

Bombing Saddam: Israel's Strike on Iraq's Nuclear Reactor

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As it would have looked from the deck of the king's yacht in the Gulf of Aqaba — desert-tan fighters, bombs under their wings, flying east.

The Osirak raid, and the small accidents that nearly stopped it — a piece that also appears in Sixty Seconds from Armageddon.

King Hussein bin Talal of Jordan was lounging on the deck of his royal yacht in the Gulf of Aqaba, the northeastern arm of the Red Sea. It was a gloriously sunny day and he was gazing into the beautiful, clear, azure waters and its abundance of colorful fish when a noise in the distance caught his attention.

It was coming from the direction of Israel.

He looked up and suddenly saw F-16s jet fighters streaking toward him skimming close to the surface of the water. As they roared toward the royal yacht, he could clearly make out the desert-tan camouflage paint on the fuselages and, more alarmingly, two huge bombs hanging from beneath the wings of each aircraft.

Then the planes screamed overhead, causing the wooden planks of the deck beneath his feet to tremble violently. A moment later a second group of four fighters shook the air again as they thundered past.

Immediately, King Hussein grabbed a secure ship-to-shore telephone and told his officer on the yacht to call the Command Center in Amman, Jordan's capital, to tell the "brothers" [the Iraqis] that the Israelis are coming to blow up the [nuclear] reactor.

This was just one of several instances how a slight twist of fate — something we call *hashgachah*, or the Hidden Hand — threatened to ruin one of the most well-planned military raids in history.

Saddam's Reactor

The Osirak nuclear reactor was the pride and joy of Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein. Lacking scientific know-how and the resources to construct the reactor with internal resources, "Great Uncle," as Hussein liked to be called ("Terror on the Tigris," as his many enemies referred to him), looked to the West and found a willing partner in French Prime Minister Jacques Chirac. They cut a deal in 1975, with the French supplying a reactor in exchange for large quantities of cheap Iraqi oil.

Originally called *Osiris* — after an Egyptian god — the reactor was renamed *Osirak* by the French (a combination of the words Osiris and Iraq) in commemoration of the partnership between the two states. The Iraqis, however, called it *Tammuz 1*, ostensibly for the Babylonian month in which Saddam Hussein's Ba'ath Party had seized control of the Iraqi government in 1968. The Israelis saw in the name *Tammuz 1* the month when the Babylonian tyrant Nevuchadnetzar breached the walls of Jerusalem almost 2,500 years earlier. Indeed, Saddam Hussein openly declared his admiration for the ancient Babylonian monarch and his desire to mirror his achievements. Furthermore, the entire one-quarter-mile square complex of buildings, labs and plants surrounding the reactor was called by the Iraqis *Tammuz 17* — that infamous date on the Jewish calendar when Nevuchadnetzar first breached Jerusalem's walls!

As part of the reactor-for-oil deal, the French also agreed to supply the Iraqis with 100 Mirage F-1 fighter aircraft, 100,000 French-built cars (Peugots and Renaults) — and one more item that worried the Israelis: 72 kilograms of enriched uranium-235 (U-235).

Nuclear reactors can, of course, be used for peaceful purposes. In fact, it's not feasible to create nuclear weapons if the reactor has access to nothing more than "low-grade" uranium. However, enriched uranium-235 is "weapons-grade" uranium; it can be used to make nuclear bombs.

When the agreement was announced, the French government defended its actions, saying that the facility would be used for peaceful purposes only. The inclusion of weapons-grade uranium, however, openly contradicted those claims. Iraq had much more oil than it could use. Why did one of the most oil-rich countries in the world need a nuclear reactor? And if it did need a reactor, why did it need the type of uranium that could be turned into an atomic bomb (two to three Hiroshima-size bombs per year, according to Israeli estimates)?

Later, under pressure, France announced that it would not send Iraq the enriched uranium. Then Saddam Hussein threatened to suspend payments — and perhaps even oil shipments — if the French backed out. It was weapons-grade uranium or no deal, he made clear. The French caved in and agreed to supply the U-235.

Notwithstanding these ominous signs, the deal failed to raise meaningful opposition by any nation... other than Israel. Richard V. Allen, National Security Advisor to President Ronald Reagan from 1981 to 1982, later admitted, “Satellite photography was providing data on construction of a reactor. I recall having seen it or heard mention of it during the transition from the Carter administration to Reagan administration. But I don’t recall us paying any particular attention to the progress of that reactor, nor were we particularly alarmed by it.”

“There was no attention given to it,” General Alexander Haig, Secretary of State from 1981-82, flatly admitted.

Everyone knew the real purpose of the reactor was military, but no one other than the Israelis was willing to sound the alarm about it.

The Great Butcher

It’s hard to understand how the major powers in the 1970s could be so cavalier about the prospect of Saddam Hussein acquiring “the bomb.” Hussein was not only one of the most ruthless dictators of the 20th century (no small feat), but he had no compunction against using weapons of mass destruction on his own civilian populations.

In March 1988, he authorized the use of poison gas to murder thousands of civilians in the Iraqi Kurdish town of Halabja. That was part of an extermination campaign against the Kurds that’s estimated to have claimed between 50,000 to 100,000 lives, including mass executions of many tens of thousands of noncombatants.

After Iraq lost the Gulf War in 1991, Hussein authorized the massacre of an estimated additional 20,000 to 100,000 Kurds, as well as 60,000 to 130,000 Shiites. He also started the bitter Iraq-Iran

war (1980-1988), which led to the deaths of between a million to a million-and-a-half people, including some 100,000 Iranians from chemical weapons.

When Hussein became absolute dictator of Iraq in 1979, one of his first moves was to call in high-ranking officials to a meeting, congratulate them for their past and future loyalty... and then put them on trial for treason and execute them. On videotape, which Hussein personally ordered, he can be seen laughing as the frightened men were marched away to their deaths. By August 1979, hundreds of prominent Iraqi politicians had been executed.

It was an auspicious start to the career of the great dictator and one of the century's bloodiest butchers.

Saddam's Nuclear Ambitions

Early in his reign, Saddam Hussein had become obsessed with acquiring atomic weapons, and the man who planted the seed of that obsession was none other than Yasser Arafat, the father of modern terrorism and leader of the Palestine Liberation Organization.

One of the most talked-about books in the Arab world at that time was *The Israeli Bomb* by a Palestinian named Fouad Jabir. Baghdad itself had become flooded with Palestinian refugees ever since the Black September uprising in 1970, when Jordan's King Hussein thwarted a plot by the PLO to overthrow him. Arafat got his people to make sure Jabir's book was brought to the attention of Hussein.

Khidhir Hamza, whom Hussein eventually appointed to lead his nuclear development team, later said that the Iraqi dictator not only believed the book, but ordered him to create an atomic bomb, even as Saddam's government denied using its nuclear research facilities to build a bomb. Hamza relates the following incident when, one day, the Iraqi dictator suddenly showed up at the nuclear plant:

"When are you going to deliver the plutonium?" he asked the assembled scientists straight out, as guards shut the doors behind him.

An awkward silence hung in the room.

"I *said*," he repeated, "when are you going to deliver the plutonium?"

"Plutonium... for what?" the leading scientist, Dr. Hussein al-Shahristani, finally replied.

Saddam looked at him, annoyed. "When will you deliver the plutonium for the *bomb*?"

“Bomb? We can’t make a bomb,” al-Shahristani almost stuttered. “Well, theoretically, we could, I suppose, if we had enough plutonium... but there are nuclear nonproliferation treaties...”

“Treaties are a matter for *us* to deal with,” Saddam said brusquely, cutting him off. “You, as a scientist, should not be troubled by these things. You should be doing your job and not have these kinds of excuses.”

Hussein then glared at the group of scientists, who all stared at the floor. Finally, he seemed to make up his mind about something, then turned and walked out the door.

The next day, al-Shahristani was not at work. He was not seen again in the facility. In fact, as Hamza would learn later, he was jailed in the most brutal prison in Iraq.

Israeli intelligence predicted that Iraq would have enough plutonium to produce two atomic bombs by 1982. Having verified the capabilities of the reactor through several international independent sources, Israeli Prime Minister Begin found himself with no option other than to set into motion a plan, either through diplomacy, espionage or military action to stop the reactor from going hot.

Sabotage

For the Israelis, destroying the reactor *after* it had already been built in Iraq was not the best option. Begin, therefore, authorized the Mossad, Israel’s foreign intelligence service, to see what it could do about the matter.

In early 1979, they discovered that the French were about to ship the core of the nuclear reactor to Iraq and that it was to be stored in a warehouse in a tiny French town on the Mediterranean, La Seyne-sur-Mer. On April 6, 1979, two cargo trucks carrying Mirage jet engines from a French manufacturing plant sped along the highway. Barely noticed, a third identical truck pulled in behind them. The convoy of now three trucks eventually pulled up to the gate of the heavily fenced compound while the security officer checked the paperwork of the first officer. The guards, more concerned with shipments going out than coming in, waved all the trucks through, including the third one.

Quietly, this last truck veered away and pulled up outside a huge storage bay. Climbing down from the cab, the driver momentarily surveyed the compound, then moved to the back of the truck and unlatched the doors. Six men, all dressed in street clothes, quickly dropped to the ground. Five of the men were *neviots*, Mossad break-in specialists trained in sabotage and bugging. The sixth was an Israeli nuclear engineer.

Inside the bay, crated and marked for shipment to Iraq, were the finished cores to the Osirak nuclear reactor, arguably the most critical components of the reactor. Crated nearby were more reactor parts and a huge metal block designed to house atomic batteries. Alongside the Iraqi shipment was a device for loading nuclear fuel into a reactor, scheduled for shipment to a Belgian company, and a specially designed lid to a container to store radioactive materials, ordered by a West German firm.

As the Israeli nuclear engineer quickly pointed out the most damaging places in the cores to plant the five plastic explosive charges, outside the compound gates other Israeli agents staged a hit-and-run car accident. When the French guards crossed the street to help the downed pedestrian, a deafening explosion shook the village like an earthquake, blowing out windows blocks away from the plant and engulfing the shipping warehouse in flames.

Afterward, the Israelis were not the only ones suspected of committing the act. The French also suspected Libya, the PLO, the Russians and even their own French secret service, which had been known to have grave misgivings about the Paris-Baghdad treaty.

Despite the success of the mission, the Seyne-sur-Mer explosion merely delayed the installation of the cores. It was an annoyance to be sure, but after several months construction at Osirak returned more or less on schedule.

The Mossad made other attempts to sabotage the operation, but in the end admitted to Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin that it had exhausted its resources.

As early as 1978, Begin had ordered his staff to put together tentative plans for a raid on the reactor, but had hoped that it would never have to take place. Now, it was clear that there was no other choice. It was time to ask the IAF to blueprint several possibilities of how to neutralize Saddam Hussein's plans to get the bomb.

Operation Babylon

General Ivry's initial plan called for armed incursion into Iraq using helicopters and assault troops on the ground. However, a similar mission on April 24, 1980, by the United States military to rescue 52 American hostages from the US Embassy in Tehran was a complete disaster and forced the Israelis to rethink their plan.

Before an alternative plan could be conceived, a seemingly unrelated event in the Middle East took place that set in motion a chain of fortuitous events for Israel.

In 1979, radical Islamic fundamentalists overthrew the Shah of Iran (a month after Jimmy Carter had toasted the shah for maintaining an “island of stability” in his troubled corner of the world). Prior to the coup, the shah had ordered 160 new, top-of-the-line F-16 fighters that the US could no longer deliver to the new government in Iran, which was hostile to America. Consequently, the State Department offered a number of the fighters to Israel. The Israelis were only too happy to accept.

What an incredible stroke of open *hashgachah*! Before July 1980, Israel couldn’t even dream of a plan using the vaunted F-16. Now the advanced fighter had fallen into its lap just when it needed it most. And that *hashgachah*, no less, arrived in the form of a coup by Iranian Islamic fundamentalists (the same fundamentalists ideologically that now rule Iran!). This is one of the many examples of the Hidden Hand at work behind the scenes.

Israeli planners swiftly drew up plans to use the F-16s to bomb the reactor.

Then, on September 22, 1980, an unexpected turn of events threatened those plans. Hoping to take advantage of revolutionary chaos in Iran and supplant it as the dominant Persian Gulf state, Saddam Hussein broke his treaty with Iran and invaded. Hostilities quickly escalated and the two nations entered into a state of all-out war, conducting air and large-scale ground assaults that would last eight bloody years.

Then, on the evening of September 30, a little more than a week after hostilities began, two Iranian F-4 jets bombed al-Tuwaitha. Although the bombs damaged some laboratories and support facilities, none hit the reactor. In the end, the damage was minor.

Menachem Begin was furious, privately blasting the incompetent Iranians who could not “finish the job.” Worse, Iraq now put all its anti-aircraft defenses on “high alert,” and, as an extra precaution, launched a ring of tethered balloons 20-feet high around the nuclear center’s walls to interfere with low-flying bombers. Ivry’s already nearly impossible attack plan was now even more difficult.

As a result, several Israeli leaders used this to vehemently oppose the plan. Over the next several months, heated debates raged at the highest echelons of government. When reports came in that the Iraqis had resumed construction on the reactor, Prime Minister Menachem Begin called for a top-secret security meeting for a decisive vote.

To discuss the mission in detail, he called in General Ivry who brought with him Zeev Raz and another officer who had planned the mission. Together, they outlined the entire raid for the ministers in precise detail, from takeoff to return. The exacting specifications of the plan and its

exhaustive attention to every detail clearly impressed the assembled ministers. Raz confidently answered every question and put to rest any doubts.

At the end of the presentation, Begin called for a vote. The mission was unanimously approved.

“What are we calling the attack?” Begin asked his chief of staff, General Rafael Eitan, at the end of the meeting. The bushy-eyed chief of staff fixed the prime minister in his stare.

“The noise of battle is in the land, the noise of great destruction,” Eitan recited, quoting *Yirmiyah* [50:22]. “Before your eyes I will repay Babylon and all who live in Babylonia for all the wrong they have done in Tzion, declares *Hashem*” [51:24].

Eitan smiled thinly. “We will call it Operation Babylon.”

Bombing Iraq’s Reactor

The new F-16 fighter was designed by pilots for pilots. Conceived as a faster, smaller, lighter complement to the F-15, the single-engine craft accommodating a single pilot was a breakthrough in fighter technology.

Instead of the traditional mechanical control stick between the pilot’s legs, the F-16 is operated by fly by wire (FBW), a computerized control system guided by a pressure-sensitive handle. This unique handle sends electrical impulses to a computer that controls the steering of the aircraft.

The cockpit seat in the F-16 was designed at a 30-degree tilt, allowing the pilot to withstand more G-forces for sharp maneuvers — typically, increased gravitational pressure caused by steep turns can make a 165-pound pilot weigh 600 pounds — and enabling him to scan virtually 360 degrees for enemy planes on his tail.

“It’s cozy. It’s built like a glove,” one of the pilots explained. “Much easier to fly than an F-15. A lot of thought about the pilot’s ability to do several things at the same time went into designing it — for instance, the ability to maneuver the airplane while operating the radar and weapon systems. It’s a fighter pilot’s fighter.”

The F-16s would require a new squadron made up of Israel’s “top guns.” Twelve pilots were chosen, eight of whom would fly the mission: Zeev Raz, Amos Yadlin, Doobie Yaffe, Hagai Katz, Amir Nachumi, Iftach Spector, Relik Shafir and Ilan Ramon.

Although the pilots were aware that they had been chosen for a special mission, they were not initially given details. Several of them, though, tried to figure out what it was. For instance, when General Ivry told Amir Nachumi and Zeev Raz that he had chosen them to be group leaders

because they had “experience in air-to-ground missions,” Nachumi saw Raz raise his eyebrows ever so slightly. Reading between the lines, the two realized they were to prepare for a bombing mission. They went straight from the meeting to an operations room with a huge map of the Middle East. Using a calculator, they quickly determined the optimum distance of the F-16 to be 560 miles. Nachumi cut a piece of string to match the map’s legend of 600 miles, pinning the string at Tel Aviv and then tracing a 600-mile circle around the map. Looking at his rotating bull’s-eye, Raz guessed somewhere inside Syria.

Ilan Ramon, 26, was the youngest of the eight pilots — and would one day become Israel’s first astronaut. Ramon had been assigned as the squadron navigator. As a result, early on he had been apprised of the mission profile: a low-level, 600-mile flight with a tailwind to mission target; then a 600-mile, low-high return (which meant climbing and flying at high altitude) into headwinds. In the Middle East, the prevailing winds are always easterly, blowing from the Mediterranean Sea, which sits off the western coast of Israel. Going with a tailwind meant flying east. Looking 600 miles to the east on the map, Ramon was led to only one conclusion: Iraq. But where in Iraq, he wondered... Baghdad?

Regardless of the target, all of the pilots were exhilarated to have been chosen to initiate Israel’s state-of-the-art fighter and train on them at an American air force base in Utah. It was only after the pilots had returned from their formal training in the United States that General Ivry revealed the details of the mission to the group. Ivry showed them a large map of the world with a small pin in an area southeast of Baghdad, over 600 miles away, and then told them that there was a nuclear reactor there.

Their reaction was as he expected — they were shocked. They didn’t know that Iraq had a nuclear program, let alone how they would fly to Baghdad. The route itself would take the pilots first over the southern tip of Jordan, then across northern Saudi Arabia, both sworn enemies of Israel. After crossing the Saudi border into Iraq, the pilots would set a course straight for Baghdad.

Because the round trip would cover more than 1,200 miles, the pilots had to figure a way to train by simulating that distance while remaining in Israeli airspace. At that time, Israel still had the Sinai Peninsula, so the pilots could fly down to its southern tip at Sharm el-Sheikh and then even down into the Red Sea and back. They had to fly several times back and forth to simulate the mission.

The next problem was that the 1,200 mile flight to Baghdad and back was beyond the range of the F-16. They could fly there, but they would not have enough fuel to return back to Israel. To maintain secrecy during the flight, midair refueling was not feasible. The only option was for the

Israelis to modify the F-16s and scale them down. This meant adding two additional fuel tanks, one under each wing, and eliminating everything but essential equipment.

Among the “non-essential” equipment discarded were the electronic ports used to jam enemy radar. In effect, this made the aircraft defenseless. From the pilots’ perspective they were sitting ducks.

A Reactor Grows in Baghdad

Over time, the dome-shaped reactor had grown into a kind of nuclear Oz, which included many buildings, such as the offices of the chemical conversion factory where spent nuclear fuel could be transformed into plutonium, the fundamental element of atomic bombs. As the target day fast approached, the Mossad kept an eye on the progress of the reactor with the help of top-secret US spy satellites that it had been given access to. The photos revealed that the facility had been fortified with an impressive array of new batteries of anti-aircraft artillery and strategic surface-to-air missiles known as SAMs.

During the Yom Kippur War, the effectiveness of the Soviet-made SAM-6 missiles had shocked the Israelis. They had been used to having air superiority over the battlefield. In the first two days of fighting, however, 40 Israeli planes had been shot down near the Suez Canal, most of them by SAM-6 batteries.

Clearly the situation in Baghdad had progressed faster and more ominously than anyone had thought.

Then on June 1, a French newspaper reported that the construction of the reactor was complete. It would now only be a matter of months before the facility was fully operational. The Israelis felt any raid had to occur well before nuclear fuel was loaded. Once the reactor was radioactive, any bombing would bring the risk of fallout and large civilian casualties.

Therefore, on June 6, Prime Minister Begin summoned General Ivry to his residence. The operation, he announced, would take place the day after tomorrow, Sunday, June 7.

Zero Hour

Sunday, June 7, 1981, was a typical summer day throughout Israel. There was nothing to indicate this was going to be anything but just another Sunday.

However, at Etzion, the secret Israeli airbase in the Sinai, June 7 was anything but typical. The entire base had been locked down since Friday. All flight and support crews had been warned not

to talk to anyone or ask any questions.

As zero hour approached, each pilot inspected his aircraft and mentally prepared for the most important mission of his life. The final briefing came later that morning and was delivered, surprisingly, by none other than General Rafael Eitan. Just four days before the attack, his son Yoram had been killed in his Israeli-made Kfir fighter during a training exercise. The tragic event had shaken every pilot in the IAF. Now, the bereaved general's presence electrified the fighters as he spoke to them about the enormity of the undertaking.

"This is an important mission, and a dangerous mission. I worry for your safety," he said, in a fatherly voice clear and strong, but strangely soft. "This is no ordinary mission. Never before has the Israeli Air Force flown an attack to such a distant point and for such an urgent need. Our history as a nation and as a people is at stake.

"Our people have overcome the agony of the Holocaust. We've survived wars in 1948, 1956, 1967, the War of Attrition in 1970, and the Yom Kippur War. And now we are faced with the greatest threat — annihilation and destruction with atomic bombs by a madman terrorist who cares nothing for human life. We must not allow him to achieve the ability to build the bomb that could destroy us."

The room seemed to almost shake with the energy pulsing through the bodies of the men. After the briefing, the pilots had several hours to be alone with their thoughts and to contemplate what lay ahead.

"That was when I first felt the gravity of the mission," Amir Nachumi said.

Israel Shafir, popularly called "Relik" or "the Major," was the unofficial squadron philosopher. "The worst part," he said, "was that the mission was so secret that I could not share the information with my wife or anybody else. But," he continued, "I remember that I came to peace with myself on the day of the mission because I'm named after my grandfather who had died in a concentration camp and I felt that I was flying for him. There's a calm knowing that there is a meaning to whatever happens to you. Many of us were grandsons or sons of people who had been through the Holocaust, and we were part of a mission that was to prevent another Holocaust."

Years later Shafir sat down and told the story of the mission in his own words, from the inside of the cockpit. That conversation is on this site as well, and it is the companion piece to this one.

At exactly 4:01 PM, the pilots fired up their engines and taxied to the runway. In an attempt to carry as much fuel as possible, the jets underwent a very dangerous and precarious maneuver called

“hot refueling,” which had never been done before. This entailed bringing tankers to the runway and refueling them with the engines on as the pilots sat inside their cockpits waiting for takeoff.

Moments later, the squadron’s technical officer gave the pilots the thumbs-up signal.

Zeev Raz, the lead pilot, was first. He tried to suppress his great fear — not getting off the ground. Would his plane really take off with all the weight it was carrying?

As he taxied down the runway, he saw he wasn’t gaining enough speed. As he passed by different markers where normally an aircraft would be airborne and heading off into the blue, he was still on the tarmac. He was afraid he was going to run out of runway. A pilot trains himself to control his emotions, but they were threatening to burst through his best psychological defenses.

Then, just beyond the last marker, his overloaded plane lifted itself into the air.

One-by-one, all eight of the F-16s cleared the runway and headed east. The mission was underway.

The Yacht

Within minutes, the streaking F-16s were over the Gulf of Aqaba and descended to the unthinkable altitude of only 100 feet above the ground to avoid enemy radar. Then, as they encroached upon Jordanian airspace, disaster struck....

Skimming so close to the surface of the choppy water that they could almost smell the salt spray, they saw several yachts at anchor below. Within a second, they blew by the boats and were across the gulf. Unbeknown to them at the time, one was the yacht of King Hussein of Jordan!

Immediately, the king grabbed a secure ship-to-shore telephone and told his officer on the yacht to call the Command Center in Amman, Jordan’s capital, to tell the “brothers” [the Iraqis] that the Israelis were coming to blow up the reactor.

The pilots, under strict radio silence and unaware of the potential danger below, proceeded on course. For some reason never properly explained, King Hussein’s message was never received — other than the fact that the Hidden Hand was at work once again.

Jettisoning the Fuel Tanks

After escaping Jordanian airspace, the eight F-16s entered Saudi Arabian airspace and its rows of sand dunes stretching toward the horizon as far as the eye could see. Avoiding detection would be even more difficult now. The Saudis had recently taken delivery of a fleet of AWAC spy planes from the US. These planes with advanced radar systems patrolled Saudi Arabia continuously, searching for enemy encroachments.

To further complicate matters, the landscape had changed drastically. Flying just 100 feet above the ground now became a challenging task even for the most seasoned of the Israeli pilots as they negotiated the peaks and valleys that dotted the topography.

It was over Saudi Arabia that the squadron had to execute the first of several never-before-tried dangerous maneuvers: jettisoning the now empty extra fuel tanks. Weighing 250 pounds, each F-16 had a total of two extra tanks, one housed under each of its wings and each sitting right next to 2,000 pound bombs. The tanks were not designed to be released while carrying bombs because they could easily collide with the bombs and cause them to explode. It was so dangerous that US regulations prohibited it. It was so dangerous that it was the only maneuver the Israeli pilots had not practiced during their intensive training, which had begun some 10 months earlier.

Now, at the point of no return and in enemy airspace, no one knew for sure what would happen when they released the tanks. But they had no choice. The extra fuel tanks were the only way to get to Baghdad and back.

The moment of truth had arrived. Lead pilot Raz would be the guinea pig. Knowing that releasing the extra fuel tanks could blow up his plane, he hesitated ever so slightly. Not only his life, but the entire mission rested on a risky action the preparation-obsessed Israelis had never tried.

Finally, Raz took a deep breath, reached forward, and pulled the switch to release the tanks. He rolled the plane to the left a bit to see if the tanks had cleared the wings. He felt no jolt to the plane, but did notice an immediate increase in flight speed, which could only have resulted from the sudden trimming of nearly 500 pounds of metal.

Behind him, Katz saw Raz's two external tanks — one, then the other — separate from the wing undercarriages, float in midair for a split second, then tumble end over end to the desert sands below. Then the other pilots followed suit and also jettisoned their tanks successfully.

Somewhere in the Saudi desert, those 16 wing fuel tanks are probably still there to this day.

The Attack

Some 90 minutes later, the pilots were nearing Iraqi airspace.

Amos Yadlin was one of the first to spot the ancient Euphrates River. He had never seen such a huge river in his life. It stretched on and on between its shallow muddy banks, flowing lazily past mudflats and sand pits seemingly forever. No wonder it had figured so prominently in history, he mused.

Then, something on the ground caught Yadlin's attention. Bizarrely, Iraqi infantrymen on the far bank were waving enthusiastically at the Israelis as they zoomed overhead, obviously mistaking the planes for their own. (From a video taken by one of the F-16s, the cheering Iraqis can be seen from the far bank of the Euphrates.)

At 5:35 PM, the pilots passed the Euphrates River in western Iraq, the designated landmark to begin the bombing runs. Each pilot accelerated his airspeed.

The orange ball of the evening sun slipped lazily toward the horizon just outside Baghdad on June 7, 1981.

Khidhir Hamza, the head of Iraq's nuclear weapons program, was hot and upset. He was still fuming at the driver who rammed his car a week earlier, and he was upset at the repair shop that was making him wait in the parking lot to pick up his car. Didn't they know what an important person he was?

Suddenly, his thoughts were shattered by the sound of thunder. Turning west toward the direction of the sound, he shaded his eyes from the harsh glare of the sun.

Faster than he could react, a pair of jet fighters roared overhead just above the rooftops. And then, in equally rapid succession, another pair streaked by.

Oh my G-d! Hamza thought to himself.

As the implications began to churn in his mind, yet another pair of very low-flying fighters thundered past... followed by yet another pair.

Then it dawned on him. Those were not Iraqi jets... and they were all heading straight toward the concrete dome of the nuclear research center, a mile and a half away!

Oh my G-d!

At around the same time, Jacques Rimbaud sat lost in his thoughts enjoying a drink of water on a patio café in the small village of al-Tuwaitha, 11 miles southeast of Baghdad. Rimbaud was one of the technicians with whom the French had supplied Iraq to construct the nuclear reactor, which was situated in al-Tuwaitha.

Like most of the French technicians, Rimbaud took Sundays off, especially Sunday evenings, even though it was a workday for Iraqis.

Suddenly, his drink began to shake, and he was jolted from his reveries by the deafening scream of jet fighters, which streaked over his head seemingly out of nowhere.

“Baghdad Ahead!”

“Lock on... don’t panic... Baghdad ahead,” squadron leader Zeev Raz said.

To each of the pilots’ shock, they were not greeted with the anticipated anti-aircraft. There were no fighters over Baghdad. Part of it was immaculate Israeli planning and part of it was pure luck (and code word for *hashgachah*, the Hidden Hand).

The time the raid took place was factored into the attack strategy. As the Mossad had discovered, the Iraqi units manning the anti-aircraft batteries had a habit of breaking for supper every night before six o’clock — one of the reasons Ivry had planned the attack time for after 6:30, Baghdad time. However, they expected Iraqi radar to pick up their presence. For some inexplicable reason, though, before heading to the center’s cafeteria, the battery teams shut down their radars.

Even if they hadn’t, any attention the Iraqis paid to an attack was toward the east, the direction the Iranians would come from, as they had in their earlier attack on the reactor. No one in Iraq expected an attack from the west.

Popping Up

During training, the pilots had practiced a maneuver called “pop-up.” Bombing from a flat approach would have caused the bombs to ricochet off the concrete dome. Instead, the pilots would “pop up” — that is, pull the nose of the plane up, hit the afterburners, and climb to an altitude of between 4,000 and 10,000 feet so they could begin an angled dive at about 30 degrees.

The first pair, Raz and Yadlin, now executed the “pop-up.” With a flick of his wrist, their F-16 fighters — which had been rocketing just 100 feet off the ground to avoid enemy radar — shot upward and climbed into the sky, which was still aglow with orange rays of the setting sun. In seconds, they were 4,500 feet high.

Then Raz flicked his wrists in the other direction, and the plane arched steeply downward into attack position, heading straight for the target — the Osirak nuclear reactor. Suddenly, Raz realized that something was terribly wrong. *Oh my G-d*, he thought. *I’m too far. I’m going to overshoot the target!*

Yadlin realized the same thing in a horror-stricken moment. Raz, the leader, had started his descent too far beyond the target. Instantly, Yadlin had visions of being shot down by anti-aircraft fire, having to bail out, being captured alive and then hanged publicly in a square in Baghdad.

Yadlin realized that he had at most a four- or five-second window before the Iraqi radar fixed him. He had seen half a squadron lost to SAMs in 1973. Nine good men from his unit were killed. The

F-16s were already outgunned, and now the leader was hesitating. Yadlin decided in a flash he could not wait.

He dropped the nose of his plane and cut in beneath Raz's plane, heading straight down "the chute," hurtling at the target. Everything else just faded away. Outside the glass canopy, Yadlin saw the dome beneath growing larger as he grew closer.

Then he squeezed the trigger and pulled back the control stick. He felt the release clips free the two bombs, and the plane seemed to jump ahead with the sudden loss of 4,000 pounds. The F-16 responded immediately, banking radically and climbing. He looked over his shoulder back down at the Osirak dome and watched both of his bombs pierce the shell of the cupola and disappear inside. Then he was gone, racing to high altitude.

Meanwhile, despite the realization that he had overflown the "pop-up" point and was too close, Raz did not give up and pulled a maneuver that would become legendary in fighter pilot circles. He pulled all the way back on the stick, angling the F-16 backward and, finally, all the way over, executing a maneuver pilots call an "overturn," an incredible, circus-like loop-de-loop in which his F-16 turned full circle like a Ferris wheel. Raz's astounding 360-degree backflip over the target, under enemy fire, repositioned him at a perfect angle to his target. He squeezed off the 2,000 pound bombs with 100 percent accuracy, and then immediately cut 90 degrees left to begin his escape.

The Second Pair

Pilots Doobie Yaffe and Hagai Katz, flying the second pair of Israeli jets, were just seconds behind leaders Raz and Yadlin. Skimming treetops, Yaffe felt his adrenalin flowing as the moment for him to "pop-up" into attack position approached. The flight until now had been strangely peaceful and uneventful.

Then, he heard something that made his heart almost stop. Listening keenly to his headset, he could make out what sounded like the chatter of Iraqi pilots stationed at the nearby Al Habbaniyah air base. Had they been alerted? If so, the entire mission was in jeopardy....

Moments after Yaffe popped up, Katz followed closely behind him. Up ahead, they could see the Osirak dome caught in the final rays of sunlight. As they neared, Katz observed that the dome had already partially collapsed, its shiny arc marred by jagged holes left by Raz's and Yadlin's delayed-fuse bombs.

Then, Yaffe, diving just ahead of Katz, thought he saw white puffs out of the corner of his eye to the left. Soon the sky was filling with them. Those weren't clouds, he realized with horror. It was

anti-aircraft fire.

Yaffe pulled back on the control stick and at the same time pressed the red button, releasing his two bombs. They fell cleanly away without a hitch. Seconds later, Katz released his. A total of eight 2,000-pound bombs had crashed through the now-gaping reactor dome.

Visions of 1973

Amir Nachumi, team leader of the second group of four fighters, closed the distance between Yaffe and Katz. Spector, his wingman, closed along with him. Up ahead he could see lights from a small town.

The sky above al-Tuwaitha was now filled with streaking tracers and gray clouds of exploded anti-aircraft fire. This was more fire than Nachumi, one of Israel's most experienced pilots, had ever seen in his life. For a moment, his memory took him back to an earlier combat.

Eight years earlier, on October 6, 1973, he had been stationed at the Ophir Air Force Base in Sharm el-Sheikh on the southern tip of the Sinai Peninsula when unconfirmed reports came in that Israel was being attacked. Nachumi had no way of knowing that Egypt had already crossed the banks of the Suez Canal, but he knew that if a war had begun, Egypt's first target would be Sharm el-Sheikh.

Without orders, Nachumi found his wingman, sprinted to the runway, and they each fired up their F-4 Phantoms, as ground crews secured the planes' weapons. Nachumi and his wingman taxied their jets down the runway and climbed steeply up, away from the base.

"The air controller was screaming that there were orders not to take off," Nachumi later recalled. "But, I decided to take off anyway."

Seconds later, as the two pilots circled to the west, they saw a squadron of Egyptian MiG fighters pounding the airfield below.

"I looked back," Nachumi related, "and saw smoke plumes on the runway, like cotton balls."

The Egyptians had launched the surprise attack that would become known in history as the Yom Kippur War.

Even though he had no prior combat experience, and was vastly outnumbered, Nachumi didn't hesitate. Sighting 12 enemy MiGs, he turned and dove straight toward them, got a fix on the lead plane and fired off a heat-seeking Sparrow missile. The MiG burst into flames, plummeting to the desert floor below, where it blossomed in a puff of smoke like a tiny blue mushroom.

Then, before he had time to even think about celebrating, Nachumi's engine suddenly stalled mid-flight!

Without panic, he re-fired the turbine and resumed his attack. In the end, he had shot down four MiGs, while his wingman had shot down three. As the two Phantom pilots circled above the airfield, the remaining five MiGs turned and headed back to Egypt. Nachumi would later be given the IAF's second-highest award for his bravery. Indeed, his efforts that day would make him a legend in the Israeli Air Force.

But that was eight years ago. His legendary past did not guarantee present success. Flying exactly 30 seconds behind the first set of four fighters, Nachumi wondered if he would have to utilize his air-to-air combat skills again. Despite his experience, he didn't want to engage Iraqi fighters. He and his pilots were on a bombing mission. There wasn't enough fuel to fend off fighters *and* return to Israel. Luckily — surprisingly — *hashgachah* had orchestrated it that they had encountered no enemy fighters or even anti-aircraft fire so far.

Then, as he looked into the distance, the darkening sky ahead of him suddenly lit up with sparks and flares. The air space ahead above al-Tuwaitha was filled with streaking tracers and gray clouds of exploding anti-aircraft fire.

Even for a veteran like Nachumi, it was somehow both beautiful and terrifying to behold.

He had seen Yaffe and Katz drop their bombs, but still there was no dust, no smoke. Had they hit the dome wrong? Then he remembered that the dome would contain much of the force of the initial explosions. And, furthermore, the first bombs were on a delayed fuse.

Nachumi dove down past 3,500 feet. He wanted to be absolutely sure to hit the target. At precisely 3,400 feet he released his bombs, then angled 90 degrees left and began his climb.

"The first thing I thought," he said, "was, ok, we did it. What is the worst fear of a pilot? Not to get killed, but to blow the mission. But now we did it."

The Pilot's Secret

As darkness slowly descended on June 7, 1981, Captain Iftach Spector took a deep breath. His eyes were watering and he was having trouble breathing. He felt like he was about to pass out.

Spector was both Amir Nachumi's wingman and commander. In an air force renowned for its prowess, Spector had chalked up more combat kills than any pilot in history, having served in the 1967 war, the 1973 war, and the War of Attrition. During the Yom Kippur War alone, Spector had singlehandedly shot down 15 MiGs — an almost incomprehensible number in a profession in

which veteran pilots the world over sported medals for shooting down maybe two or three enemy planes in a lifetime.

At 41, Commander Spector was easily the oldest pilot among the eight. Indeed, the planners thought him too old to fly the grueling mission, and he was *not* among those originally chosen. However, bypassing protocol and stepping over egos, he made an impassioned plea to an old friend, General David Ivry, head of Israel's air force, to be inserted into the mission. Ivry reluctantly agreed.

Despite Spector's legendary stature among the pilots, the heavy-handed way he pushed himself into the mission created tension — and not only from the pilot that he bumped from the original group. Even some of the others had doubts, albeit privately in deference to their commander and his history of achievement. They worried that Spector — who only first began training a couple of months after them — had not had nearly enough time to get comfortable with the new F-16 fighter. Any lack in one pilot was a threat to the lives of the others — to say nothing of the mission. Granted, Commander Spector was a legend, but did that mean it was in the best interests of the mission?

One of those who now had his doubts, but also dared not admit it, was Spector himself. As he watched the sky above al-Tuwaitha light up with anti-aircraft fire, he felt he was about to pass out — literally. It was not from fright that he felt dizzy, but from a bad case of the flu and a fever he had hidden from the others.

As Spector began his final approach, just seconds behind Nachumi, for a brief moment he lost track of where he was. Had he blacked out? He wasn't sure. The colonel continued his dive, struggling to keep his focus.

He realized that his lack of training time in the F-16 was a handicap at the moment. The altimeter whirled before him. He had followed Nachumi down, but something was wrong. He wasn't where he was supposed to be. At 3,400 feet he sent off the bombs. As they disappeared beneath him, Spector hit the afterburner and shot skyward.

Behind him, Osirak quickly fell away, shrinking into a tiny square on the earth below. But it was no good. Spector was far too good a combat pilot not to know that he had missed. His bombs had not hit the target. He had failed and the realization hit him like a knife to the gut.

A Thunderous Fireball

Shafir and Ramon, the final pair, followed immediately behind Spector. By now, the Iraqi guards had scrambled back to their posts and had opened fire.

The sky was thick with gunfire and the unmistakable contrails of shoulder-mounted, Soviet-made SA-7 missiles. Smaller than the radar-controlled SAM-6s, the sleek, heat-seeking SA-7s were every bit as deadly. Ilan Ramon spotted an SA-7 streaking by on the right uncomfortably close to his wing. (The thin, white contrails, he knew, were probably from SA-7s, shoulder-mounted, heat-seeking missiles. The larger and deadlier SAM-6s left a wider trail. That was small comfort at the moment. A solid hit in the exhaust from an SA-7 would be every bit as fatal as from a SAM-6.)

The Iraqi batteries had obviously had enough time to recover from the initial assault and to warm up their radars. Anti-aircraft fire now was more directed and intense, lighting up the darkening sky in a phantasmagoria of bright flashes, streaking contrails and gray puffs of smoke. Ilan Ramon had never seen anything like it.

Ramon quickly checked his targeting display, then pushed the nose of the fighter straight down and into the seemingly impenetrable net of gunfire crosshatching beneath.

Even before Shafir and Ramon released their bombs, the dome beneath them suddenly exploded outward in a mammoth cloud of smoke followed by spectacular flames leaping hundreds of feet into the air. The two pilots quickly released their bombs and rocketed away to rendezvous with the rest of the squadron at 30,000 feet.

As Ramon climbed, the last pilot out, he could see the dome engulfed in a final thunderous fireball. Huge flames leaped from the dome in the center of the grounds. Despite the failure of two of the sixteen bombs to detonate, the dome now lay in ruins, irrevocably destroyed. Videotape later showed that the once monumental dome looked like a broken eggshell.

For the first time in history, a nuclear reactor had been bombed and obliterated.

With the target destroyed, the pilots now focused their attention on their next task: getting back alive and avoiding what they thought would be a certain encounter with enemy aircraft.

A Big Surprise

But the Iraqis were nowhere to be found.

“They didn’t take off,” Zeev Raz said later. “They didn’t shoot missiles. They didn’t even lock the radar.”

“It was a big surprise to us,” Amos Yadlin declared.

“Even after the bombing,” Raz added, “on the way back, for more than 90 minutes they didn’t try to intercept us.”

One of the reasons the Iraqis didn't pursue the Israelis, it was later revealed, was that they weren't even sure who had bombed Osirak. They only found out the next day, Monday, when Prime Minister Menachem Begin released the news bulletin!

Homeward Bound

After an hour, the strike force crossed into Jordanian airspace, where MiGs could well be waiting for them. Raz zoomed up to 40,000 feet. At that elevation there was less moisture, and the planes would not produce telltale contrails. But headwinds there were at 125 knots. That would offset most of the fuel efficiency they would gain by flying in the thinner air at 38,000. Should he take the safer, slower route, flying virtually invisibly at 40,000 but risk running out of fuel, or should he head for home as fast as possible at the lower, more fuel-efficient altitude but risk being seen? He opted for the faster route and descended back to 38,000 feet.

Indeed, behind them, north of Amman, IAF radar picked up planes scrambling west and south. But Raz's group was too high, too fast, and too far ahead to be engaged.

Unimpeded by enemy aircraft, the F-16s set their course for Etzion airbase. Instead of the usual four-minute sunset, they watched the sun in front of them set continually for 40 minutes, as they followed the curve of the earth at 38,000 feet. Then, as the planes descended, they dove out of sunlight into darkness in seconds. In a heartbeat, it was nighttime.

When they landed, Ivry phoned Begin again and informed him that all of the pilots had returned alive; everything had gone as planned.

"Baruch Hashem" was the Prime Minister's first reaction.

"When I got out," Relik Shafir reminisced, "Ilan was in the next shelter and we just hugged for about a minute; you know, didn't say a word. We just hugged each other for about a minute. Well, if you touch someone you know you are ok; you are alive. It was a great moment that I cherished. I still cherish."

US Reaction

The Iraqis were not the only ones surprised by the raid. The entire world was caught off guard.

"I really think it was one of the most important and most interesting military surprises of all time," Richard V. Allen, National Security Advisor to President Ronald Reagan, said. "I think the magnificence of the operation was reflected in the fact that it had been under consideration for more than a year and that it had not leaked and that we were not able to penetrate Israeli

intelligence to gain any heads up about potentially aggressive — or if you would call it aggressive — action against the reactor.”

President Ronald Reagan, whose relationship with Menachem Begin was both confidential and contentious, was shocked when he was notified.

“I could hear the president [Ronald Reagan] say, ‘They did what!?’” Richard V. Allen retold. Then Reagan asked, “Why do you suppose they did it?” Not waiting for a response, the President of the United States answered the question himself. “Well,” he shrugged, “boys will be boys.”

Reagan’s response was not surprising. The president had been fiercely pro-Israel and a staunch foe of anti-Semitism his entire professional life, dating back to his days as a Hollywood movie star. An FBI dossier on Reagan from the post-World War II years recounted an episode at a Hollywood party when the future president nearly came to blows with a guest who had accused the Jews of war profiteering.

The president’s well-known loyalty to Israel didn’t extend to every member of his administration, however. The following day, the National Security Council convened in the Oval Office to formulate the official US response to the raid.

“The president went around the table,” General Haig said, “and, with the exception of one member of the cabinet, there was a very strong anti-Israeli condemnation mood in the room. It was really rather vitriolic — especially the vice president [George H. W. Bush] and Jim Baker.”

“I was frankly amazed at the views that were expressed,” Richard V. Allen said. “The vice president, George Bush, long-time friend, was very vehement in his criticism of the Israelis, of strongly urging that some sort of punitive action be taken. Jim Baker, White House Chief of Staff, was of the very same opinion.”

“Then it finally got around to me,” Haig related, “and I said to the president, ‘Before this is over, we’ll be on our knees thanking G-d that Israel did what it did.’”

World Reaction

As expected, the UN voted unanimously to condemn Israel for the attack. Despite demands from Vice President Bush and Arab nations for harsh sanctions against Israel, none were ever enacted.

A *New York Times* editorial on the Tuesday following the raid excoriated Israel, charging, “Israel’s sneak attack on a French-built nuclear reactor near Baghdad was an act of inexcusable and short-sighted aggression.”

However, Prime Minister Begin, in his heavy European-Jewish accent, boldly told the world at a press conference, “Israel has nothing to apologize for. We decided to act now before it is too late. We shall defend our people with all of the means at our disposal.”

According to a French journalist, many in the French government, including Jacques Chirac himself — the one who had orchestrated the deal with Saddam Hussein, were privately relieved that Israel had taken this action, despite his public hyperbole to the contrary.

Veiled Admiration

Politics aside, military experts from around the world were astounded by the mission and the expertise in which it was executed. It was clear that many American insiders, including ranking members from the Joint Chiefs, had at least a grudging admiration for the boldness and the remarkable precision of the attack.

When Richard Allen brought in the highly classified satellite photos of al-Tuwaitha to show to the president, Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger and the Pentagon generals, the reaction of the group was amazed silence. Clearly seen were the surrounding fences, the outlying buildings, the main gate, the guard towers — everything perfectly and immaculately intact. But in the middle of it all stood a deep, gaping hole: the site of the former Osirak reactor, utterly and surgically obliterated.

Reagan studied the photographs, then finally said what many present had silently been thinking.

“Ok, yeah, yeah, I see,” the president said, referring to the supposed damning evidence of Israel’s perfidy: “But what a terrific piece of bombing!”

There were only 11 casualties, 10 Iraqi soldiers and one French technician. All but the French technician came as a result of the artillery fired blindly into the sky by Iraqi soldiers as they waited for their radar to warm up. Most importantly, the nuclear fuel stored nearby was undamaged, precluding any potential radioactive contamination.

“It was superbly done,” General Haig admitted.

“I thought it was absolutely stupendous,” Richard V. Allen added. “It was hard for me to imagine that this could have been done so expertly. It was performed brilliantly, nearly flawlessly.”

The condemnation of Israel was vociferous, but short-lived. The Israelis accepted the criticism in exchange for security from certain catastrophe. In less than two minutes, Israeli warplanes did more than level the nuclear plant. They also struck at the heart of the uneasy strategic balance of the Middle East, sending shock waves that long reverberated throughout the region.

It would be nearly a decade before the rest of the world understood the significance of the mission. In 1991, Saddam invaded neighboring Kuwait, ultimately leading to US intervention and Operation Desert Storm. (Note, in an ironic twist — otherwise known as *hashgachah* — it was former Vice President George H.W. Bush, as President Bush, who authorized Desert Storm. As vice president, Bush was one of the leading critics of Israel for its attack on Saddam Hussein's nuclear reactor. Indeed, in general he had pro-Arab leanings and was a foe of Israel's. As president, however, his sentiments had apparently shifted; and his son, George W., became one of Israel's greatest friends. This is a poignant example of *Lev melachim b'yad Hashem*, "The heart of the king is in the hand of Hashem" [Mishlei 21:1].) Had Saddam Hussein secured nuclear weapons, chances are that he would have acted a lot more boldly, and perhaps the United States would not have acted the way it did knowing that Iraq had that kind of capability.

During the nearly month-long bombing campaign that preceded the ground offensive by coalition forces against Saddam's Iraq in 1991, the rebuilt Nuclear Research Center at al-Tuwaitha was heavily targeted by Allied sorties. By the end of the war, the once-proud campus was a moonscape of rubble and destruction. The buildings and laboratories were either leveled or gutted, the towers toppled.

At the time of Operation Desert Storm, David Ivry was the Israeli Ambassador to the United States. A decade after the mission to destroy Saddam Hussein's nuclear reactor, he found out just how much the US military appreciated the value of Israel's actions. A week after the coalition's successful invasion of Iraq in 1991, Secretary of Defense Dick Cheney sent a satellite photo of the bombed-out reactor to Ivry. The photo included the following note, "With thanks and appreciation. You made our job easier in Desert Storm."

The whole attack took less than two minutes. Eleven people were killed. Ten of them were Iraqi soldiers, and they were not killed by Israeli bombs — they were killed by their own anti-aircraft guns, fired blindly into a sky they could not see, because the radar that was supposed to warn them had not finished warming up. The reactor's nuclear fuel was stored a short distance away. Nothing touched it. Had it been hit, the contamination would have reached the civilians of Baghdad, and the raid that was meant to prevent a catastrophe would have caused one.

Then there is the date. The pilots lifted off on Sunday, the seventh of June, 1981. On the Jewish calendar that was the fifth of Sivan — erev Shavuot. While they were in the air, Jews were preparing for the night the Torah was given.

Call it a run of luck: bad radar, panicked gunners, fuel stored a little to one side. But luck is not an explanation, it is a word we use when we have stopped looking. A rational man follows the

evidence wherever it goes. The evidence here goes somewhere a secular historian will not follow it — to the only observer in the story who saw all of it, who was not surprised by any of it, and who arranged for a reactor to disappear out of the middle of an intact compound on the afternoon before Shavuos. We are not abandoning reason when we say so. We are refusing to stop short of it.

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