

The Baal Shem Tov
Kesser Shem Tov
Siman 20-29

Siman #20

From the Baal Shem Tov: **"And Pharaoh drew near"** Exodus 14:10—for "in distress, You have widened my space" Tehillim 4:2. Through the experience of being confined or pressed (מִצְרִין), one is drawn closer to Hashem, blessed be He. This is the meaning of "You have widened my space"—realizing that this distress is a deficiency in the Shechinah. One then prays with intent for the Shechinah to Hashem, blessed be He, and thereby brings about the unification of the Holy One, blessed be He, with His Shechinah. For the tzaddikim are the emissaries of the Shechinah (מְטוֹרְוֹתָא).

[NOTE From the Baal Shem Tov:

Regarding Pharaoh's pursuit of the Israelites as they stood before the Red Sea, it is written: "And Pharaoh drew near" (*u'Pharaoh hikriv*). The Sages explain that "he brought Israel closer to our Father in Heaven," for through this, "they lifted their eyes heavenward" and prayed to God.

The reason for this is: "In distress, You expanded for me" (*ba'tzar hirschavta li*). In other words, that which constricts and hinders a person in serving God ("in distress") is precisely what causes them to strive harder and achieve greater spiritual elevation ("You expanded for me"). This is because through experiencing constriction, one is brought closer to God.

Furthermore, through this process, there is also an elevation in Divinity itself, as it were. This is the meaning of "You expanded for me": "For me" refers to the level of the Shechinah, and "You expanded for me" means that the closeness and prayer to God, which result from the "distress," bring about an "expansion" in the Shechinah itself. When a person prays for the removal of the "distress," it is done with the awareness that this distress reflects a deficiency in the Shechinah. The existence of the "distress" originates from, as it were, a deficiency in the Shechinah—the Divine light dwelling within the worlds—which is in "exile" and concealment, resulting in constriction and lack for the individual.

In prayer, the person pleads with God for mercy on the Shechinah (and not merely for their own personal lack or suffering). The essence of the prayer is that the Divine light beyond the worlds (*Kudsha Brich Hu*) should connect with the Shechinah and shine within it openly, thereby freeing it from "exile" and constriction. This leads to the "union of *Kudsha Brich Hu* and His Shechinah," a complete unification and connection between the Infinite Divine and the Shechinah.

The foundation of this idea, that prayer is not for one's personal lack but for the distress of the Shechinah, is rooted in the teaching that "the righteous are the emissaries of the

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Matronita" (*tzaddikaya inun shluchei d'Matronita*)—the Shechinah, called the "Matronita" (Queen). Therefore, the entire content of their prayer is a plea for mercy on her behalf.

Text Breakdown and Themes:

1. "וּפָרַעַה הֶקְרִיב" (Pharaoh drew near):

The word "הֶקְרִיב" (drew near) is interpreted not just as Pharaoh approaching physically, but as creating a situation where the Jewish people were spiritually forced to draw nearer to God. This reflects a core teaching of the Baal Shem Tov: challenges and pressures, represented here by Pharaoh, often act as catalysts for spiritual growth and closeness to the Divine.

2. "כִּי בָצַר הִרְחַבְתָּ לִּי" (In distress, You expanded for me):

The "distress" symbolizes spiritual struggles or constrictions (מִצְרִין, narrow straits). However, these situations lead to a paradoxical "expansion" of connection with God. When a person feels confined by challenges, they are motivated to seek deeper reliance on and communion with God.

3. "שֶׁיֵּשׁ מִצְרִין מִתְקָרֵב יוֹתֵר לַהֲשֵׁם יִתְבָּרַךְ" (Because through constriction, one draws closer to God):

The very presence of challenges or "constrictions" (מִצְרִין) compels a person to transcend their limitations and reach for God. This ties into the kabbalistic concept that difficulties are not barriers but opportunities for spiritual elevation.

4. "זֶהוּ הִרְחַבְתָּ לִּי" (This is the expansion):

The "expansion" is the result of recognizing that the constriction or difficulty is ultimately an invitation to unify with God. The soul yearns to correct the perceived lack in the Shechinah (Divine Presence), which is itself a reflection of the individual's yearning to restore spiritual harmony.

5. "שֶׁזֶה חֶסֶר בְּשִׁכְנָה וּמִתְפַּלֵּל בְּעַר הַשִּׁכְנָה":

When a person feels distress, they sense a "lack" or an imbalance in the Shechinah, the manifestation of God's presence in the world. Their prayer becomes not just for their personal needs but for the restoration and elevation of the Shechinah itself, aligning their will with God's greater purpose.

6. "וְנִעְשָׂה יְחִיד קוֹדֶשׁא בְּרִיךְ הוּא וְשִׁכְנִיתָה":

This refers to the mystical union between the Holy One, blessed be He (קוֹדֶשׁא בְּרִיךְ הוּא), and the Shechinah. This unity is achieved when the individual's struggles lead them to turn to God in prayer and devotion, aligning their inner life with divine harmony.

7. "צְדִיקִיא אֵינוֹן שְׁלוּחֵי דְמַטְרוֹנִיתָא" (The righteous are the messengers of the Divine Presence):

The tzaddikim (righteous individuals) play a critical role in this process. They are

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seen as intermediaries who bring healing and rectification to the Shechinah through their actions and prayers. Their connection to God allows them to serve as channels for divine light and blessing. **END NOTE]**

Siman #21

"Two by two, they came to the ark, male and female." For in every word (תִּבְּרָה) there are two interpretations: one in the aspect of male (זָכָר), representing mercy (רַחֲמִים), and the other in the aspect of female (נְקִבָּה), representing judgment (דִּין). And the tzaddikim transform the attribute of judgment (מִדַּת הַדִּין) into the attribute of mercy (מִדַּת רַחֲמִים).

[NOTE: Male and Female in Every Word

Regarding Noah's Ark, it is written: "Two by two, they came to the ark, male and female." The inner meaning of this is that the "ark" (*teivah*) refers to the words (*teivot*) and letters of the Torah. It is said that within the ark ("they came to the ark") are "male and female," meaning that within every word (*teivah*), there are two aspects:

1. **A higher and positive interpretation**, which corresponds to the aspect of *zachar* (male, the giver), representing the attribute of *rachamim* (mercy).
2. **A lower and negative interpretation** (which descends and derives its life force from the male aspect), corresponding to the aspect of *nekevah* (female, the receiver), representing the attribute of *din* (judgment), which is characterized by restriction and concealment.

This means that all judgments (*dinim*) and negative aspects in the world have a good and positive source in the attribute of *rachamim*, from which they derive and draw their vitality. Thus, the good and positive source is the "male aspect" (the giver) relative to the judgment itself (the receiver).

This concept is rooted in the Torah, where every word contains these two levels of "male" and "female."

This is also the reason for the power of the righteous to bring salvation and transform negative situations into positive ones. The *tzaddikim* reverse the attribute of judgment (*din*) into the attribute of mercy (*rachamim*) by revealing the higher source (the male aspect) of the very negative situation itself. **END NOTE]**

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Siman #22

From the Baal Shem Tov: "He expounded on the host of Torah..." and it is taught in *Pirkei Avot* (Ethics of the Fathers): "One who learns from his friend even a single chapter, a single law, or even a single letter..." We find concerning King David, peace be upon him, that he only learned two things from Ahitophel, and yet, all the more so, one who learns even a single chapter from his friend, how much more so must he behave toward him with honor.

And it is difficult to understand: Why does it say he learned only two things? Additionally, it is challenging, for one could argue that it suffices for the derivative to be similar to its source (i.e., *dayo l'ba min ha-din liheyot ka-nidon*, "it is enough for the derived case to resemble the original").

It was explained that when one learns from a worthy teacher, the Torah is fruitful and multiplies within them, as is known. However, when one learns from a wicked person, the Torah does not become fruitful and multiply but remains in its simplest form, exactly as it was learned from them. Therefore, it says that David learned only two things from Ahitophel, who was wicked, and those two things did not become fruitful and multiply but remained as only two things, just as he had learned them. Yet even so, David still called him his teacher. Now, if one learns from a friend, meaning they are both righteous, then the Torah learned is fruitful and multiplies. All the more so, one must treat such a teacher with great honor. This resolves the connection to the opening statement about the "host of Torah," which refers to a gathering where everyone is righteous, allowing the Torah to flourish and multiply.

[NOTE: Torah from a Worthy Teacher (1) – The Torah is Fruitful and Multiplies

From the Baal Shem Tov:

"He expounded on the host of Torah..." Our Sages have taught the greatness of Torah teachings spoken in a proper setting. As the Talmud recounts: "When our Rabbis entered the vineyard of Yavneh... they all began with honoring the host and expounded, and Rabbi Yehuda began with honoring the Torah." Sanhedrin 32b

The deeper meaning of this can be explained as follows: It is stated in *Pirkei Avot*: "One who learns from his friend a single chapter (of Torah), or a single law, or a single verse, or even a single statement, or even one letter—must show them respect. For we find that King David, peace be upon him, only learned two things from Ahitophel, and yet he called him his teacher, his guide, and his confidant. How much more so must one show respect to someone who teaches them a single chapter, a single law, and so on."

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This raises a difficulty: What is the meaning of the emphasis "only two things" (*shnei devarim bilvad*) in language that seems to diminish the significance of these teachings?

Another difficulty arises: Shouldn't the lesson be that just as David honored Ahitophel for teaching him "two things," so too one is obligated to honor a teacher specifically when they teach at least two things—not for a single chapter, law, or letter? This would align with the principle of *dayo l'ba min ha-din liheyot ka-nidon* ("it suffices for the derived case to resemble the original"). In our case, since the obligation to honor one's teacher is derived from the case of Ahitophel, who taught David "two things," it should not be extended to learning only "one chapter or one law," as this would make the derived case more stringent than the original.

Thus, the language and reasoning require further explanation.

Our teacher explained that when a person learns from a worthy teacher, the Torah is "fruitful and multiplies" within them, as is known. That is, the teachings of Torah grow and deepen continually in the learner's mind. However, when one learns from a wicked person, the Torah does not become fruitful or multiply; instead, the lesson remains in its original, simple form, exactly as it was taught, without any addition or expansion. This is why the Tanna mentions the example as a proof via a *kal va'chomer* (logical inference): "What of David, who learned only two things from Ahitophel," who was a wicked person? The teachings David received from Ahitophel did not become fruitful or multiply but remained as just "two things" without any further development. Nevertheless, despite this, David still called him his teacher.

If so, "one who learns from their friend"—meaning both teacher and student are righteous, as implied in the Mishnah, which discusses Torah learning from someone worthy—then in such a case, the Torah becomes fruitful and multiplies. Thus, "how much more so must one honor them." Even if they learned only "a single chapter, and so forth," since the Torah learned will eventually expand and multiply greatly, this learning surpasses the "two things" that David learned from Ahitophel. Therefore, the obligation to honor such a teacher can be derived from this case through a *kal va'chomer*.

This also explains and clarifies the story from the Sages mentioned earlier, where the Rabbis in Yavneh began their teachings by emphasizing the importance of the "host of Torah." This highlights the greatness of the Torah that would be learned in that place, as all those present were righteous—both the Torah teachers (the Tannaim who gathered in Yavneh) and the hosts (the local residents who served as the "hosts" of Torah). **END NOTE]**

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Siman #23

Additionally, on a different matter: The Ten Commandments encompass the entirety of the Torah, as explained by Rav Saadia Gaon. Just as the entire Torah is included in the Ten Commandments, so too can the entire Torah be encompassed within a single word (*teivah*), and so on.

However, this is only if the soul of the teacher from whom one learns is rooted in the World of Unity (*Olam Ha'achdut*). In such a case, the Torah teachings received by the student are unified and interconnected. Conversely, if the teacher's soul is rooted in the World of Separation (*Olam Ha'perud*), then the student who learns from them also receives fragmented and disconnected teachings.

This explains the statement that David learned only "two things" from Ahitophel. Because Ahitophel's soul was from the World of Separation, what David received from him was limited to two distinct and separate teachings, rather than a unified and comprehensive understanding.

[NOTE: Torah from a Worthy Teacher (Part 2) – Every Teaching Contains the Entire Torah]

Our teacher further explained the precise wording of the Mishnah (referenced earlier), which states that King David learned from Ahitophel "only two things," in another context:

The Ten Commandments encompass the entirety of the Torah, as explained by Rav Saadia Gaon. Just as the entire Torah is included in the Ten Commandments, so too, the entirety of the Torah is included in a single word (*teivah*) of the Torah. Therefore, even if someone teaches their friend "a single word" of Torah, they have effectively taught them the entire Torah.

However, this principle applies only if the soul of the teacher from whom one learns is rooted in the "World of Unity" (*Olam Ha'achdut*)—a realm of holiness inherently connected to the unity of the Creator, where this unity is evident in every detail. In such a case, the unity and inclusiveness of all aspects of Torah are apparent, such that each word of Torah inherently contains the entire Torah.

In contrast, if the teacher's soul is rooted in the "World of Separation" (*Olam Ha'perud*)—a realm of existence that is separate from Divinity, where the unity of the Creator is not evident, and the details exist independently without integration—then the student who learns from them also receives teachings as separate, disconnected elements. As a result, the learned material does not contain within it any connection to

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the rest of the Torah, and what is taught remains limited to its specific content without including anything beyond itself.

This is the meaning of the Mishnah's statement regarding King David: "He learned from Ahitophel (who was from the World of Separation) only two things." These two things were limited, without any additional connections or inclusion of other aspects of Torah.

END NOTE]

Siman #24

From the Baal Shem Tov, in the name of Rabbi Sa'aryah Gaon: The primary purpose of a person's creation in this world is to break the negative traits that are intrinsic to them. Through this, they elevate their level, referred to as "your nature," in the supernal world, which is called "world" (עולם) from the language of concealment and hiddenness.

This is the meaning of the verse: "Go forth from your land and from your birthplace" (Genesis 12:1). That is, the negative tendencies born with a person should be subdued, as mentioned above. "And from your father's house"—for "your father" is referred to as Chochmah (wisdom, Abba), and "your father's house" represents Binah (understanding), the realm of thought. The intention is that one should rectify negative thoughts. This is the meaning of "from your father's house," indicating that one should discern and elevate the fallen thoughts from their source in "your father's house" so that they may be uplifted.

Through this process, you will merit to the supernal land "that I will show you," meaning that I will reveal to you your nature in the world above.

Siman #25

From the Baal Shem Tov: When a person becomes aware of the afflictions of their heart, which represent spiritual illness rooted in the concept of "smallness" (katnut), this awareness itself is the key to their healing. Through the knowledge and acknowledgment of this state, they can sweeten and rectify it, and this becomes their remedy.

However, the opposite is true when the person is in a state of concealment (hester). As my teacher explained regarding the verse, *"And I will surely hide My face"* (Deuteronomy 31:18), such a person does not recognize that they are spiritually ill. In this state of unawareness, there can be no cure for their grievous wound, as they remain oblivious to the need for healing.

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Siman #26

From the Baal Shem Tov, of blessed memory:
 Since the Shechinah encompasses all worlds—domem (inanimate), tzomeach (vegetative), chai (animal), medaber (speaking beings), and all created entities, both good and bad—the true unity is within the Shechinah. How can opposites, such as good and evil, coexist within one entity, as they are fundamentally contradictory? The answer is that true unity lies precisely in this coexistence. In truth, it fits perfectly, for evil serves as a throne for good, as in the verse, "And Pharaoh drew near" (Exodus 14:10). Alternatively, by witnessing the deeds of the wicked, one derives satisfaction from knowing they are righteous, experiencing a sense of pleasure and delight even through the existence of evil. In this way, evil is also elevated slightly, but when ascending from there, "all workers of iniquity will be scattered" (Psalms 92:10).

Similarly, an evil thought serves as a throne in this manner. The Baal Shem Tov also stated that a spark of a soul from Atzilut occasionally descends into Asiyah, observing how people treat the honor of the King of the universe with levity. It feels pain over the dishonor shown to the King. Subsequently, it experiences delight not from their actions but from its own distinction and closeness to the divine.

This explains the verse, *"And the Lord said to Abram"*—interpreted as referring to the soul, which is called "Abram," as stated in the Zohar. *"Go forth from your land"*—this means from Atzilut to Beriah; *"and from your birthplace"*—from Beriah to Yetzirah; *"and from your father's house"*—from Yetzirah to Asiyah. The "land that I will show you" refers to Asiyah. The phrase *"that I will show you"* means that there, in Asiyah, you will see the deeds of the people of the world of action, how they treat His glory with levity, and you will rebuke them.

[NOTE: The Baal Shem Tov teaches that the Shechinah encompasses all aspects of creation, including opposites like good and evil, showing that true unity lies in their coexistence. Evil serves a purpose, often as a "throne" for good, providing opportunities for spiritual growth and elevation. Similarly, a soul descending to the world of action (Asiyah) witnesses dishonor toward God, feels pain for His glory, and is tasked with rebuking and elevating those actions, ultimately transforming the lower world into a place of divine revelation. This is symbolized in the verse "Go forth" (Lech Lecha), representing the soul's journey through spiritual realms to fulfill its mission in this world.
END NOTE]

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Siman #27

The verse *"And there was a famine in the land"* symbolizes a spiritual lack of faith and reverence for God, as explained in the Zohar. This indicates that people were treating God's honor lightly. Therefore, Abram went down to Egypt, representing his sorrow over the dishonor toward God in the world of Asiyah (the realm of action). However, this descent led to his eventual ascent from Egypt, symbolizing spiritual elevation and an increased longing to serve God. This aligns with the principle that light has greater value when emerging from darkness.

The reference to Lot, who represents the evil inclination, going "with him to the south" implies that through the presence of evil, one can derive greater joy in divine service. The evil inclination becomes subdued and transformed into a "throne" to support holiness, as the left side (evil) becomes subservient to the right (good).

Finally, the phrase *"Abram was very wealthy in livestock, silver, and gold"* signifies that he extracted sparks of holiness from Egypt, similar to the concept of Joseph gathering all the wealth in Egypt, symbolizing the elevation of divine sparks hidden within the material world.

[NOTE: The continuation of the discussion about the role of evil in relation to good focuses on the idea that light is enhanced and clarified when it emerges from darkness ("יתרון האור מן החושך"). This concept is illustrated through the verse, *"And Abram went as the Lord had spoken to him... and they came to the land of Canaan... and there was a famine in the land"* (Genesis 12:4-10). When the soul, as a spark from Atzilut (the highest spiritual realm), descends into the world of Asiyah (the realm of action, representing "the land that I will show you"), it observes a lack of faith ("חסרי אמונה") and disrespect for God's honor, as the Zohar describes. This lack of faith symbolizes the "famine in the land." The verse continues with Abram descending to Egypt, a term that also means "narrowness" (מצרים = מיצר), symbolizing the soul's distress over the dishonor toward God in the world of Asiyah.

However, this descent ultimately leads to spiritual ascent, as stated in the verse, *"And Abram went up from Egypt"* (Genesis 13:1). Through this process, the soul grows in its longing and delight in divine service, as light becomes more appreciated when contrasted with darkness. This illustrates the advantage of overcoming spiritual challenges. Furthermore, the darkness (evil) itself becomes a tool to serve holiness. This is reflected in the continuation of the verse, *"And Lot went with him to the south."* Lot, representing the evil inclination, joins this ascent, as the struggle with the evil

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inclination enhances the soul's spiritual growth. The "darkness" is thus transformed into a throne for holiness, subdued and utilized in the service of God.

The text explains that even the evil inclination (יצר הרע) can ascend and be elevated alongside the righteous person. Through the existence of evil, the righteous derive greater delight and devotion in their service to God. This results in the evil itself being uplifted, becoming a "throne" (כיסא)—a tool and vessel for increased holiness. The "left side" (representing impurity) becomes subservient to the "right side" (representing holiness), aiding and enhancing the righteous person's spiritual growth.

This is reflected in the verse, *"And Abram was very wealthy in livestock, silver, and gold."* This signifies that Abram extracted sparks of holiness from "Egypt" (symbolizing impurity or evil). Even within realms of evil, there are hidden sparks of holiness, the inner goodness for which these things were created. When evil serves as a "throne" for good and its divine purpose is revealed, the sparks of holiness within are elevated and restored to their rightful place.

The wealth that Abram amassed—symbolized by livestock, silver, and gold—represents the sparks of holiness he uplifted. This idea parallels the story of Joseph, who *"gathered all the silver in the land of Egypt"* (Genesis 47:14), meaning he elevated the hidden sparks of holiness concealed within Egypt and brought them into the realm of holiness.

END NOTE]

Siman #28a

It is known, as written in *Etz Chaim*, the connection between the mitzvah of circumcision (*milah*) and the concept of *Chashmal*. I see it fitting to interpret these ideas as relevant to Torah study, prayer, and the depths of mitzvot. This is the secret of *Chashmal*, as I received from my teacher, the Baal Shem Tov: the process of submission (*hachna'ah*), separation (*havdalah*), and sweetening (*hamtakah*) that is required in all engagement with Torah and prayer.

The term *Chashmal* (חֶשֶׁמֶל) represents this process:

1. **ח"ש (Chash)**: To remain silent and subdued, restraining oneself until the barriers (*klippot*) are removed.
2. **מ"ל (Mal)**: To speak and articulate words that sweeten judgments at their root.

This concept applies to prayer, as my teacher explained in the name of his master. The *Chashmal* process involves separating distracting thoughts from one's mind, thereby distancing the *klippot* (negative forces) from the Shechinah (Divine Presence). The term

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Mal holds two meanings: (1) speech and (2) cutting or separating, both of which are interconnected.

Thus, the secret of *Chashmal* involves cutting away the *klippot* (submission and separation) and then engaging in speech (sweetening) through Torah study and prayer. This allows one to elevate and refine the divine energy concealed within, aligning it with holiness.

Siman #28b

If the teacher resembles an angel, as implied in the letters of *Ke'ilam* (כָּאֵלִים), they must embody *Chashmal*—remaining silent (*chash*) while cutting away and removing the *klippot* (negative forces), to be cautious of externalities. Only then, Torah may be sought from their mouth, as their words will enter the listener's heart and bear fruit.

This is also understood in the command "*Lech Lecha*" (*Go forth*)—to distance oneself from the three stages of submission (*hachna'ah*), separation (*havdalah*), and sweetening (*hamtakah*), as explained by my teacher of blessed memory. The verse warns to detach from the coarseness of materiality and the influence of the *klippot*, which cause arrogance of spirit, saying, "*Go forth from your land*" (אֲרָצְךָ)—leading to submission.

"*From your birthplace*" refers to breaking away from idolatry, the root of the *klippot*, inherited from the father's influence. As the Ra'avad explains in *Sefer Yetzirah*, the builder's strength is found in the construction, meaning the father's influence persists in the child. Therefore, one must separate from and elevate these inherited *klippot*.

"*From your father's house*" alludes to Terach, who died in Haran, symbolizing the state of divine anger (*charon af*) before Abraham. Terach represents judgment (*din*) and severity (*gevurah*), while Abram represents loving-kindness (*chesed*). Abram's task was to sweeten judgment at its root, blending *chesed* and *din*, as taught elsewhere by my teacher of blessed memory.

After sweetening the judgment, one can attain the level of "*the land that I will show you*"—a state of divine clarity and purpose. Understand this deeply.

Siman #29

From the Baal Shem Tov:

The phrase "*You are the Lord, our God*" can be understood as follows: When a person perceives themselves as being directly present before God (*Ata*—"You"), they are

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actually distant from God. The term *Afa* indicates directness and closeness but paradoxically reflects a hidden and distant state in this context.

Conversely, when a person perceives themselves as hidden and distant from God (*Hu*—"He"), acknowledging their separation and concealment, they are actually close and directly connected to the Divine Presence. This is the meaning of "*You are the Lord, our God*", emphasizing a profound spiritual paradox: true closeness comes through recognizing one's humility and distance before God.