

# Get the manager out of the room

In the brain and in everyday life, our behavior is channeled and limited by what we learned in the past. A little awareness can generate a big change

Moshe Bar

It's said that well-behaved women don't make history. The same goes with men. Our barrier for change is what is easy and what is acceptable. Those two blocks prevent most of us from spreading our wings, and guarantee that we will be regimented and not deviate from the ranks. That is true of our everyday life, and as is becoming increasingly clear from our growing understanding of how the brain works, it's true for our inner lives as well.

Let's start with the "easy." Routine, habits and the pursuit of the familiar all enable us to save energy and to enjoy comfort and a sense of security. But tendencies like these also entrench us, suppress growth and prevent us from exploring the world. In the brain, too, the first barrier to non-routine thinking is the relative ease with which activity progresses along familiar, well-trodden paths, as compared with progress on new paths. If as children we learn that a chair typically appears next to a table, the cortical representations of both a chair and of a table are linked in a certain sense, and that link continues to be strengthened as we go on seeing chairs next to tables. This is the famous neuroplasticity that underlies our ability to learn and to remember both new things and things that are recurring, and which exists also at advanced ages. As a result, when we see a chair, we immediately think of a table and activate its cortical representation – even if not necessarily consciously and even if there is no table in sight.

Associations of this kind are highly advantageous in our interactions with the world. Based on past experience, we anticipate and deploy with surprising precision for what is around us and for what will appear in the future. To think about the oak tree from which the chair was made, and not automatically about the table, requires an effort, because it's a departure from the natural structure of memory, which is constructed on the basis of the frequency with which things appear together in everyday contexts.

Similarly, we have whole scenarios stored in the memory, which are stronger and more automatic, the more typical they are. As Israelis, when we are invited to breakfast, it's easier for us to imagine and expect an omelet and a vegetable salad than to anticipate sausages (which is probably also why people wince when they see me eat sushi with *skhug*, a Yemeni hot sauce). The scenarios we have experienced and filed away, and the



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habits that they gave rise to on the basis of past experience, guide our future behavior. That's why it's easier and more natural for us to commute to work by the same route every morning, to buy vegetables from the same greengrocer and to hang out with people who think like we do.

The "acceptable" is the second barrier that stops us from initiating revolutions both major and minor. Rules, orders and conventions play an important role in preserving order and security, and in social functioning. Without them, we would not survive. That's why displaying doubt about rules and conventions, or deviating from them, will usually expose us to punishment, denunciation or at least a quizzical look. But such aberrant behavior also has an important role, perhaps even more interesting: If we don't ever deviate from the rules or challenge the norms, we won't invent surprising things or create special works. Without deviating, we will not be open to moving in new directions and we will not blossom in a way that will bring to expression the potential hidden in all of us.

As in human society, in the human brain, there are also acceptable and anomalous thought patterns, and each has an important role. Indeed, beyond the fact that frequency and typicality channel us into familiar paths and behaviors, both in the brain

and in our surroundings, the second dominant element that restrains our possible breaching of boundaries is a system of laws and dictates.

A constant struggle is going on in our brain between two potent and contradictory forces. One is excitation, the other is inhibition – something like the gas and the brakes in a car. Excitation activates representations, associations, thoughts and actions; while inhibition constrains and suppresses the activation of less relevant representations, distracting thoughts and involuntary or unacceptable actions. When we're standing on the old city wall in Acre and we want to jump into the sea, but are also afraid to do so, that is exactly the war between excitation and inhibition. When your interlocutor's mouth is giving off an unpleasant odor, your excitation encourages you to point it out to him, but assuming you have a healthy level of inhibition, that impulse will die and you will restrain yourself from saying anything.

Individuals can differ in their levels of inhibition. People with attention disorders, as well as children in general, are more impulsive and can say things that others would not say, or do things that others would not dare to do. Within the setting of a laboratory, a simple task called an "anti-saccade" exemplifies the power of inhibition. In this task, a flash in

the corner of the visual field naturally attracts attention, but the subject is required to resist the urge to move her eyes toward this flash and to move her eyes instead in the opposite direction. This turns out to be very difficult for people with inhibition deficiency, though not only for them. Give it a try.

The prefrontal cortex is akin to the brain's CEO, deciding and using excitation and inhibition to push toward what is desirable, based on its forecasts of possible consequences and results. It is late to develop, arriving at maturity only when we are in our mid-20s, partly because its development is based on accumulated experiences that gradually teach us the difference between good and bad and between right and wrong. It is the censor, the boss in the room; it sets the rules.

These two principles, attraction to the familiar and inhibition, are not independent. Both are based on the statistics of the world around us. The familiar is the typical, which in the nature of things occurs more frequently in everyday contexts and therefore directly influences our expectations from the surroundings. A refrigerator will appear in the kitchen with high probability, but a shoe will appear there with relatively low probability, while a samurai sword will appear in a kitchen with near-

zero probability. In the same manner, we will know that the dish we like to order in a particular restaurant will generally taste the same each time.

Our skill and tendency to collect and remember the statistics of what happens around us is the basis for critical abilities such as learning a language, or other attributes of the world, such as that children learn to expect that a car will necessarily have wheels but that it will not necessarily be red.

Similarly, inhibition is also based on probabilities. It ensures that we will go with what is regularly dictated to us and with what is acceptable. Because what is acceptable is what occurs more frequently – for example, what's in fashion, the use of contemporary slang or trendy vacation spots – and inhibition sees to it that we do not deviate from the mainstream.

Accordingly, both in the brain and in society, behavior is channeled and limited by what has been learned in the past, and by what is dictated as being acceptable and conventional. Both of these elements are the principal enemies of creative thinking, unique behavior and individualism, of everything that can be considered as being revolutionary to a degree. Galileo and Einstein, Gorbachev and Sadat, Van Gogh and Madonna – none of them would have changed our world if they had acted only according to the acceptable.

But it is worth overcoming what society and our brains dictate, not only in the context of major revolutions. Starting a trend of wearing sandals with socks, selling spaghetti in a pita or coming to class with a radical haircut are all moves that require cognitive and emotional energy, which must stand firm against the voices of inhibition that are broadcast to us constantly from inside and out. After all, it's known that it's easier to follow than to lead, and this extra effort is one of the main reasons why.

One of the best pieces of advice I can give for a successful brainstorming session, when creative ideas are called for, is to remove the manager from the room. This can lower inhibitions. There is no bad idea, there is no dumb idea, there is no idea that we already know won't work – that has to be the atmosphere during the creation of ideas, or otherwise thinking is paralyzed by external inhibition that develops into internal inhibition as well.

This is also how creativity works in the brain. The creative process can be thought of like a rhombus – a diamond shape. In the first stage, the bottom half of the diamond, we generate ideas openly and freely,

through what is known as divergent thinking. Afterward, in the stage of convergent thinking, all the ideas that were raised are evaluated and compared, and the best idea is chosen. Boldness, both conceptual and behavioral, requires a reduction of inhibition, which comes with a certain lack of discipline and violation of typical boundaries. Naturally, this is not a recommendation to break laws or endanger life. Going through a red light will not enhance creativity.

Following the easy and the familiar is a tendency that occurs in us spontaneously and automatically, and that is both the advantage and the shortcoming of the way we think and act. Listening to dictates, from inside and from outside, is less automatic but influences our conceptual and behavioral paths in a similar way, by inhibiting what is not acceptable and is contrary to those dictates. The easy opens available doors for us, while the acceptable closes doors to nonstandard actions and ideas. That doesn't mean we don't have the freedom to choose, but only that we need to be aware of and interested in exercising it.

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A few days ago I went with my little daughter to the library across from our home, to read some poetry together by Nathan Zach. The enchanting silence of libraries, the white walls and the orderly shelves seemed to offer a perfect opportunity to teach her a lesson about breaching boundaries. Because I'm new to the world of yoga, I told her I needed a little help in doing a headstand – right then and there. The horrified expression that filled her face reinforced my feeling that the mischievous lesson was also timely. I persisted at length, until she was ready to play along.

I think it was a good lesson. I want each of my children – Naor, Nadia and Nili – to make history one day, or at least be liberated to choose.

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## Along the watchtower

The Eid family has fortified itself against settler marauders from the Givat Ronen outpost. Their home has an alarm system, heavily barred windows, security cameras and a front door made of heavy iron. Life under terror

The Twilight Zone  
Gideon Levy  
and Alex Levac

The last house in Burin is actually the second-to-last house. At some point fear drove the Suheib family to abandon their home, the very last house, across from the mountain, after dark; only during daylight hours do they dare spend time inside. The home of the Eid family is a few minutes' walk away, in the direction of the rest of the village. The Eids refuse to give in, to abandon their well-kept house, in the face of the ongoing intimidation by the settlers on the mountain.

"A fine house," we tell the hosts as we enter.

"Fine, but not safe," the owner responds with a bitter smile.

A tour of the Eid residence begins with a presentation of the means of defense and early-warning devices the family has installed during the years the settler pogroms have been taking place. As if Israel's vaunted cyber unit 8200 was transplanted to a Palestinian village just outside Nablus, in the northern West Bank. The father of the family, Bashar Eid, who's also the self-appointed security coordinator, stops on the stairs leading to the roof to show us the screens displaying the feed from his security cameras. A split screen reveals views of all the exterior angles of the house. This is where the marauders enter, here is their assault route and

this is as far as they get. The memory of Eid's phone is bursting to capacity with hundreds of clips documenting the attacks on the house and its surroundings in recent years.

Eid spends part of his time, during the day and at night, on the roof. It's his watchtower. From here the houses of the malevolent Givat Ronen outpost, illegally erected in the late 1990s, are visible on the mountain opposite, about a hundred meters to the east, as the crow flies. Not far away is the settlement of Yitzhar.

The roof of the Eids' house also bristles with security devices: power-

Eid says the number of raiders fluctuates from one incident to the next. They always descend from the hilltop on foot, wielding clubs and sometimes also guns, and they always attack, smash and burn.

ful searchlights that illuminate a large area around the house, cameras and an alarm system that he now activates for our benefit – a scary, oscillating air-raid siren. All of this equipment is installed amid water tanks, satellite dishes and clotheslines. Country life.

The view from the roof evokes a spectacular Tuscany-like landscape of hillside olive groves, plowed fields, lush trees. Nine dunams (2.25 acres) of

privately owned groves, already partially plundered when Givat Ronen was built and still being targeted, as the Eids' struggle to remain on their land. Not a year passes without some of the family's olive trees being torched, and there is no harvest in which members of the family, along with volunteers – some of them Israelis – who arrive to help, aren't hurt. The harvested crop, too, is looted by settlers. It's all documented on Eid's videos.

Now to the windows of the two-story house: iron bars sandwiched between densely knit metal grilles, which are meant to protect the family against the volleys of stones lobbed at them. The front door is fashioned from heavy metal, as is the lock.

This is home-sweet-home for the Eid family: Bashar, 50, a retired Palestinian police officer who spent 25 years in the force, part of it as the bodyguard of then-Prime Minister Rami Hamdallah. To supplement his salary, he did home renovations and farmwork for others living in the village. However, he is no longer able to work, since being wounded in one of the settler pogroms. Manal, his wife, is a beautiful woman of 38. They have three daughters – Zein, 17, Zumrud, 15, and Jena, 14 – smiling and bashful high-school students. It's Ramadan, everyone's home. Two small "LOVE" sculptures are perched on the living room cabinet.

They started building their home five years ago, while meanwhile living in another, smaller home in the village. The violence erupted on the very first day, just after the construction workers had left the site. When Eid arrived the next morning, he found smashed bricks



Manal and Bashar Eid, at home in the village of Burin, this week. "We will never surrender," he says.

and saw that equipment was missing. Hate graffiti in Hebrew was scrawled on the rocks. Burin is a hilly village, located also near the settlement of Yitzhar.

The latest attack on the Eids occurred just over a month ago, the same night as the pogrom in the neighboring town of Hawara.

Givat Ronen, also known as Sneh Yaakov – established in 1999 in memory of a settler who had been killed near there a few years earlier – is a wild outgrowth of the settlement of Har Bracha, to the northwest. If Givat Ronen makes the news, it's almost always in the wake of its inhabitants' violence and thuggery.

The most serious attack on the house and the family took place in June 2022. Eid was wounded and confined to bed for a time in An-Najah University Hos-

pital in Nablus. A photograph from that period shows him with his arm in a cast and his leg and head bandaged, leaning on a crutch. He was hit by the settlers' stones and then beaten, in the presence of his daughters and wife, as he lay helpless on the road near his house. In another attack, a settler tried to drag Zumrud, when she was younger, up onto his horse. On one occasion settlers called out to Bashar, "We'll do to you and your daughters what we did to the Dawabsheh family in Duma" – referring to the firebombing of a Palestinian home in 2015 that claimed three lives.

Every year, Eid says, he loses a few olive trees to arson attacks. His car was also set ablaze a few months ago by settlers, an incident fully documented by the security cameras. The footage shows a settler arriving with a container of fuel, dousing the dilapidated car

and then setting it aflame. Burin has a fire truck but the settlers prevented it from reaching the site, Eid adds. He was able to save and repair the car, but it now has plastic sheets instead of windows, which were smashed by the settlers during a more recent rampage. The settlers, he says, wait for the fields near the house to dry out in the summer, then set them ablaze as well.

How many attacks have there been on the house? Bashar isn't able to cite an exact number. But apart from two, they have all occurred in broad daylight. Weekends are especially prone to violence, he says, noting that the number of raiders fluctuates from one incident to the next. They always descend from the hilltop on foot along the winding trail, wielding clubs and

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