**Show, Tell, and Feel**

**Ki Tavo 5779**

**It’s hard work being in relationship. I’m in awe when we celebrate here couples who are celebrating 40th and 50th anniversaries as we have recently. It’s inspiring. And this is not the norm statistically - most relationships, in America end in divorce or dysfunction - which makes it all the more remarkable when relationships persist. I often take the opportunity to ask couples who are celebrating a milestone anniversary, what wisdom they can share with me. I’m personally interested, but I’m also professionally interested because part of my job is to help foster or promote good healthy relationships - between people and God between community members, between us and our neighbors - and so I want to know what makes some relationships work and others fall apart. When I ask couples, I often hear the conventional wisdom, “don’t go to bed angry,” “patience!”**

**This has been the topic of scientific study for nearly 40 years by one couple - Drs. John and Julie Gottman - themselves a married couple - who used their training as therapists, psychologists and researchers to investigate the question what makes relationships work?**

**One particular study in what they call “the love lab” produced an interesting finding that relates to a concept in our Torah portion today. They designed the lab on the campus of the University of Washington to look like a bed and breakfast retreat only they had cameras and listening devices throughout the facility. They invited 130 newly married couples to come and spend time at the retreat and do what they normally would do on vacation - cook, eat, read, watch TV. They collected a lot of data about how the couples interacted and then sent them on their way. They did a follow up six years later and looked for patterns between the couples who were still married and the couples who divorced. And they found an interesting correlation. The number one determinant of whether or not a couple would remain married was whether they would respond to what they call “bids” for their partner’s attention.**

**For example, let’s say the husband is a bird enthusiast and he notices a beautiful goldfinch out the window and says to his wife, “look at that bird!” The wife now has a choice. She can turn towards her husband by stopping whatever she’s doing and expressing interest, or coming over to look herself, or she can turn away by continuing to read her newspaper or even responding with contempt, “Don’t interrupt me!” The study found that couples who divorced after six years turned towards each other 33% of the time, while couples who remained married turned towards each other 87% of the time. Almost nine out of ten times, they met their partner’s emotional needs.**

**Now why did I tell you all of this? I was thinking about this study and finding when I learned an interesting interpretation of the bikkurim ritual - the first fruits ritual described at the beginning of Parshat Ki Tavo.**

**Bikkurim offers us a paradigm for how we maintain and sustain our relationship with God. A farmer in Israel is supposed to bring his or her first fruits to the temple in Jerusalem and offer them up to God. In the season of Shavuot, the farmer brings these fruits to the kohen priest in that time and hands them to the priest and says a script telling the story of how we were slaves in Egypt and God took us out of there and brought us to the land of Israel where we now are able to enjoy the produce and fruits of the Earth.**

**The Jewish tradition is born out of a sense of gratitude for our lives. God sustains us and sustains the entire earth and bids for our love an affection. Will we turn towards God or turn away?**

**The entire ritual is one of expressing gratitude to God. We’re acknowledging that not only did God help us grow the produce, but in our history, God enabled us to live freely on a land flowing with milk and honey. Without the Exodus from Egypt, we would not be able to live in Israel.**

**And one commentator known as the Da’at Torah - Rabbi Yerucham Laibovitz - a 19th century rabbi from Belarus wonders why do we actually need to say the words of the Bikkurim liturgy? Isn’t it enough to have brought the first fruits and schlepped to Jerusalem and offer them up. Don’t actions speak louder than words? Why, wonders Rabbi Laibovitz, do we also have to say the words. And he answers his own question by quoting a verse at the beginning of next week’s parshah “ki karov elekha hadavar b’fikha uvilvavkha laasoto - for [a relationship with God] is close to you in your mouth and in your heart to do it.” (30:14)**

**He concludes that love of God is not enough to feel in your heart, but you must say it in your mouth, and do it with deeds. All three components are essential to a loving relationship. Sometimes people feel love and they think that’s sufficient. I don’t need to tell her I love her, she knows I love her. Rabbi Laibovitz would say, “nonetheless, you have to say the words, ‘I love you.’” And of course, it’s not enough to just say the words, but we need to show with actions. And if we don’t feel it in our hearts then all of this is merely going through the motions or lip service.**

**This aligns with another finding of the Gottman study - that bids are not always verbal. I brought home cookies, or I went out of my way to get the ice cream you like from that supermarket across town because I sensed on the phone that you had a bad day. Or your partner sighs or seems worried and you ask sincerely how’s everything going. In all of these ways, you’re turning towards your partner when he or she bids for your love and affection.**

**It reminds me a little bit of the song from Fiddler, “Do you love me?” That’s a bid - Tevye is asking Golde - quite explicitly - I want to know. Do you love me. And she responds by pointing to all the things she’s done. “For twenty-five years I washed your clothes, cooked your meals, cleaned your house. Given you children. Milked your cow.” Tevye needs to hear the words and there’s a release, something powerful when Golde finally says, “I suppose I do!” And I suppose I love you too.”**

**The bikkurim - first fruits - paradigm is the same as the Gottman finding. God bids for our affection by sustaining the earth and all life on it. By creating natural cycles of sun and rain so that food can grow. God is showing us that God loves us. And we turn towards God by showing our gratitude and appreciation of these abundant gifts. We show God, by making the trip to Israel, we tell God, by reciting the liturgy, that we suppose we love God too.**

**We’re already in the high holy day season. We’re about to enter the thickest part of it. And we will spend much time thinking about our relationships - to one another and to God. We’ll ask forgiveness, we’ll express gratitude. This is important relational work. Because it’s not enough to feel sorry or grateful, or sorry, or love. It must be shown and said out loud. This high holy day season, I encourage you. If you love someone, tell them. If you feel sorry, show them. In that way, we can, God willing nurture our relationships so that they will be healthy and successful for all of us.**

**Shabbat shalom**