

From the Rabbi's Desk
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How To Move a Tree

D'var Torah for the Second Morning of Rosh Hashanah

5784

With Gratitude to my friend, Rabbi Fabian Werbin



I am not sure I will convince you that English is a difficult language to learn. but let me try.

There are words like womb, or knew, or know, or awe, in which letters are written but not pronounced. If you drive you are a driver, if you learn you are a learner, if you teach you are a teacher but if you cook you are a... cook.

We have homophones, words that have the same sound as other words, but are spelled differently and have different meanings, like two/to/too - I'll give two of these to you, too.

We also have homographs which are words that have the same spelling but a different sound and a different meaning, like wind as in a gust of air, or wind, what you do to an old clock.

And then we have *homonyms* - words that are spelled the same and pronounced the same but have different meanings. For example, a tire is the round rubber thing on a car, or what happens to you if you stay awake too long.

One of these homonyms appears in today's Torah portion. To try is to attempt, to endeavor, to make an effort, to strive, to do one's best. To try is also to

subject (someone) to a trial, to a test. As we read today in the Torah (Genesis 22:1):

וַיְהִי אַחֲרֵי הַדְּבָרִים הָאֵלֶּה וַהֲאֱלֹהִים נִסָּה אֶת־אַבְרָהָם וַיֹּאמֶר אֵלָיו אַבְרָהָם וַיֹּאמֶר הִנְנִי:

And it comes to pass after these things that God has tried Abraham and says to him, "Abraham"; and he says, "Here I [am]."

Interestingly enough, in Hebrew the homonym still remains: לנסות (lenasot) means to attempt, to make an effort, to give it your best try, but it also means to test, to subject someone to a trial.

After testing Abraham several times, God decides one last time to check Abraham's faith, and year after year, on Rosh Hashanah, while God keeps busy trying Abraham, we, in turn, embark on a journey to try to become better versions of ourselves. We strive to be better humans, better Jews, better parents, and better children. Our constant trying underscores the significance of these holidays.

In a society like ours that prioritizes results, gain, achievements, success, and production, trying, just trying, may have little or no value.

However, if we are here today, it is because we still have some work to do, because we tried last year, and the year before, and the year before the year before... and we are ready to try again.

William Stimosn, tells the following story:

Early one morning in a park in Taiwan I came across a man who had stopped off on his way home from the market to harness himself to a tree. For a moment it looked as if he were trying to move the tree to another place, maybe drag it home for his front yard. I had to laugh at the crazy thought. That tree wasn't going to budge. The man was obviously engaged in some kind of exercise. Most likely, he brought his harness out every morning to do the same practice. I once read in a book of eastern philosophy that if you had a fish in a pond and you wanted it to get big and strong you put a stone in the middle of the pond. The fish would swim around and around the stone trying to get to the other side. No matter what side of the stone he was on, the other side always beckoned. And so he kept swimming. In time, he would be much bigger and stronger than a fish in a pond without a stone in the middle.

It seems crazy to attempt the impossible, and yet it brings about a strength that can't be gotten otherwise. This man will never move the tree; but he will become very strong. I may or may not become the writer I set out to be in my youth, but the effort has really changed my life and I feel it's made me a better person. The fish, no matter what side of the stone he gets to, never reaches the "other" side. He's always on the side he's on. The other side, though, by being there, eventually makes of him a superior fish.

A man, a tree, a fish, a stone; a blank page, a writer -- no matter how hard we try, there is that which we can never quite reach. But then one day we find that somehow it has reached us -- and recognize, with surprise and astonishment, the other side.¹

In a society that values results, I would like to invite you to embrace trying.

Will you be able to move the tree? I am not sure. We all have a "tree" in our lives that we have been trying to move for a long time and it doesn't seem to budge. Like the fish in the pond, many times we feel we are swimming in circles getting nowhere. We sit with a blank page in front of us, ready to write the best story of our lives, and the inspiration doesn't come.

Let me share with you a story that Rabbi Werbin (I love you Rabbi Werbin) shared with me in preparation for these High Holy Days.

Shortly before Rav Shalom Elyashiv² was hospitalized with his final illness, Rabbi Rudinsky was visiting Jerusalem and was offered the honor of sitting next to Rav Elyashiv during prayers. Due to his advanced age and medical condition, Rav Elyashiv had difficulty standing, and he sat throughout the davening. Rabbi Rudinsky noticed however, that during each Kaddish and during the chazan's repetition, Rav Elyashiv would strain himself to lean forward ever so slightly in his chair.

After davening, Rabbi Rudinsky garnered the courage to ask the great rabbi for his exertion; surely the centenarian was exempt from rising. Rav Elyashiv explained, "Throughout my entire life, I always stood up for the recitation of Kaddish and the repetition of the Amidah. Now that I no longer have the

¹ <https://www.boloji.com/articles/2421/how-to-move-a-tree>

² https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Yosef_Shalom_Elyashiv

strength to do so, I am exempt from standing. But a Jew is never exempt from wanting, we are never exempt from our obligation to try. Every time another Kaddish arrives, there is another chance for me to try. Maybe the Holy One will give me strength to stand this time.

We are never exempt from our obligation to try.

"Rabbi, I never learned Hebrew." Give it a try!

"I never learned Torah before." You need to try!

"I never lit Shabbat candles or had a Shabbat meal with my family." You must give it a try!

Try to take time to meditate, to reflect, to work out, to call your children, to volunteer, to make a difference.

The story goes that a Jew came to the Slonimer rebbe around the time of the High Holy Days Yamim and poured out his heart filled with worry.

Rebbe, every year I have big plans, big ideas, new projects. One year it's studying a page of Talmud a day, one year it's getting ready for Shabbat a little earlier, the next year spending more time with my wife and children. But I never go all the way. Somehow, the evil inclination on the shape of a less important project gets in the way, and things fizzle out.

Rebbe, what will remain of me? After all is said and done, at the end of my life I fear that I will have nothing to show for all these desires and aspirations. Just unfulfilled desires for holiness, unfulfilled yearnings that never resulted in real accomplishments. They will bury me in the cemetery and write on my tombstone: Here lies Reb yid, the master of trying, the king of aspirations.

The Slonimer Rebbe looked at the heartbroken Jew and replied: And nu? What is wrong with that? If I were walking through the cemetery and chanced upon a grave of a Jew about whom is written, "here lies the master trying, the one who desired holiness, who never gave up on his dreams to be close to Hashem, a Jew who kept trying to grow and always wanted after greatness", I would stop in front of that grave and pray there, I would thank God for being in front of the grave of a Tzadik.

Dear friends: the process of trying again is not a mark of weakness but a testament to our resilience, an acknowledgment of our humanity and our capacity to learn, grow, and evolve.

The act of trying again is an act of courage. It requires us to confront our mistakes, to face our shortcomings, and to say to ourselves and to God, "I am not defined by my past, but by my ability to rise above it."

I may not be able to move the tree, but I will give it my best try.

As we step into this new year, let us seize the opportunity to try out -one more time- for a better version of ourselves.

May this new year be one in which we all try one more time, and may we all be inscribed in English, Hebrew, Spanish or any language, in the book of Life and in the book of blessings, and may it be your will, dear God, to grant all of us a good, joyous, healthy, and sweet year. Amen.