

Tail of Two Jewries

Some Innovative Lessons From Chris Anderson and Jewish Summer Camp

Rabbi Avi Katz **Orlow**

Education is clearly a process and not a product, but today's educators still have much to learn from new models of online product distribution. This new marketplace of the internet is not just a new way to get old products; it represents a seismic shift in our culture. Today's customers get what they want when they want it, and accordingly we need to rethink how we educate our students. While we need to determine ways to use new technology, we also need to learn to imitate the culture of this new media. It is this article's argument that to compete better in this new market we have to learn certain pedagogical innovations from the Talmud and some from Jewish summer camp.

Jewish culture, especially modern Jewish culture, has always had to reconcile strong currents of tradition and of change. In Ecclesiastes 1:9 we read, "That which has been is that which shall be, and that which has been done is that which shall be done; and there is nothing new under the sun." From that we might think that all innovation is illusory if not useless—particularly innovation in Jewish education. Other Jewish sources, however, disagree with Ecclesiastes. The Talmud tells a wonderful story about Rabbi Yehoshua of Peki'in:

He once asked two of his finest students, "What hiddush (or new teaching) did you learn at the house of study today?" They replied, "We are your disciples and we only drink your water." The rabbi then said, "Even so, it is impossible for there to be a session in the house of study without some new teaching" (Hagigah 3a).

It is noteworthy that Rabbi Yehoshua of Peki'in was less interested in the honor his students wanted to show him than in hearing about what they learned. According to Rabbi Yehoshua of Peki'in, innovation is a fundamental component of Jewish learning.

Unfortunately, most communities seriously engaged in Jewish learning fear innovation, perceiving it as a deviation from tradition. Members of these communities, however, would be the first to buy the latest volume of *hiddushim* by leading Torah scholars. Although they are afraid to express their own new ideas, they crave innovation in study—just as most of us would in every other part of life. Jewish educators who work outside of these houses of study should value innovation as much or even more. Unshackled by the limits of the norms of traditional circles, these educators have more room to innovate and to question the panoply of Jewish texts and traditions. The whole world can be brought to bear in a more progressive learning environment. In traditional study houses, the overarching guide for study—and indeed for every aspect of life—is halakhah, the traditional body of Jewish laws. The challenge is that the foundation of

Rabbi Avi Katz Orlow is the Jewish Education Specialist at the Foundation for Jewish Camp. He has been working in Jewish experiential education for close to 20 years.

traditional texts and traditions becomes weaker when educators question their basic assumptions. Outside of the house of study, Jewish educators have no such all-encompassing authoritative guide as halakhah and therefore are challenged to assert a claim on Jewish authenticity.

It used to be that an educator's authority was largely based on his or her access to knowledge. Since the first printing press, there has been a growing challenge to the educator's unique claim of authority. To preserve reverence for Jewish education amidst the vast sea of competing content, it is understandable that some might think that our only choice is to "batten down the hatches," lest we open the door too wide and sink as a result. For those who want to preserve reverence and relevance, disengaging from the information age is not an option. It seems that we have entered a second stage of the information age, the search era. Now, in the world of Google, students can search and find any information they seek. In 2010 Google will have hosted more than 1 trillion free searches (Leadbeater & Wong, 2010). Wikipedia contains more than 13 million free articles, and Youtube has 20 hours of content loaded to its server every minute (Leadbeater & Wong, 2010). At an unparalleled rate the torrent of user-generated material is raising the water level of data within easy reach.

Given that today's students can learn—and now teach—about almost anything, today's educators need more than expertise to be relevant to their students. The traditional community has restricted its own access to this new media, positioning itself to maintain focus on traditional Jewish educational methods while the rest of the community struggles to stay afloat.¹ Welcome to "Web 2.0"; we are still waiting for Jewish education 2.0.

TARGETING NICHE INTERESTS

Chris Anderson's book, *The Long Tail: Why the Future of Business Is Selling Less of More* (2006), may present an alternate and preferred model to meeting the challenge of balancing innovation and authenticity in the search era. In *The Long Tail*, Anderson—editor-in-chief of *Wired Magazine*—challenges the assumption that the desire for popular products drives our culture. Before the age of the internet, companies assumed that everyone wanted whichever items were most popular. Online commerce, however, has belied this assumption. As the costs of production and distribution have fallen, Anderson argues it has become economically viable to target niche interests in the market and expect substantial returns.

Take the act of buying a book—an appropriate example for the People of the Book. We used to walk into our local bookstore, find something we liked, buy it, and walk out with our book of choice. When we gave the money to the cashier, we were also purchasing the experience of browsing and buying in an enjoyable atmosphere. The cost of the book took into account the staffing and upkeep of the store itself—which has finite resources and finite shelf space. We do not often think of the real estate value of a slender volume of literature, but it is there and we are paying for it. To solve this problem of finite space,

¹See Steven M. Cohen's *Tale of Two Jewries: The "Inconvenient Truth" for American Jews* (2006). There he identifies the polar realities of Jewish education in the future of the Jewish community. The educated are getting more education, while those outside this community are getting less educated. I combined this title and that of Chris Anderson to come up with the title of this article.

bookstores carry only the most popular books—the ones consumers are most likely to buy.

Amazon changed this reality. Without the maintenance costs of a traditional bookstore or the problem of finite space, a website can offer far greater variety than a shop on the street. Amazon can carry any title, no matter how obscure, for a marginal cost. Going onto www.Amazon.com, customers can find any edition of a book—new or used—in hardcover or paperback. Potential buyers can even virtually flip through the pages of any given book to simulate the sensory experience we have in the store. Amazon's users recommend books and provide reviews, and the site allows customers to post their own feedback. Given time for shipping, anyone can get almost anything they want without having to leave the comforts of home. And now with Amazon's Kindle—a wireless electronic handheld reader—the customer does not even need to wait. The book of choice is in their hands in a matter of moments. Freed from worrying about the overhead expense of shelf space, the company can afford to keep something in stock even if it sells only rarely. However happy this makes the consumer, it makes Amazon's staff even happier. Amazon is making money.

Anderson points out that Amazon is able to turn a larger profit by selling small quantities of these niche products instead of relying on high sales of a few popular books (see Figure 1). Where book stores used to essentially tell consumers what they wanted to read, Amazon is making money by giving consumers exactly what they say they want and are willing to buy. Supply, in the age of the internet search, has met demand. Suddenly the true desires of the consumers are revealed and serviced (Anderson, 2006).

One industry that has not been able to take advantage of the “long tail” is the ice cream business. Instead of offering an infinite number of flavors suited to meet the tastes of every potential patron, ice cream shops rely on selling from the “head”—the bestsellers. The majority of stores carry, at most, a dozen or so flavors—many of them variations on chocolate, vanilla and a variety of fruits. Ice cream vendors assume that most customers will want these flavors. In any event they do not have enough space to carry more variety. In many ways ice cream shops are marketing an experience more than selling a product.

The marketplace of Jewish education bears greater resemblance to a small ice cream store than to Amazon. This explains why so many people have not found their “flavor” in the Jewish community. So-called pluralistic Jewish settings



Figure 1. The long tail of the new marketplace (from Anderson, 2006).

tend to pride themselves on carrying the three main flavors, with perhaps one or two other options. But we still have not found a way to serve those who claim they are lactose intolerant—which is ironic given that we are Jewish. We need to find a way to reach every customer, or they will take their business elsewhere. A larger (metaphorical) Jewish communal ice cream shop would go a long way toward solving this problem, but that could raise other issues. It would seem that catering to a diversity of Jewish tastes in ice cream flavors would ruin our romanticized sense of the authentic ice cream parlor experience. In this sense, we do not want to imitate Amazon out of fear that this would diminish the collective experience or our imagination of a unified community.

Like it or not, young Jews live in the culture of the “long tail.” Proverbs 22:6 instructs us to “educate a child in his way so when the child is old he will not depart from it.” If we want to meet the needs of our students, we need to understand their “way”—their cultural context—so they will stick with it. We cannot rely on antiquated notions of what is popular. While we should not abandon our beliefs in what is an authentic education, we need to strive to be more like Amazon. We need to enable our supply to meet the demand. Although we might not even desire to explore the deep recesses of the “tail,” we need to expand our shelf space. We need to understand and meet the innate tastes, interests, and desires of today’s students.

The Jewish community used to rest on the assumption that leaders should draw people to the “head of the curve”—that everyone should share the same experiences and live according to the same norms. Jumpstart’s *The Innovation Ecosystem: Emergence of a New Jewish Landscape* offers an interesting response to Anderson’s “long tail”:

Where the unity-focused system of the twentieth century sought to bring together a diversity of individuals in a single organization, the innovation ecosystem fosters a diversity of organizations that serve specific interests, or niches. The health of each organization is not dependent on its size or scale, but rather on the quality of its interactions, the nature of its specialization, and its ability to adapt. Organizations do not need to become large to have impact. In fact many participants prefer more intimate settings (Jumpstart et al., 2009).

The culture of the “long tail” has created the new assumption that we should each get exactly what we want. The fear about this iPhone generation is that everyone has his or own play list—or ice cream flavor.

At first glance, it seems that the creation of these numerous individualized niches would further atomize the Jewish community, but that is not the case. Rather, these niche segments create new opportunities for Jewish educational cross-pollination. The 2009 Jumpstart study found that participants in these specialized niches also had others areas of interest: They span the gamut of Jewish involvement. As in the case of Amazon’s book sales, people bounce back and forth between the “head” and “tail” of popular products.

With the generous support of the Jim Joseph Foundation, the Foundation for Jewish Camp has begun developing these niche markets by helping five new specialty camps open in the summer of 2010 (see <http://www.jewishcamp.org/experience/specialty-camps>). The goal of this project was and continues to be to bring new campers to Jewish camp by accommodating their niche interests. The first

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summer was a tremendous success. These five camps brought in close to 150% of the benchmark set for the number of campers, with an aggregate of more than 600 campers. These new camps have joined the emerging innovation ecosystem² and are doing their part to help us expand our range of communal ice cream flavors.

As in the case of the real ice cream store, however, these additional flavors come at a high price. Realizing the need to provide for a larger diversity of customers' interests has not helped us overcome the cost barriers of production, distribution, and, in our case, providing the experience. Just as Amazon did for books, we need to figure out a way to lower the prohibitive overhead costs of providing Jewish education. In an era when information is moving more quickly than ever, education must prepare students for a reality in which they are constantly encountering new sources and learning new things. Outside of the most cloistered elements of our community our educators cannot stand idly by, clinging to what worked in the "antegoogluvian" era.³ Today the proliferation and accessibility of data are unstoppable; students see little reason to master a common body of knowledge. Given that each young adult can learn whatever he or she wants, we must shift our focus to "passion-based learning" (Brown & Adler, 2008). The student is not motivated by the authority of the educator but rather by a personal interest or desire to become a member of a particular community of thought and practice.

For us to make this shift we need to redefine the role of the educator. The teacher can no longer be the sage on the stage; instead of teaching everyone the same thing, they must facilitate all the students' own learning about themselves and what drives them. The educator's new role is to inspire, to identify, to facilitate, and to contextualize their students' interests. This new educational environment is open-sourced, and the authority of experts has lessened in value.

We need to make more room for the role of the professional-amateur (ProAm). In their essay, "The ProAm Revolution: How Enthusiasts are Changing Our Economy and Society," Charles Leadbeater and Paul Miller write:

After the rise of the professional in the 20th century we are now seeing this historic shift reversing in the Pro-Am revolution. Enthusiastic amateurs, pursuing activities to professional standards, will have an increasingly important role in our society and economy. From astronomy to activism, from surfing to saving lives, Pro-Ams—people pursuing amateur activities to professional standards—are an increasingly important part of our society and economy (Leadbeater & Miller, 2004).

If we recruit more student-teachers to increase the teacher pool, we can change the marketplace of learning. Some might fear that ProAm programs like Teach for America undercut the market and lower the value of seasoned educators. However, bringing in ProAms who are closer in age or life experience to students may foster closer relationships between these amateur educators and their students. Training amateur educators will create a more learned population. Even if these amateur educators leave the field, it is hoped that this experience will have given them a deeper appreciation of the value of excellent veteran teachers.

²It is wonderful to see a proliferation of hubs of innovation in the Jewish community such as, but not limited to, Bikkurim, ROI, Jumpstart, UpStart, and the rebirth of the Joshua Venture.

³This is also known as B.G. before Google. This term is used to talk about the time before the deluge of Google. It was coined by Nicholson Baker (2009) in the *New York Times*.

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THE LABORATORY OF JEWISH SUMMER CAMPING

A great example of the ProAm model in Jewish education may be seen in overnight Jewish summer camps. Camp counselors are often only a few years older than their campers and do not have the same training as rabbis or educators. Despite these perceived handicaps, they create meaning for their campers every day. Their proximity in age and their shared life experience make them ideal role models for the campers. In that way, counselors are the ideal amateur educators—and the word “amateur” comes from the Latin *amator*, or lover. It is hard to find people who love their work as much as camp staff. While few will make a career of camping, camp becomes an integral part of their lives. This is the same dynamic that makes peer-to-peer book reviews on Amazon so successful. While a rabbi might suggest a book to a student, the student is more likely to follow the recommendation of a stranger. The student assumes that the rabbi has an agenda, whereas the amateur who shares a review does so strictly motivated by love. In a shadowed world of internet avatars, this perception of altruistic motivation is the new authenticity—itsself a much coveted commodity.

Camp provides the perfect laboratory in which the community can create, use, and remix ideas. Camp is a participatory culture where the roles of consumer and producer intersect. Camp is hierarchical and has a very traditional atmosphere, but at the same time it is a space of mass innovation. Camp is a semi-closed network in which it is safe for staff and campers to experiment in what it means to be a good citizen; they can prepare for the hyper-connected virtual world in which they exist during the rest of the year.

Just as the variety of camps expands our capacity to connect with a larger range of families, the variety of camp staff members expands a camp's opportunity to connect with more campers. When Amazon removed the accessibility barriers to books, it revealed the market's real nature. As Clay Shirkey says, “Seen in that light, social tools don't create collective action—they merely remove the obstacles to it” (Shirkey, 2008). In camping as well, anything is possible when the amateur educator models his or her own brand of avant-garde contemporary Jewish life in the hyper-traditional setting of camp. The focus on developing this youth culture allows more campers to connect to Judaism. Hiring amateur educators is also economically efficient. Although doing so does not infinitely expand our educational opportunities, it does allow us to flow deeper down that niche-based “long tail” of Jewish connectivity.

While camps benefit from empowering these amateur educators, they should not provide a completely open teaching platform for counselors. Excellent camps are disciplined about who they hire and how they orient, train, and supervise their staffs. Camps are not hiring seasoned professionals; therefore they need to invest in the professional development and Jewish education of these ProAms. The camp's leadership must express reasonable expectations for the desired learning outcomes of the campers.⁴ Working at camp is a job; the amateur educators need to be held accountable for achieving these goals.⁵

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⁴While we have long posited that camp delivers Jewish learning outcomes, you are encouraged to read the recently published study by Steven M. Cohen and colleagues (2010), *The Long-Term Impact of Jewish Camp upon Adult Jewish Engagement*.

⁵To see great research into accountability within the Ramah system, see Dr. Zachary Adam Lasker's dissertation, *The Camp Counselor as Educator and Role Model for the Core Jewish Values and Practices of the Conservative Movement* (2009).

An extraordinary model for this kind of training is the Cornerstone Fellowship, a program of the Foundation for Jewish Camp that has been funded by the Avi Chai Foundation.⁶ In the summer of 2010 Cornerstone worked with more than 40 camps from all over North America—both geographically and ideologically. Each camp sent a small delegation of third-year bunk staff fellows to a four-day conference in May, which was held in the ultimate classroom, a camp. An eclectic group of experienced experiential educators set a cornucopia of Jewish content before this diverse group of counselors and asked them to bring that content back to their camps. The Foundation for Jewish Camp does not set the agenda for these counselors; rather, each group of staff created an action plan for bringing more Jewish content back to their camp under the guidance of a senior camp representative. The director must then sign off on the action plan. This process ensures buy-in from the most senior bunk staff and authority of the camp leadership. In the context of their own camp culture the third-year bunk staff define camp culture more than the camp leadership. When the Cornerstone fellows decide to bring back more Jewish intention to their bunks, the camp is transformed. Over the last eight years Cornerstone has been an exemplar of Leadbeater and Miller's *Pro-Am Revolution*.

At the conference in May, the Cornerstone fellows explored the niches of their own interests while encountering the various other interests of fellows from other camps. The camps are developing content for the niches they serve and also connecting to *Klal Yisrael*—the whole of the Jewish people. In other words, Cornerstone is a huge ice cream party where most of the fellows can find the flavors they want. This model aspires to emphasize “passion-based” education while connecting more campers to their Judaism. The Cornerstone Fellowship leverages peer-to-peer engagement to draw people down the “long tail” with training, content, and direction. This unique celebration of their diversity of Jewish expression underscores how much they have in common. “If you get the conditions right, a walled garden can turn into a rain forest” (Johnson, 2010).

Rabbi Yehoshua of Peki'in was right in that it is impossible for there to be a session in the house of study without some *hiddush*, but this principle is not limited to the traditional house of study. We see the “long tail” manifest in camp, but that is not the only place where this ProAm trend emerges in our community. On campus, Hillel has coupled its Campus Entrepreneur Interns—a team of college students who are paid to engage their peers in Jewish life on campus—with a senior Jewish educator who can provide deeper engagement with Jewish content.⁷ It is also present in the growth of the Independent minyanim. Yeshivat Hadar was started to train more learned laity. Rabbi Elie Kaunfer offers many suggestions for this amateur-led movement in his new book, *Empowered Judaism: What Independent Minyanim Can Teach Us About Building Vibrant Jewish Communities* (Kaunfer, 2010; see also his article in this issue). To expand the range of the synagogue's offerings and enable it to capture a larger segment of the market, some innovation in congregational education has come about when synagogues themselves have recruited and trained amateur educators (Weissman, 2010).

⁶To learn about further professional development work by the Foundation for Jewish Camp go to <http://www.jewishcamp.org/how-we-help/developing-professionals>

⁷See Hillel's logic model at <http://www.jimjosephfoundation.org/PDF/Hillel%20SJECEI%20LM.pdf>

Perhaps Jewish summer camp is a unique place of study because it is founded on three basic tenets. The first one is obvious to anyone who has ever worked at a camp: Camp is all about the campers—from the basics of health and safety to inspiring them at every moment of the day, 24 hours a day. If a camper does not have a meaningful summer the staff has not done its job. That brings us to the second tenet of camp: that the first tenet is a *lie*. While camp would not exist without the campers, the lasting educational outcome of camp is the transformation of the staff into mature Jewish citizens. We say camp is about the camper so that the amateur educator learns something about him- or herself. Beyond taking care of the campers' basic needs, the magic of camp happens when counselors can pursue their Jewish identity with the campers. When counselors relate to their campers, then maybe for the first time these amateur educators understand what they are teaching. The urgency of the students' basic needs coupled with the myth that "what the counselor is doing has never been done before" creates, in the staff, a deep and lasting sense of ownership of Jewish life.

While we know that immersive learning environments are a big part of camp, all immersive teaching environments take the learning to the next level (Sales & Saxe, 2002).⁸ Perhaps the unique aspect of camp is the third tenet of camp. Not everyone who goes to school is expected to be a teacher, and surely not everyone who goes to synagogue is expected to hear the calling to become a rabbi. But at camp, every camper who gets off the bus is seen and is asked to see him- or herself as a potential staff member. Camp has a very tight learning loop, a holistic cycle in which the student becomes the teacher and the teacher becomes a student. The camper pays attention to the counselor because the camper wants to follow the counselor's example and join the camp's staff in the near future. In this sense the *chanichim*—campers—are truly initiates to the larger learning project of camp. While these amateur educators have a notable lack of expertise, there is a fascinating expectation that the students are driven to advance themselves as teachers.

It is no surprise that more than 30% of Jewish professionals in the field started out as counselors in Jewish summer camp (Kelner et al., 2005). According to a recent report by Jack Wertheimer, close to 70% of the next generation of Jewish innovators aged 22–40 attended Jewish summer camps (Wertheimer, 2010). It is overly simplistic to claim that "camp is all about the campers." Camp is all about creating an environment in which the camper can evolve to become the counselor, teacher, productive member of society, and leader in the Jewish community. As Richard Joel, the president of Yeshiva University, often says, we are working on creating *klei kodesh*—clergy—as well as lay *kodesh*, holy lay leadership.

Immersive experiences, such as camp, in which the student becomes the teacher, will have an enduring impact on everyone involved in the enterprise. As the Talmud says, "I have learned much from my teachers, and more from my peers, but the most from my students" (*Ta'anit 7a*). These participatory environments not only benefit the amateur teacher but also perpetuate a tighter learning loop that attracts new students who aspire to become teachers.

⁸Look for Dr. Sales' soon-to-be published reflection on 10 years after *Limud by the Lake: Extending the Tent and Strengthening the Tent Stakes: Growth and Change in Jewish Summer Camp*.

CONCLUSION

Today's consumers have grown accustomed to getting exactly what they want when they want it. Jewish education needs to respond by nurturing systems that enable amateurs to meet the needs of consumers by diversifying their offerings without incurring excessive overhead expenses. It makes sense that we continue to invest in the "clicks" over "bricks." While we need real places to meet and form lasting community, we also need to appreciate how much is happening today with the click of a mouse and the forming of small groups. With the limited expense of online community as compared with the brick and mortar destination-based Jewish life, we need both to use and to imitate the technological advancements of the 21st century.

The *Talmud Bavli* relates,

When Rabbi Chanina and Rabbi Chiya would argue, Rabbi Chanina would say to Rabbi Chiya: "Do you argue with me? If, G-d forbid, Torah were to be forgotten by Israel, I would restore it through my pilpul, my academic hairsplitting!" Rabbi Chiya responded to Rabbi Chanina: "Do you argue with me? I ensure that Torah will not be forgotten by Israel! What do I do? I soak flax, weave nets, hunt deer and feed its meat to orphans. I prepare parchment from the deers' hides, write the five books of the Torah on five scrolls and go to a city. I teach five children all five books of the Torah and six children each a section of the Mishnah. I then tell them that by the time I return again, they should each teach the others what they had learned." That is why Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi said: "Great are the deeds of Chiya" (Bava Metzia 85b).

As an innovator, it seems that Rabbi Chanina is superior. If the Torah were lost, he could have composed it again from scratch. But in the end, Rabbi Chiya was superior to Rabbi Chanina because he created an innovative, sustainable educational system by training a group of amateur educators and directing them to teach each other. While none of them had as much knowledge as Rabbi Chanina or Rabbi Chiya, they were all bound up in a learning community and found a way, with minimal overhead, to keep Jewish education alive. They built their learning community by reinforcing their own learning, which was itself facilitated by teaching each other.⁹

In their recently published *Learning From the Extremes*, Charles Leadbeater and Annika Wong (2010) outline what global educational systems need to do to meet the needs of the 21st century, providing many compelling examples from the developing world. They argue that to meet the needs of the masses we need to explore transformative disruptive innovation in informal learning settings. The key innovations that meet these needs focus on pulling in the students and not pushing them, rely on peer-to-peer education, and use creative spaces for learning.

Faced with needs similar to those of the developing world it seems that Rabbi Chiya understood Leadbeater and Wong's argument's many centuries earlier. Rabbi Chiya figured out how to pull the students in by dealing with the fundamental needs of feeding the orphans. Rabbi Chiya fundamentally redefined the role of the educator from what it was understood to be in the house of study. He was not a dispenser of knowledge, but a wise facilitator of peer-to-peer

⁹There are similarities here to the methodology of a "purpose-driven church." See <http://www.purposedrivenchurch.com>.

education. For Rabbi Chiya was not interested in bringing his students to the house of study, but in bringing the learning to their environment.

Like Amazon, Rabbi Chiya was able to expand Jewish educational shelf space, through his hard work, blood, sweat, and flax seed. Today's educators need to realize that there are alternative distribution methods to teaching Torah that stretch beyond the traditional hierarchical relationship between teacher and student. Peer-to-peer environments are an innovation in that they create a sustainable learning loop where students and teachers learn from each other. Rabbi Yehoshua of Peki'in and Rabbi Chiya seem like camp people: Each cares more about teaching and connecting than about his personal stature and his title. Instead of getting stuck in the traditional bookstore model, we have the opportunity to explore new paradigms that can help us, the People of the Book, make additional shelf space to ensure that we all—individually and as a collective—find exactly what we need and what we want.

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