



Judaism on Our Own Terms:

A Guide to Creating Our
Own Independent Jewish
Communities

So you want to build your own independent Jewish community...

Great! So many young Jews in colleges across North America feel alienated by and pushed out of traditional on-campus Jewish communities because of their political beliefs or the identities they hold (i.e. Hillel International's Standards of Partnership for Israel Activities exclude individuals and groups from the Jewish community on campus on the basis of their views on Israel). Luckily, we have the power to create our own communities, devoted to justice and action, with welcoming norms and traditions. And even more luckily, here's a guide on how to do it!

Feel free to use this as a reference to glance at from time to time, or read through the whole thing if you want. Every community is different, so take what works, adapt what doesn't, and share your own lessons along the way!

An important note: We're students and organizers that have lived/are living through the experience of creating and maintaining independent Jewish communities, so we're speaking from the conditions that we've seen on the ground. This guide is not intended to be prescriptive, and many of the larger patterns and trends that we speak about only became clear in retrospect. So! take our recommendations in this document as suggestions or places to start, not as the authoritative word. With that said, happy community building!

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Getting Started



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By a base, we mean a group of people committed to building a community and invested in its health and growth. Often, these things start with a simple conversation and a shared desire to create alternative space. From there, it's about building the kind of strong relationships that motivate people to continue to take action, whether it's bringing a dish to a potluck, planning an event, or feeling empowered to contribute a new skill or idea.

Here are some tips to try:

- Understand where your campus community is and what needs aren't being met by existing Jewish life. This can be just a few informal conversations, or a more structured outreach opportunity to groups that are frequently excluded by mainstream organizations such as Hillel. It's important to be honest at this stage — Hillels will almost always have more resources than student groups (and lots of free food), so focus on aspects of community that you can help create!
- As you get the group off the ground, take the time to have one-on-one conversations. Getting to know people individually is incredibly important to understand what they want and need out of a community space, what capacity they have to contribute to the group, any hesitations or fears they have, and just their overall personal well-being. The stronger the individual relationships, the stronger the group!
- Once you start meeting regularly, make sure someone is designated to follow up one-on-one with new members. Whenever you have a public event, make sure you also have a way to follow up and recruit!

Setting consistent norms around communication is really important. Making sure that your community has well-established channels to talk to each other means that community members will know where and when to look for information about events, discussions, etc. Likewise, when your community has people in charge of communicating group decisions and sentiments with the outside world, you can make sure other groups and/or media sources know who to talk to and how to talk to them. Here are some ideas that have been successful for us in the past. For internal communication, building a listserv, Facebook group, or Slack workspace is very helpful. Some things to keep in mind when you're creating that communication channel:

- Set out clear norms about what the communication medium should and should not be used for. As email chains/groups grow in size, it can be tempting to use them in order to blast out not super related (but still important and interesting) stuff. Try to resist that temptation, because it can make it so people ignore the notifications that are the most critical or time-sensitive.
- Have clear expectations about who maintains the channel and how to rotate who sends out messages/emails if you want to avoid it being the same person or people every week.
- Make sure that when new members are added to the group, they can see past communications — someone being able to scan through the old emails and chat transcripts can save a lot of time and energy.
- If possible, once you've decided on a medium to use, try to avoid making external group chats. It's always best to have a transparent organizational structure and avoid social hierarchy.
- For external communication and getting people to come to events, the key is a mix between experimentation and consistency! Try a mix of any/all of the following: person-to-person, Facebook events, posters, listservs. Once you find something that works, stick to it!



Both secular and religious rituals are incredibly important for grounding a group. They provide a sense of normalcy, establish clear expectations, and are the basis of forming a stable group identity. Here are a few ideas:

Set a regular meeting time (e.g. Friday nights every other week) and stick to it.

Decide where events usually take place (e.g. in people's homes, in comfortable academic spaces, or somewhere else).

Decide what kind of events ground the space. These could be potluck dinners, facilitated discussions, shabbat services, speaker series, direct actions, etc.

Together, create a set of community norms. Restate and revisit these regularly, possibly at the beginning of each meeting.

Have social events outside of the context of your group (e.g. movie night, party, game night) to create a fun, healthy group culture.

Open the space with relevant check-ins about the week, how people are authentically feeling, and/or people's holistic Jewish backgrounds.

Build religious ritual into the space. This can be interpreted widely! It could look like saying prayers, having Shabbat dinners, teaching and singing Jewish songs/niggunim (wordless melodies), or any number of rituals. This zine is also full of ideas for rituals!



Tali Ginsburg

Once your group is established, it's important to have some shared clarity on its intentions and politics. In our experience, there are a lot of political questions raised by starting a group like this. Make sure to think about:

Who is a part of our community? Who holds leadership positions in our community? Who is excluded from our community or our community spaces?

- Jews of color, LGBTQ+, Disabled (neurodivergent, not able bodied), poor or working class people.
- "Comfort the afflicted, afflict the comfortable." - Reject "comfortable" feeling or familiarity of spaces.

How do we make our spaces and communities truly inclusive and not just "welcoming"?

- Collaborative and comprehensive planning from the beginning, not just inviting someone to an event after you've already planned it.
- Building genuine relationships within and among communities is crucial.
- Invite feedback without placing the burden on marginalized people to list all their needs or explain their marginalization.
- Highlight the voices and experiences of Jews of color, Sephardi, and Mizrahi Jews without tokenizing or essentializing those experiences.

Challenge Jewish norms or assumptions around small talk, cultural touchstones.

- "What do you mean by that? Why?"
- Avoid Jewish institution alphabet soup (e.g., JCC, USY, NFTY).

How can the group be socially inclusive while maintaining an identity as an alternative space for those pushed out of other Jewish spaces, especially around Zionism? It's also important to leave space for people to grow, explore, and potentially expand their political identities.

For instances of harm, look into and implement restorative justice! Have a policy about harm discussed and agreed upon in advance.

How can the group be resilient to turnover especially when core members graduate or students leave for other reasons?

We don't pretend to have the answers to these questions, but we believe that constant wrestling with them is essential. We do think it's important to remember to call people in (and not out) and that having challenging conversations is part of maintaining a healthy community! It's also important to remember that Judaism always intersects with other identities, and there is no one way to be Jewish or to be "Jewish enough."

Goals	Steps to achieve this	Skills and resources needed
JOCSM (Jews of Color, Sephardi, Mizrahi) feel included and comfortable	<p>Practice accountability and humility</p> <p>Use "I" statements</p> <p>Take space, make space</p> <p>Open discussions and acknowledgement of power dynamics</p>	<p>Teaching on whiteness and white supremacy</p> <p>Active relationships with other groups and issues</p> <p>Closed space for JOCSM</p>
Supportive network of closed spaces for marginalized people	<p>Programming about different cultures, backgrounds, and traditions</p>	<p>Relationships with larger Jewish institutions</p>
Acknowledge and confront Ashkenormativity	<p>Don't assume that ashkenazi traditions are the only traditions</p> <p>Representatives from an organization and/or community members host discussions on Ashkenormativity and race within Jewish communities</p> <p>Anti-racism work with white Jews</p>	<p>Relationships with other affinity groups specifically for POC</p> <p>Relationships with organizations off-campus (e.g. Jews For Racial and Economic Justice)</p> <p>Active listening skills and self-reflection</p> <p>Self-reflection leading to action</p>

Want your group to become involved in organizing on-campus? Great! On the next page is a chart on successful coalition building. A few pointers before beginning:

Be transparent and realistic; be honest about who you are and where you are coming from.

Actively build relationships based on solidarity.

Attend and promote other groups' events and campaigns, talk about group issues within your own community, and plan actions alongside other community partners.

Think about when your Jewish experiences should be centered and when you should take a step back, based on whether or not you are directly impacted by an issue.

Be mindful of power dynamics, both within the group and among other groups. Communicate authentically!

Goals	Steps to achieve this	Skills and resources needed
Honest and mutually supportive partnerships with other campus groups (e.g. interfaith work)	<p>Show up to other people's meetings and advertise to your people</p> <p>Challenge stereotypes about one another No "good Jews" — virtue signalling is not why we organize. No "bad Muslims" — we cannot use a litmus test of supporting Israel to work with groups</p>	<p>Separate space, or alternating between spaces</p> <p>Calling in v. calling out</p> <p>Active listening</p>
Connect to and communicate with organizations off-campus	Build and maintain relationships from the beginning, not just in times of crisis or for a specific event	Equal give and take
Organize all parts of campus community	<p>Roles include faculty liaison, staff liaison, and alumni liaison</p> <p>Keep Facebook social media and engage actors through email petition drives, letter writing drives, phone drives</p>	<p>1:1 meetings with faculty and staff to gauge support. Create a faculty and staff list-serv of supporters to stay in contact</p> <p>Use the spectrum of support and ladder of engagement (not just for students!) What power do these holders have that students do not have access to?</p>

As your group grows, you may need to look for outside funding sources to make meals, events and other expenses sustainable. Luckily, there are lots of ways to go about this, depending on the school and the size of the group. One thing to consider is how to make decisions about money transparently and with the whole group. For example, if getting funding from Hillel or other Jewish institutions, does the whole group feel comfortable? Here are a few other ideas:

If you become a student group or registered student organization, you can often get funding from your school, including the student government, the school's office of religious life, or department funding.

You can also try some self-funding, including online crowdfunding, or reaching out to families, recent graduates, and other individuals who might want to and be able to support you.

There are organizations that provide money for groups to pay for Friday night dinners. Check out the resource page for more!

So you've created a loving, sustainable independent Jewish community that will stand the test of time. Yay! But how will the community stay rooted in its original mission? To a certain extent, there will always be some knowledge-drain in college communities, because people get older and graduate. However, by integrating practices of institutional memory-building into your community, you can make sure that the hard-earned lessons that you've learned in your time as an organizer don't get lost. Here are some examples:

In our experience, collaborative cloud folders (such as Google Team Drives) can be really useful to ensure that resources are accessible to everyone in the organization — they don't depend on having a specific username and password, and you can just invite people to access them.

When having discussions based on readings, make a copy of what you were reading! If you're under a time crunch at some point in the future, old readings can always lead to generating new conversations.

Having a designated notetaker for decision-making conversations. Like any other role in the group, make sure that the role is rotating, so that the notetaker isn't always that same person.

Record exit interviews with graduating members about history of the group — how it has changed since they joined, what they're looking forward to, why it has been an important community to them, etc. These recordings can be really valuable sources of wisdom in the future!

BUILDING COMMUNITY ON OUR OWN

THE STORY OF JGAF



AS YOU CAN EXPECT OUR SCHOOL, DESPITE CLAIMING LIBERAL IDEOLOGIES, SHOULD REALLY HAVE A MOTTO LIKE THIS
CONFORM TO CONVENTION. COLONIZE OUR WORLD.



IN SPACES OF HIGHER ED IT CAN BE VERY DIFFICULT TO FOSTER AUTHENTIC, LIBERATORY COMMUNITIES FOR SPIRITUALITY & CARE.



MANY STUDENTS FIND THEMSELVES STUCK IN JEWISH COMMUNITIES WHICH DO NOT ALIGN WITH THEIR POLITICS AND FEEL MUNDANE
THIS STALE CAMPUS JEWISH COMMUNITY IS SOLD TO US AS OUR ONLY OPTION, LEAVING STUDENTS NOWHERE LEFT TO GO.

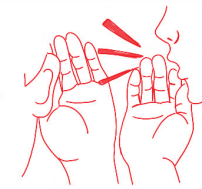
SO WE STARTED TO BUILD OUR OWN!

WE STARTED TALKING ABOUT WHAT WE WANTED FROM OUR JEWISH LIFE.

WE SHOULD PRAY TOGETHER & MAKE ART!



AND WE CANSING!



WE GREW A LOT THROUGH WORD OF MOUTH AND FB EVENTS.



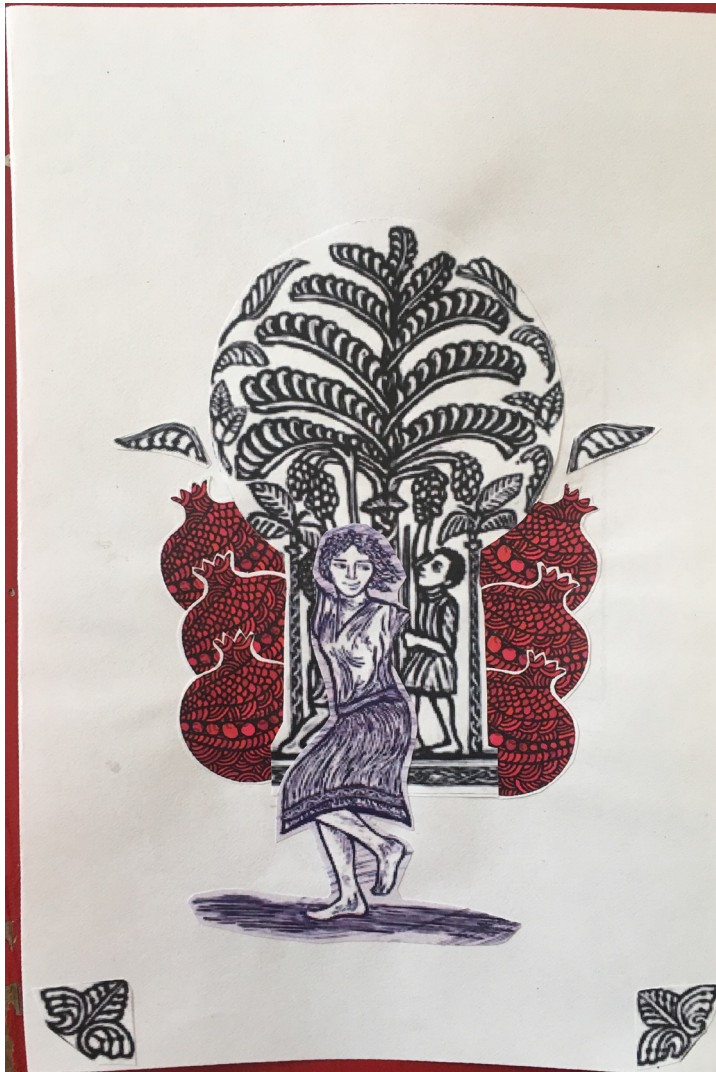
TOGETHER, WE SING WE PROTEST WE PRAY WE EAT WE CARE WE TALK WE LISTEN WE LOVE

WE NAMED OURSELVES*
J.G.A.F.
Jews Givin' A Fuck!

* AFTER A FAMILIAR GROUP @ COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY

MADE BY: NAOMI RW @na0mir0se

Programming



Why is it important to have difficult discussions within our community?

We believe in not shying away from difficult conversations and embracing what makes our communities diverse, complicated and beautiful. In our experience, the most fruitful, sustaining and meaningful way to build Jewish community is through engaging in the deeply Jewish tradition of discourse and debate. Below is a guide to leading some of the peer-facilitated conversations that have been meaningful in our communities. Part of the JOOOT vision is integrating learning opportunities that are accessible and anti-hierarchical and grounded in the principle that every Jew is capable of teaching and learning Jewish content. We hope you use these conversation starters as a way to spark debate, build community and connection and produce some Jewish ideas as a group. You can pair these conversation starters with either a larger event, presentation or training on one of these subjects or simply as a conversation starter at a shabbat meal.

How do we have these discussions?

We suggest beginning formal discussions with the establishment of community guidelines or norms. Everybody should have the opportunity to discuss and contribute to these guidelines; taking the time to agree upon and write down a set of guidelines will help facilitate the following discussion, especially so you can return to them in moments of doubt or conflict to revisit what your community has already agreed upon.

Some resources on facilitation:

SOUL Key Principles of Friere: <https://bit.ly/2DtxL99>

SOUL Training for Trainers: <https://bit.ly/2JUYVJZ>

USAS Seven Steps to Painless Facilitation: <https://bit.ly/2UnGMJO>

An example of discussion guidelines:

Call in, not out: Instead of “calling out” someone’s words or actions, “calling in” aims to change problematic behavior with compassion and patience. Are we more interested in shaming someone or in changing harmful behaviors and beliefs?

Use “I” statements: To express how you are feeling, try to use “I” statements to avoid speaking on behalf of others and to empower yourself to really say how you feel. This can be particularly helpful in moments of conflict.

Take Space, Make Space: Group members should be aware of how much they are speaking. If you are speaking a lot, consider taking a step back. If you are usually more quiet, consider pushing yourself to share your thoughts with the group. Additionally, group members should keep in mind who is typically socialized to take up space in the room and adjust accordingly to create an equitable space for everyone to communicate.

Be messy: In order to have an honest, transformative community discussion, it’s important that we are honest with our community about what we think and what we believe. That means that we don’t need to wait to speak until we have planned out what we want to say word-for-word. We want to hear from everyone (including you!) and accepting that we can’t be articulate all the time lets us break down some of the barriers that can prevent discussions from flowing.

Discussion questions based on themes:

Jews and class

What is the interaction between classism and class diversity within Jewish spaces? (e.g. gatekeeping in Jewish institutions due to tuition of Jewish day school and summer camp, donor families’ special privileges...)

What is the interaction between notions of class and antisemitism? How are Jews conflated with the rich and elite, and how does that both perpetuate antisemitism and erase the experiences of low-income Jews?

Where do your values come from? How do your values interact (e.g. how middle class white values can be layered onto Jewish values)?

Antisemitism and white supremacy

What is antisemitism? How have you experienced it in your life?

What is white supremacy? How does antisemitism fit within white supremacy?

Where do we see white supremacy in our daily lives (including within our own communities)?

How can we dismantle white supremacy (including antisemitism)?

How do we continue to perpetuate white supremacy within our community? What are the assumptions we hold about who is/can be Jewish? How can we disrupt and dismantle these practices and assumptions?

Israel/Palestine

When did you first learn about Israel/Palestine? What narratives were you told?

How have your beliefs about Israel/Palestine evolved over time? What changed for you?

What words do you use to describe the situation? Why do you use those words? (e.g. Occupation, apartheid, settler-colonialism, Zionist, Liberal Zionist, non-Zionist, anti-Zionist).

How do conversations about Israel/Palestine make you feel? Inside the Jewish community? Outside the Jewish community?

Why is Israel/Palestine important to you? How does it connect to your values?

For some articles for discussion, check out the online JOOOT Guidebook.

Interested in guiding a text study? This is a place to start! There are also more options for online resources at the end of this guidebook and in its online version. As members of independent Jewish communities, it is important for us to examine our cultural and literary roots and put them in conversation with present day values.

Note: For a more complete picture, use this guide alongside a complete text from the Tanach. The following text corresponds with weekly Torah portions, Parshiot, so feel free to read this as part of a weekly communal services or for study on your own time. This text can be studied in Hebrew or whatever language you are comfortable with.

Translations are from *The Torah: A Women's Bible Commentary*, edited by Tamara Cohen Eskenazi and Andrea L. Weiss. This is a short sample text study, a sort of Spark Notes for the Tanach. For the full text, and more text studies, check out the online JOOOT Guidebook.



Lech Lecha: Hagar -- xenophobia, class conflict, and perspective on women's roles.

Gen 16:1-2 — Now Abram's wife Sarai, who had not borne him a child, had an Egyptian slave named Hagar. So Sarai said to Abram "seeing as God has kept me from bearing a child, have intercourse with my slave: maybe I will have a son through her."

Gen 16:5-15 — summary: Hagar becomes pregnant and scorns Sarai. Sarai approaches Abram about the dilemma. He tells her to do as she pleases with Hagar, as it is her slave. Sarai bullies her so aggressively she runs away. God's angel provides for Hagar a spring of water and tells her to return to Sarai and submit so she may be the mother of many descendants. The angel instructs Hagar to name her child Ishmael, for God has heard in her pain, and informs her that Ishmael will be a wild man who lives in opposition to those around him. Hagar returns to Abram and gives birth to Ishmael. Abram is noted to be 86 years old.

Why does Sarai ask Abram to have a child, more particularly a son, through Hagar? What does this say about infertility and lack of a male heir? What ethical questions must we raise with this proposition?

What messages are enforced by Hagar's decision to return and submit to Sarai as opposed to continuing to go out on her own?

How can we integrate a more critical outlook on Sarah with a tradition in which she is standardly regarded as an exemplar woman and one of the Imahot? What implications does this have?

One of the best ways for an independent Jewish community to grow and flourish is by planning and hosting communal meals, tefillah (prayer), holiday celebrations, and other gatherings for Jewish ritual. But creating and leading ritual spaces can also feel overwhelming. Here are some resources that other campus leaders have found helpful as they got started with Jewish ritual.

Tefillah + Nusach (prayers + their melodies)

Sidduraudio.com is a simple, clear resource for learning basic Tefillah skills. With resources for learning Shabbat, Weekday, and Holidays nusach, SiddurAudio is great for anyone looking to build their leading skills. Note that this resource is best for Ashkenazi nusach.

Virtual Cantor is another easy-to-navigate resource for crystal clear recordings. Like Siddur Audio, this site is better for nusach than for music or nigunim (wordless melody).

Hadar Tunes: Based out of the NYC Beit Midrash, Hadar is another powerhouse online resource for anyone looking to improve their tefillah skills. The recordings of weekday nusach is particularly well-loved among the traditional-egalitarian crowd because Dena breaks down the service into bite-sized chunks.

OffTonic's list of nusach resources is quite extensive and includes links out to many sources of nusach. Helpful if you're looking for lots of examples of Sephardi nusach. There's so much information on there than it can be easy to fall down a rabbit hole— or to get overwhelmed with the sheer number of options.

All Genders Wrap: Interested in wrapping tefillin? All Genders Wrap is a great, feminist resource that has easy-to-understand directions for wrapping tefillin. Choose lefty or righty, Ashkenazi or Sephardi style and wrap away!

RitualWell hosts a massive collection of ritual guides in a wide range of traditional and experimental styles. It's a great place to find texts for holidays and the Jewish life-cycle. Check out their rituals for gender transition, Rosh Chodesh, recovery from illness, as well as their extensive resources for integrating social justice themes into tefillah.

Open Siddur Project: An open-source database that aims to create an open-access database of Jewish liturgy. It's particularly helpful for finding specific versions of prayers.

Music + Niggunim (Wordless Melodies)

Let My People Sing: An annual retreat for Jewish song-leaders and a great source for Niggunim, songs in Jewish diasporic languages, and social-justice-oriented Jewish singing. Their Soundcloud is a great resource for learning and teaching songs.

Ningun Collective: A fabulous and quite extensive database of Niggunim. Listen to their full “sets”/playlists for a sense of how to lead a Niggun circle.

Big Tent Ningun + Piyyut Project: An online database of recordings of Piyyutim and Niggunim. It’s still growing, so send in your recordings!



Text Studies

Sefaria is really the gold standard when it comes to text studies. It has several versions of major Jewish texts (for free!) and easy-to-navigate tools for making your own source sheets. If you are making a source sheet on a particular subject, be sure to try the search function to see what others have compiled on that topic. Specifically, check out the OnIFoot collection for social-justice oriented texts.

Keshet has a ton of LGBT Jewish educational resources, including text studies. Keshet’s lesson plans can be easily integrated into teach-ins and Beit-Midrash-style text studies.

Trans Torah is a rich resource of text studies, essays, and ritual specifically focused on trans and non-binary Jews. Created by Rabbi Elliot Kukla, this is a great place to find theology and liturgy.

JustAction is a project of Panim, The Institute of Jewish Leadership and Values. It’s another wonderful website that offers a variety of resources relating to teaching about and for social justice and change.

Uri l’Tzedek is another organization committed to both working for and teaching about social justice and responsibility, and is the first Orthodox organization committed to social justice work. The website is a great resource.

Hosting/Funding

OneTable: This great organization helps fund young people who are putting on Shabbat dinners. We use it to pay for food. Make sure to use a non-edu email address!

Union for Reform Judaism: URJ provides money for Shabbat dinners on college campuses.

Moishe House Without Walls: A great option for grad students-funding for events for post-college Jewish communities.

HUC Founders’ Fellowship: HUC-JIR’s Founders’ Fellowship is a leadership incubator for college students. It includes guided mentorship and support, as well as a project stipend.

NYC Workmen’s Circle: Fellowships for creating social justice focused Jewish organizing groups on college campuses. 15\$/hour internship. East Coast. Email: jtaubes@circle.org.

Congress of Secular Jewish Organizations will send someone to meet with you to help organize a non-religious Jewish community.



Remember, you're
part of a beautiful
movement that spans
cities and campuses
across the continent
that wants to support
and build with you!
Please feel free to
reach out to us if you
have any questions,
thoughts, or want to
share ideas. Happy
community building!
XOXOX

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