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HEALTH | WELLNESS | ESSAY

# Why I've Become More Mindful About What I Delegate

It's convenient to outsource work but often more satisfying to roll up your sleeves to do it yourself.

*By Moshe Bar*

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Moshe Bar's family in the treehouse they built together. PHOTO: MOSHE BAR

Of everything I have done, little has brought me as much joy as building a treehouse for my children around 15 years ago. Armed with power tools and two left hands, I spent about a year turning a collection of crooked beams into an

enduring structure. We all loved it so dearly that my now 20-something kids and I decided to tattoo its image on our skin.

I've spent some time trying to figure out why this labor-intensive project brought me so much satisfaction. The treehouse itself was great fun, but the process of creating it, demanding as it was, invigorated me and lifted my spirits in ways I did not expect.

I learned that I was in good company. Psychological studies consistently show that people value what they have worked for. This phenomenon is called the "[IKEA effect](#)," named for the prideful pleasure people feel when they assemble the Swedish manufacturer's flat-pack products themselves.

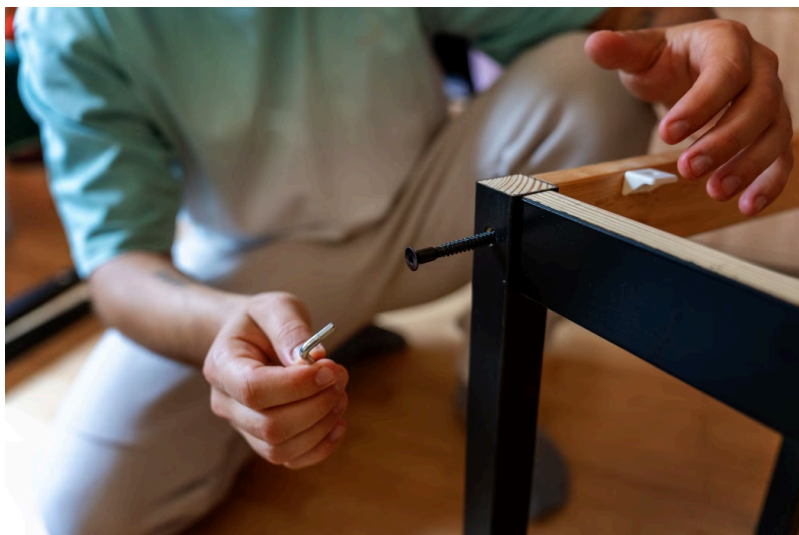
In one particularly amusing study from 2011, social psychologists at Harvard Business School found that people prized Lego constructions they built themselves over identical pre-assembled models. The phenomenon is apparently not exclusive to humans. Scientists have observed that rats and starlings consistently prefer the food that they worked to get over the same food received without effort.

I thought of these studies after a recent family cooking class. The recipes were for simple ramen and gyoza, but my 13-year-old daughter declared that the meal was the most delicious she had ever tasted. Our investment in every detail of the process clearly elevated the experience.

Modern life often prizes prepackaged conveniences. We buy ready-made products, eat frozen pizzas and replace what's broken instead of fixing it. The more successful we become, the more likely we are to outsource jobs that we might have once done ourselves. Yet the effort of involvement is what gives meaning to so much of life.

I had to be reminded of this recently. Last year I began to notice that though I had been productively busy, I wasn't as excited as I used to be. Not bored, not tired, but a spark I'd long enjoyed was gone. My youngest daughter noted, with incisive candor, that my "wow" wasn't as loud as it had been. She was right.

Ever the scientist, I started probing my routines and habits, searching for what might be missing in my life. The insight came, unexpectedly, during a Talmud study session in November with my beloved teacher, Rabbi Shabtai Rappoport.



People are more attached to the furniture they assembled for themselves, a phenomenon known as the 'IKEA effect.' PHOTO: GETTY IMAGES

We were discussing the concept of *shlichut*—delegation—in Jewish law, which permits certain commandments to be performed by a proxy. For instance, you can appoint someone to make a charitable donation or officiate at a wedding on your behalf. Other commandments, such as praying or visiting a sick friend, must be performed firsthand. The distinction typically depends on the nature of the task. When the outcome is what matters, delegation is acceptable, but when the experience itself is important, you should do it yourself.

One needn't be a Talmudic scholar—or a patron of IKEA—to draw inspiration from these rules. What I had been missing wasn't success, leisure or even purpose. What I lacked was being more involved in the process.

As I've grown older, I've found myself delegating more of the lab-work I oversee, focusing more on the big picture. Similarly I let others tutor my kids and tend to my little garden. My distance from the granular details of my life and work was by design, but it seems to have left me feeling disconnected from it all. Participation is a form of commitment, and commitment allows for a richer experience.

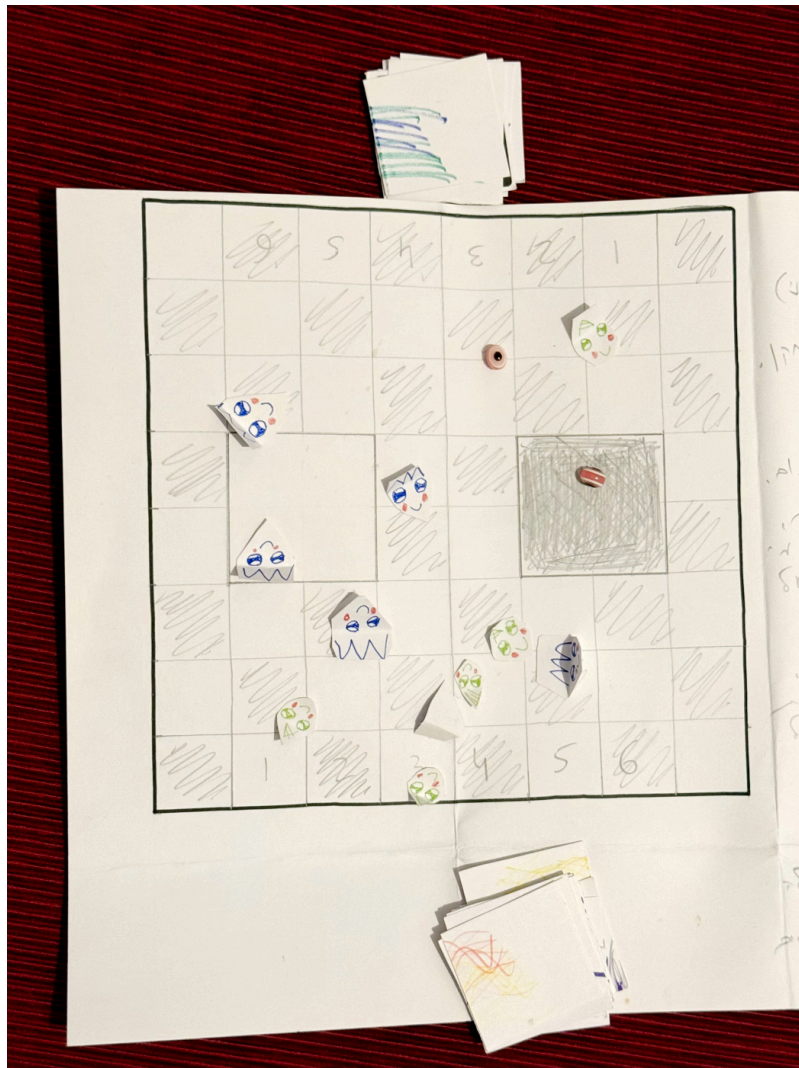
A recent family trip to Japan for my birthday confirmed this theory. The older children and their mother took upon themselves the burden of planning, sparing me weeks of logistical headaches. The vacation was fabulous, but I sensed my family enjoyed the results even more than I did. My lack of involvement rendered me a guest rather than an agent, and who wants to be a guest in their own life?

The connection between actions and feelings—between engagement and fulfillment—can be seen in a relatively new and popular treatment for



depression called behavioral activation (BA). Beyond low mood, one of the most challenging symptoms of depression is anhedonia, a diminished capacity to enjoy ordinary activities, which often leads to avoidance and withdrawal.

Studies show that encouraging patients to get up and do the things they used to enjoy, such as cooking or meeting with friends, can be just as effective as talk therapy in boosting moods and well-being. BA works because it helps patients override their avoidance and regain a sense of control over their lives. Activity is also often easier to manage than analysis.



A board game created by Bar and his daughter. PHOTO: MOSHE BAR

Staying active and involved isn't only the best way to enjoy life but also to prolong it. This goes beyond the well-known effects of exercise on physical and mental health. Being involved in purposeful activities that require mental engagement, such as hobbies, social interactions and volunteering, has been shown to improve resilience and reduce dementia.

Brain research confirms that cognitive involvement in process-based activities increases brain plasticity, enriches connections between neurons and lowers neurodegeneration. This helps explain why retirees who stop working but don't fill their days with other demanding activities experience an especially steep cognitive decline.

Although this insight hasn't quite nudged me to start washing my own car, cooking all my meals or running all the experiments in my lab, I am now more mindful about what I delegate. I hold on to the projects for which experiencing the process matters.

As a crafts project on a rainy day, my daughter and I invented a board game. It isn't the most exciting game or the most sophisticated. It is honestly a little silly, but we play it far more often than the ones that came shrink-wrapped from a store.

Pleasure and meaning, it seems, aren't necessarily about ease. There is delight in involvement, in details, in rolling up our sleeves and making what we want happen for ourselves.

*Moshe Bar is a neuroscientist at Bar-Ilan University in Israel and at Massachusetts General Hospital and the chief scientific officer at Hedonia. His most recent book is "Mindwandering: How Your Constant Mental Drift Can Improve Your Mood and Boost Your Creativity."*

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