

# S3KReport



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## Rekindling Tradition as Life Partnerships End

I am a sociologist, a thirteen-year convert to Judaism, and someone who has been divorced. All three perspectives led me to find out how individuals experience divorce and ending life partnerships through contemporary U.S. religious communities.

The U.S. Census in 2000 reported that 10% of the adult population is divorced. Divorce for Jews appears only slightly below these national numbers; the National Jewish Population Survey 2000-01 reported 9% of Jewish adults as currently divorced. The number of people who have experienced divorce at some point in their life is even higher, as these figures do not reflect people once divorced but currently remarried.

Given the ubiquity of divorce across most religious groups, it is somewhat surprising that sociologists have paid so little attention to how people experience divorce in congregations. Studies that do address the relationship between religion and divorce are largely quantitative, analyzing large samples and concerned with causal relationships. For example, scholars have explored how interfaith marriages may be more susceptible to divorce

and separation, assessed divorce rates in various religious denominations, asked how divorce may affect religious membership, and analyzed the effects of religiosity and social networks on lifelong marriage (e.g., Amato et al. 2007; Chiswick

& Lehrer 1991; Stolzenberg et al. 1995; Mullins et al. 2004). These are important questions, but they do not tell us much about religious meaning and process as life partnerships end.

That individuals turn to religious communities, especially in times of acute stress, should not be surprising. Tens of millions of Americans gather weekly for local congregational worship, many of them seeking communities to ameliorate grief or hardship (Ammerman 2005; Hadaway et al. 1993). Life challenges like divorce can bring people closer to their religious communities and practices or chase them away in search of new ones. Sociologists have argued quite cogently that participation in communities of faith can strengthen coping mechanisms and promote health and well-being, but we have little research exploring the complexity and nuance in these processes.

Taken by the divorce statistics and by my own experience, I wanted to dig deeper, using in-depth qualitative methods, to analyze how people turn to religious practice and community as they end life partnerships. Which rituals and practices are most meaningful? What helps individuals cope with new family arrangements and post-divorce identity construction? How have religious communities responded to the needs of this population?

How might religious leaders confront contemporary family issues? In particular, how might synagogues work to help the divorced, and what can Jewish ritual and community mean to those ending life partnerships?

### The Study

From 2005 to 2009, I have conducted sixty interviews with divorced individuals (eleven Jewish) active in a variety of religious communities. I interviewed forty clergy (twelve rabbis) and lay leaders. Three of the rabbis had been divorced. I also interviewed two Jewish counselors who ran support groups. The majority of interviews were in-person, although half of the rabbi interviews were by

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## About the Author

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phone. The average interview lasted one and a half hours. Interviews were open-ended; although I included specific questions about life history and ritual practice, I allowed room for research participants to express what they themselves felt was most important. For example, I asked specific questions about what songs or prayers they might have found meaningful, and, in the Jewish case, whether they had received a *get*, or talked to their rabbi or members of their congregation about their situation. Responses to broad questions like, “Tell me about religious or spiritual practices that helped you,” or “What did you find most challenging about your divorce experience?” frequently ignited long narratives about the depth of ritual meaning and congregational experience. I was able to gain entry into support groups and workshops for the divorced in the Protestant and Catholic traditions. I also analyzed divorce pamphlets, newsletters, recorded lectures, on-line publications, books, and media sources produced by each tradition.

I draw here primarily from my interviews with divorced Jews, demonstrating how traditional Jewish practice and synagogue worship became significant for individuals as they ended relationships and experienced changes in home ritual practice. These interviews speak to larger dynamics at work across religious traditions, specifically: *overwhelming congregational silence, individual shame, and the private nature of divorce experience*. These individual and social forces pose challenges for synagogues who strive to better reach and serve those ending life partnerships.

## Divorce as Death and Injury

Most people experience divorce as a time of heightened emotion and construction of a new self (Giddens 1991; Vaughn 1986). Respondents talked about the intense transformative nature of the period, naming divorce as a kind of “death,” a time of grief and mourning for their spousal relationship and loss of time with children.

Karen, a Jewish woman who had recently ended a marriage of over fifteen years, talked about divorce as death and injury: “It is totally a death and it takes a grieving process and it takes support and it affects you like a death...people really need to be treated during the divorce like it’s a death. It’s a very hard time...You are broken.” Jill, another Jewish woman who had been married to her “high-school sweetheart” for over fifteen years, told me of her near debilitating sadness associated with losing time with her two teenage children: “I don’t know if that ever goes away...Very painful. You expect to have your children for 18 years and then they go to college, that’s the expectation, now that time has been cut and shortened...this stinks...it’s really the price you pay.” Mark, who had ended a marriage and then a recent engagement, compared ending intended life partnerships to physical injury: “These sorts of emotional and spiritual wounds are worse than most physical things...because they can last months, and even years...Most illnesses that you have don’t last that long.”

Social workers and rabbis who had led divorce support groups, some for almost a decade, all echoed the prevalence of this level of pain for those who came to groups. A social worker described divorce as trauma: “This kind of crisis intervention with trauma is...You see someone who is

suffering so intensely get better.” How did Jewish practice and synagogue involvement play a role in my respondents’ getting better?

Congregational music, song, and prayer were empowering and healing rituals across traditions. My interviews with Jews were distinct in that they also spoke passionately about the loss of home ritual. Loss of relationships and what had been deeply meaningful family home ritual led them to synagogues, new ritual spaces, and Jewish community organizations where they found both religious and therapeutic practices.

## From Home to Synagogue

All Jewish respondents talked about the negative impact of divorce on home ritual. Lighting Shabbat candles, saying *Kiddush*, and sharing *challah* as a family had been central in their lives, but the loss of a spouse and the reality that their children now had two homes and might be away on Friday evening undermined ritual practice. The conventional association of women lighting the Sabbath candles and home rituals as a family affair reduced Mark’s desire to practice rituals on his own. It did not “feel right lighting the candles alone,” he told me. But it wasn’t just men who were affected. Jill talked about how her children, now teenagers, did not “want to stick around on Friday night,” and how having them at their fathers’ house on many Friday evenings made her home practice even less likely. Another woman faced with post-divorce challenges of single working parenthood tried to perform Shabbat eve ritual when she got the kids for Friday nights, but often made do with small crackers instead of a *challah*. Children are a major motivation for parental involvement in Jewish practice and community (Cohen and Eisen 2000:67). Unsurprisingly, then, my respondents found home rituals deeply disturbed as their relationships with children changed considerably post-divorce. Despite what they described as the sometimes alienating “family centered” nature of most of their congregations, they turned to synagogues for ritual sustenance.

In synagogue, it was Jewish liturgical music especially that brought consistency to their chaotic lives and facilitated the expression of what respondents named as unpredictable and overwhelming emotions. Music did more than soothe; it also connected people with a tradition that proved regenerative and grounding. Jill described feeling in synagogues services that “there is something spiritual above us.” “I’m very connected to the traditions,” she added, “and to prayer.” She talked about the Jewish worship service as “tradition;” her childhood memories

of singing Shabbat songs made services a link to family memory, filling the empty Shabbat ritual spaces that divorce had brought into her home. Jill explained: “It’s an anchor...something to go back to, to go home to.” Her connection to congregational prayer was so overwhelming that she was stopped by tears during our interview: trying to articulate the depth of feeling at the nexus of communal prayer and individual grief proved too profound for words.

Lynn Davidman (1991:93-94) writes of women attracted to a modern Orthodox synagogue because they were “missing a ‘core’...a sense of being rooted in some firm, stable, and clearly defined way of being.” Through singing Jewish songs, “there was a feeling of partaking of something rich and enduring.” The songs put them, “in touch with the Jewish people, past and present.” Jeffrey Summit (2000:33) refers explicitly to this positive role of finding tradition through music: “The tune, separate from the words,” which “serves as a portal to the past, a connection with ancestors, real and imagined” (33). This ancestral and familial ritual association was invaluable for most of my Jewish respondents as multiple relational losses overwhelmed their daily life.

Two respondents described singing as providing connection to Divine love and strength. Rachel’s husband left many years ago, on a Shabbat evening, no less. She was devastated and frightened; her body tensed with anxiety and fear. A friend came by to watch her children the next day so that she could go to Shabbat morning services. As she entered the synagogue to join the congregation in prayer, she felt a sudden sense of “calm,” and the reassurance “that everything was going to be fine.” She talked about the space as safe, reassuring, and filled with love:

*I went to shul...didn’t say a word ...I was just in another place. I walked into the sanctuary and put the tallit on...said the Barchu and up until then I was shaking like a leaf...As soon as I put the tallit on in the sanctuary, it was like suddenly being nestled under the wings of the Shechinah – this calm took over me... so here I am, I’m shaking like a leaf and I put on my tallit and this calm just totally takes over me and I just totally felt enveloped and I just knew it was going to be okay.*

The *Shechinah* is a name for the close, indwelling, feminine aspect of God. The *Barchu*, or call to prayer, is a musical call and response by rabbi and congregants who bow toward Jerusalem as they chant the words. Rachel stood on that Saturday morning, her body encompassed

by the prayer shawl, a canopy of safety, moving and singing with those around her in a call to prayer. The sense of “enveloping calmness” gave her strength to get through the rest of that weekend and the days after; and to be a strong mother for her children in the years to come.

Karen too described music as important during a difficult “transition” from married to single self. Her only child was finishing high school and had lost interest in attending Shabbat services. She felt little desire to attend the Conservative “family-centered” synagogue to which she and her husband had belonged. So she joined what she called a “spiritual” place, a synagogue associated with the Jewish Renewal movement. Even though she did not talk with members of this synagogue about her divorce, which she considered private, the services helped her “refocus” her everyday life: “The spiritual component in my journey now is to support the essence of who I am in bringing out the best of who I am. So I get off track when I’m dealing with a teenage child, and then on Shabbat I can reflect, refocus, can put things in a little bit more of a perspective and pull myself together.”

This new “spiritual” congregation was especially helpful during the most uncomfortable time in home life: the period of time where she knew that the relationship was over, but had not made the final decision to leave. The synagogue became a welcoming sanctuary:

*I found myself in this safe haven...of nurturance that was not alien or alienating and I felt...I mean if somebody were to ask me...how did I get through it, that’s how I got through it. Knowing every single Saturday, I had a place and this was over a long period of time because when my marriage was failing, I had to get out of my house...And so that safe haven really gave a destination for where I could go and that was so important...I mean some people paint or write poetry or some people go hiking. For me, Saturday morning was going to Shul and just having that whole, being surrounded in that spiritual environment.*

For Karen, communal prayer was especially powerful as an embodied experience:

*It’s not an intellectual experience... When the service starts... its songs, music, chanting, bringing the community together and we sing out loud, really loud and spirited and it shifts me from being caught in the pettiness in my brain of going around and around to just resonating inside my body and then I shift and then we do a meditation of the certain prayer, the Amidah and I just go into the Amidah and I do my own private words.*

Karen also received a get from a nearby Conservative synagogue, finding it “legalistic,” but feeling a deep tie to “ancestors” looking down on her as she went through the process; and she went through an immersion ceremony at a new *mikvah* center after receiving her *get*. She described cleaning her body before immersion as especially meaningful for someone who had just ended an intimate loving union: “I just had one very powerful experience and that was getting prepared. You really have to do everything, and I looked in the mirror, and I either heard a voice that said you are loved, or you are beautiful, one of those two things and it was really incredible.”

Several women with whom I spoke were planning to conduct a similar ritual at their local *mikvah* after receiving their Jewish divorce. Contemporary ritual baths offer innovative re-creation of traditional Jewish practice for those ending marriages. *Mayyim Hayyim*, for example, a new *mikvah* (ritual bath) center in the Boston area, presents itself as reclaiming “the ancient tradition of mikvah” and reinventing “the rituals of immersion to serve the needs of a diverse 21st-century Jewish community” ([www.mayyimhayyim.org](http://www.mayyimhayyim.org)).

The diversity of practices that Karen assembled both inside and outside the synagogue (and in various Jewish movements) demonstrates the highly individual nature of the way religious practice impacts the ending of life partnerships in our society. Her choices were even celebrated privately: a small circle of her “closest” friends attended her *mikvah* ceremony. She was surrounded by other Jews during services, but described deep body resonance and the claiming of private meditative/prayer space within the *Amidah* as most powerful.

Some rabbis (and non-rabbis too) have devised individual ritual ceremonies expressly for congregants and close friends. One Reconstructionist woman worked with her ex-husband, his spiritual mentor, and her rabbi to create an original separation ritual that included several symbolic actions — like the breaking of a plate to represent the harshness of ending the marriage and the feelings of brokenness associated with it. Another woman who was planning a “Document of Release” ceremony in her Reform synagogue was comforted that her teenage children would be there to witness a peaceful end to their parents’ marriage.

Several respondents talked about saying *Kaddish* for their endings. It was the most important Jewish ritual for Mark, who said it inside and outside synagogue walls, whenever he “felt the need.” I asked him what it meant to say *Kaddish* for these endings. He answered: “It was very personal...because it was Jewish. Just letting out a bunch more of this huge wellspring of grief that I had.”

Support groups too were popular across religious traditions. In the Jewish community, groups were shaped by a combination of therapeutic and religious beliefs and practices, and facilitated by rabbis and clinical social workers. They mostly took place outside of the synagogue. One rabbi who had run support groups for several years explained: “The synagogue is really for the ‘ritual’ and the ‘education.’” Jewish Family services, she said, were created for more of the emotional needs. This rabbi also justified a semi-private therapeutic space as separate from synagogue life: “People don’t want to be in a support group with people they pray with in synagogue.” My sample of divorced Jews were split on this issue; about half wanted more synagogue programming for the divorced, the other half desired more private, removed space.

In the Jewish healing group I studied, participants were invited to express emotions, especially through the creative use of traditional practices. In a group inspired by the ritualwell.org website, facilitators adopted the tearing of cloth to model *kriyah*, the well-known Jewish mourning ritual. In another healing group the rabbi ended sessions with a traditional healing blessing; others featured Psalms, which members were asked to ponder for their message. In terms of calendrical connection, respondents found profound connection during Passover season, by imaging the ending of intimate relationships as a personal symbolic journey of freedom.

## **Frustration, Silence, and Shame**

Mark lived in a suburban neighborhood in an area of the U.S. with a high concentration of Jews and several synagogue options, but described a difficult search for a Jewish support group:

*I am actually very dissatisfied with what the Jewish community, at least here, has to offer single people and also single people who are going through divorce. It is very bad in a number of ways... in the temples, I mean I've gone to their websites and there is diddely-squat for single people...those of us who may be more religious or less but want to be part of the community are like, “fend for yourself.”*

Mark eventually found a support group through Jewish Family Services and another through a Jewish healing group, but he remained unattached to any synagogue and doubted that he would find one that had resources and community for singles and the divorced.

Rachel, herself divorced fifteen years ago, and now a Conservative rabbi, also experienced a lack of programming for the divorced when she needed it. Even though synagogues generally take a person’s post-divorce financial situation into consideration regarding dues, she said, asking for a reduction and having to explain one’s finances was a strong deterrent: “Synagogue dues are astronomical...Very often they (congregants) are put through the grinder to get any kind of concession on dues. These are not people who are used to having to beg and they simply throw up their hands and walk away.” The divorced “disappear through the cracks,” she contended. Because she was working in a synagogue while going through her divorce she herself was “embraced by the congregation.” But, she

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argued, “If I had come off the streets, I would have been ignored...I saw it happen, over and over again.” She remembered feeling frustrated that the Christian churches around her appeared to be doing more for the divorced than synagogues do:

*There was a fairly large Baptist church that ran a program for people going through divorce which was to give them a support network. They had the program that was for the parent, they had one for the children which was run by a psychologist who was...helping them to cope with the change in their lives...And I saw other similar programs. Synagogues were doing nothing.*

Jews and Catholics have very different formal religious edicts toward divorce: Catholicism does not recognize a religious divorce, while Judaism does. But several of my Jewish respondents paralleled my Catholic respondents’ experience of not knowing what their religious position was as a divorced person. Sandra, for example, told me:

I called him [the rabbi], probably the week after my husband left. And he said ‘Come in, come in’...I was completely lost. I had no idea what to do. And he didn’t just throw books at me...He and the cantor have been pretty good following up and calling me from time to time. I have questions about what do I do next as far as religiously, am I going to be like excommunicated because I am divorced?

Sandra’s reaction is surprising given that she had been very active in this Reform congregation, had spent much time working with children in the religious school, and described her congregation as “very embracing and very loving.” Her description speaks to a contradictory dynamic that I found at work across traditions where respondents, in both liberal and conservative traditions, while finding meaningful ritual in synagogue communities, also experienced congregational silence around discussion of divorce, fear of gossip, and some individual shame. When I asked Sandra if she had spoken to synagogue members about her situation she replied, “You don’t tell them everything, because they’re all *yentas*, everybody’s a *yenta*.” Jill, who belonged to a Reconstructionist synagogue where the rabbi had been divorced, exemplifies the initial individual shame that I heard from many respondents across traditions, Jews no less than others:

*I can tell you, it was beyond weird and painful for me. It took me 11 months to tell my rabbi that I was separated. I’m now separated 16 months. It was something I felt uncomfortable about, ashamed about. He is a very approachable young man who is not much older than we are. It was a conflict of mine...and once I told him it was great.*

The rabbis I interviewed confirmed a pervasive synagogue silence around the issue of divorce. They expressed frustration at not knowing when couples were having difficulties. Some heard through gossip, but many talked of not learning about a separation until preparation for Bat or Bar Mitzvahs of children, in some cases, years later. This differed somewhat for rabbis of very small congregations, but held true for synagogues of over 150 members. This ubiquitous silence across religious traditions,

associated with fear of gossip and shame, reflect larger cultural forces at work in society at large: ending life partnerships is often seen as a failure to sustain a relationship, something that everyone ought to be able to do, and hence, involving private-self work to resolve. This combination of seeing life partnership as “normal,” coupled with the understanding of divorce as private and personal, magnifies the “alone” character of ending life partnerships in religious community.

## Implications

Despite this “alone” character, divorced respondents saw synagogues as important spaces for navigating what they described as their highly emotional journeys. The late John Rayner (1998, 65-66), from the Council of Reform and Liberal Rabbis in Great Britain, describes the arguments that persuaded the 1996 Rabbinic Conference of the ULPS to adopt “a truly Progressive version of the traditional Get,” their “Document of Release.” Divorce was described as “a traumatic experience, not unlike bereavement,” calling for “pastoral counseling or communal support.” Helpful ritual would “fortify self-respect,” and “reassure” people that they are “valued” as both individuals and synagogue members. Finally, it was hoped that a progressive ritual for divorce would encourage those who avail themselves of it to “remain associated with the community, and continue their children’s education.” My respondents would have agreed. Turning to Jewish tradition and congregational worship strengthened, and for some rekindled, a sense of Jewish identity.

Jewish intergroup marriage, conversion, and young adulthood are all life passages that are recognized as having strong potential for drawing people closer to Jewish practice and community. Divorce is another such major life transition, with significant implications for the continuance of Jewish tradition. Increased attention to Jews ending life partnerships represents untapped possibilities for renewal of Jewish tradition and increasing the relevance of synagogues.

Some rabbis offered rationales against paying more attention to the divorced in synagogues. Some resisted public divorce ritual as an imposition of private emotion on children and/or community in general. Rabbis largely assumed that it was the job of Jewish Family Services to address therapeutic issues. A few rabbis from larger congregations said, “We don’t have many divorced families here.” Given what we know about family life in the U.S. that observation is hardly credible, although, no doubt, the rabbis were telling the truth in saying that they did not necessarily know of the divorces that were occurring. Members who were marginally involved in synagogue life could leave quietly through divorce, and as some rabbis noted, even if the synagogue follows up with a survey or phone call, the ex-member may not mention their divorce as reason.

People experiencing the pain of ending relationships can be found in all synagogues. A good number may leave when they feel little sensitivity to the stigma they encounter, especially if they are also faced with programming centered almost solely on intact nuclear families. I interviewed one rabbi who had started her own support groups – one for men and one for

*(Advisory Board Continued)*

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women – in her Conservative synagogue, and she found the demand for her programs strong.

When I first started this project, a rabbi in the Conservative movement asked me why we would want to create a ritual for “a plague.” His response mirrors the opposition that Catholic divorce ministries often face. Such resistance comes partly from a belief (conscious or otherwise) that ending a marriage is a deviant circumstance, and that new rituals for easing the pain of such ending might further validate the deviance. To the contrary, my research suggests that rituals for divorce confirm cultural ideals of marriage and life-partnerships, thereby sustaining them in the public eye, even as they mark their endings as sacred also.

## Suggestions

My current synagogue home is small (about one-hundred and forty households), unaffiliated and made up of Jews and non-Jews from various backgrounds: Conservative, Reconstructionist, Reform, formally Orthodox, converts, and non-Jewish spouses in interfaith marriages. Through my past experiences as a synagogue board and choir member, I have come to understand the difficulty of trying to be all things to all people and the challenge of making the synagogue a welcoming, exciting, and fulfilling worship space for all. In many ways, those ending life partnerships are similar to other groups whose departure from social norms may make them feel alienated in their congregations and the wider community.

But providing a welcoming and meaningful religious community matters. On Jewish grounds alone, we are urged to care about individuals in distress. More practically speaking, we live in an age of choice, when we can ill afford to alienate individuals who are likely then to leave the synagogue.

My research prompts a few suggestions for reaching out to those who are in the midst of ending marriages and life partnerships.

1. Increase synagogue programming outside of the normative family model. Most of my respondents felt synagogues were geared to nuclear families and longed to find worship and programming that felt welcoming to singles.

2. Consider providing ongoing support groups within the synagogue, led, perhaps, by professionals and by people already divorced. Even a gentle suggestion of a welcoming synagogue space may eat away at the silence and

bring those ending their relationships closer to Jewish community and ritual.

3. As a matter of course, synagogue websites should list “divorce” alongside other topics related to pastoral and family issues. In addition, make a routine effort to provide information about divorce resources through newsletters and resource tables.

4. People turn readily to on-line resources for help in ending relationships while keeping them private. Ritualwell.org, was particularly popular. Production of Jewish discussion/support-group texts and ready-media programs for synagogues may help speed attention to the divorced.

5. Embrace ritual as transformative, restorative, and dynamic: separation ceremonies, *mikvah* immersions, Jewish music, and saying *Kaddish* for the end of a relationship drew my respondents closer to tradition and synagogue life.

6. Breaking the silence that prohibits open discussion of divorce in synagogues is not easily accomplished. Many religious leaders across traditions were hesitant to discuss divorce openly – in a sermon, for instance – for fear that it would only bring extra discomfort to people going through divorce. Many people in the throes of ending relationships do, in fact, want to keep their experiences private, partly because of the gossip they think is likely to occur, and partly because they understand the divorce process as a personal and private matter. The task, then, is how to present a sense of approachability for congregants ending relationships while not making them feel even more “different” than they already do. Sermons that include divorce alongside other life-cycle endings can work to break silence.

Beyond these specifics, we require an overall synagogue perspective that acknowledges the ending of life-partnerships as a complicated and on-going process that can stretch out over years, affecting numerous life-cycle events and influencing children’s religious education long after the divorce itself is final. Co-parenting household issues may lead to competing messages about Jewish practice; religious schools have to adapt to children who alternate weekend residency with parents. If synagogues are to remain in touch with changing relationships in the twenty-first century, their ability to welcome the divorced should rank high on their list of priorities.

## Resources for Jewish Leaders and those Ending Life Partnerships

RitualWell ([www.ritualwell.org](http://www.ritualwell.org)) is a project of Kolot: The Center for Jewish Women's and Gender Studies at the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College.

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## About Synagogue 3000 (S3K)

Synagogue 3000 is a catalyst for excellence, empowering congregations and communities to create synagogues that are sacred and vital centers of Jewish life. We seek to make synagogues compelling moral and spiritual centers – sacred communities – for the twenty-first century. Our offices in Los Angeles and New York direct national congregational networks and the Synagogue Studies Institute. Sacred communities are those where relationships with

God and with each other define everything the synagogue does; where ritual is engaging; where Torah suffuses all we do; where social justice is a moral imperative; and where membership is about welcoming and engaging both the committed and the unaffiliated. We wish to change the conversation about meaningful Jewish life in our time.

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