drive for human beings in this world. This tenet of Epicurean philosophy is often oversimplified, and the second half of the “Letter to Menoeceus” tempers the ideal: pleasure as achieved through the simple life; Epicurus did not advocate for the hedonistic pursuit of pure pleasure at the expense of self-sufficiency or at the cost of acquiring anxiety and pain in the process.

Here, too, the fourth chapter of *Avot* provides a response to a simple understanding of a core Epicurean teaching. Rabbi Eliezer ha-Kapar teaches that “jealousy, desire, and [pursuit of] honor remove one from this world” (4:19). Famously used by Rambam as an epigraph of sorts to the discussion of the golden mean in *Mishneh Torah (Hilkhot Deiot 2:14-3:1)*,²³ this teaching stresses Judaism’s focus on striving toward higher ideals and away from the pursuit of pleasure. Though in this case a full understanding of the Epicurean view is not as diametrically opposed to Judaism as it might seem, we still find a teaching designed to reject an understanding of a basic tenet of Epicureanism juxtaposed with the others.

From Sayings to Philosophy

Many struggle with understanding the genre of *Avot*, as it at times appears to be biographical-historical in nature²⁴ and at times midrashic.²⁵ But few would deny that many of the *mishnayot* are also critical in establishing the Jewish view on a series of major philosophical questions.²⁶ Often, a prevailing view is to treat each of these *mishnayot* as separate sayings in a vacuum: teach all students, find elderly teachers, eschew a pursuit of pleasure, and prepare for the World to Come. This brief study demonstrates, however, that when taken together, these various teachings become greater than the sum of their component parts, and indicate a thoughtful, sustained critique of a major philosophical system prevalent at the time.

²³ Rambam in 3:1 shrewdly juxtaposes two teachings of Rabbi Eliezer ha-Kapar which work together; see *Nazir* 3a. This rabbi, too, only appears once in the Mishnah, although he appears more often in the Talmud.

²⁴ Especially in the first chapter.

²⁵ Especially in the fifth chapter. Ben Zoma’s *mishnah* (4:1) is also clearly exegetical in nature, as is virtually every one of Ben Zoma’s statements in the Talmud (see *Berakhot* 1:4, *Hagigah* 15a, *Sotah* 49a, *Bava Kama* 41a, *Menahot* 11:4, *Hullin* 5:4, and *Tosefta Taharat* 6.

²⁶ See, for example, 2:6, 3:1, 3:14-16.

WITH LIBERTY AND PRESENTS FOR ALL

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From twenty-sided dreidels to pet menorah hats, the American Hanukkah marketplace has reached new and at times satirical heights. As a designer of Hanukkah products, I have always wondered how this marketplace came to be. During a recent bout of designer’s block, I decided to head back to the early 1900s to draw inspiration from the Hanukkah gifts of yore. As I scrolled through digitized Yiddish newspaper ads, I was given insight into the origins of this Americanized market.

It turns out that Yiddish ads in newspapers such as the *Forward (Foverts)* or the *Yidishe Tageblatt* captured more than the growth of Hanukkah in America—they provided a window into immigrants’ first encounters with American culture. In her book [Jewish Mad Men](#), Kerri P. Steinberg explains that “through its stories and advertisements, the *Forward* introduced first-generation immigrants to the American way” (p. 17). While these ads were intended for Hanukkah, they also provided explicit and implicit messages about how to keep up with their new American neighbors.

One of the earliest Hanukkah ads, a December 27, 1902, ad for tea and coffee on page six of the *Forverts*, was simply titled “Hanukkah Presents,” with the word “presents” spelled out phonetically in Yiddish. According to Steinberg, by spelling out English words in Yiddish, these ads “increased the vocabulary of the immigrant, assisting them in their acculturation exercises” (p. 87). In promoting tea and coffee, this ad taught immigrants how they could become classier and more American. This ad ironically used Yiddish to help Americanize immigrants’ food habits.

Advertisers also used Yiddish to teach immigrants how to smell and feel like real Americans. A December 9, 1920 ad on page four of the *Forverts* ad featured soap, perfume, aftershave, talcum powder, and dental cream (later known as toothpaste) as gifts for Hanukkah. Steinberg explains that “such ads helped make readers aware of the necessity of cleanliness and good hygiene as they evolved into acquiescent Americans” (p. 18–19).

Food manufacturers also entered the Yiddish advertising fray. On December 12, 1917, The Hecker Cereal Company ran an ad on page three of the *Yidishe Tageblatt* for “pancake flour,” likely the predecessor of pancake mix, to make “Hanukkah latkes” (spelled out phonetically in Yiddish). Since latkes were typically cooked with schmaltz and potatoes, this ad tried to convince immigrants to switch over to a simpler American formula. When I asked her about this ad, the current *Forverts* editor Rukhl Schaechter explained its underlying message: “If the Jewish immigrants want to fit into America they might just make the switch to breakfast pancakes.”

As an ad from December 21, 1932, on page six of the *Forverts* put it, “Let your guests choose which Hanukkah games to play, but if you want it to be a success, make your cakes with Royal Baking powder.” Forget about candles and dreidels—it was American taste, literally and figuratively, that would make immigrants’ meals a success.

These Hanukkah ads presented immigrants not only with an opportunity but a choice: choose between your old-fashioned past and your new American identity. In her book [Hanukkah in America: A History](#), Dianne Ashton explains that immigrants “could enact a range of identities either by selecting these new American products, by

cooking with new American ingredients,” or by using recipes from the old country (p. 118). The irony of these Yiddish ads was that although they were written in the language of the Old Country, they viewed the ways of the Old Country as a regression; using American products was seen as laudatory.

Conveniently for advertisers, immigrants treated Yiddish ads as extensions of their already trusted Yiddish periodicals. The copy of Yiddish ads and the images that accompanied them paradoxically used immigrants’ native tongue to transmit tips for how to rid themselves of their Old Country ways. The subliminal Yiddish message was clear: shed your immigrant fashions to make room for your new American identity.

While immigrants might have not recognized the power of Yiddish advertising, newspaper editors certainly did. Ashton explains how some editors voiced concerns about the intensity, for example, of the growing Hanukkah marketplace. Ashton states how as early as 1907, “perhaps contradicting the paper’s own advertising,” the newspaper *Yidishe Tageblatt* “warned readers, ‘we do not want death from pleasure!’” (p. 113).

Ultimately, however, the “market forces” of Yiddish advertising triumphed (Ashton 137). While perhaps counterproductive to the proliferation of Jewish traditions and observances, Yiddish advertisements succeeded in creating an Americanized generation of Jewish immigrants.

Yiddish Hanukkah ads did more than expand the Hanukkah marketplace; they used the *mamaloshen* to fastrack Jewish assimilation. These ads ironically contributed to a new miracle for Jewish immigrants in America—the ability to fully assimilate, with liberty and presents for all.

³⁹ Whether “*hu ha-nikrah*” is an approximation referring only to the beginning of the *bein ha-shemashot* period at sunset, only to its end at the appearance of three stars, or to both its beginning and its end is debatable. In my view, it is likely that both are intended as suggested practice, as opposed to either one being a precise halakhic delimiter.

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