I believe it is no accident that the word used to express the initial period of grief after the loss of a loved one is ANINUT. And although the root of the word is often used to mean AVEILUT, grief and mourning, I cannot ignore the fact that it is also related to the word ANI. Technically speaking, certainly from a Halachic perspective, this is the period of time during which one is to be involved with preparations for the funeral, with thoughts of the deceased. But, in reality, despite that, it is a period of intense aloneness; a preoccupation with the self and a justified wallowing in self-pity. Inability to cope with the reality that has just become, one can only focus on ANI (me) – how will I survive this loss? What will I do? Can my life ever be the same? My loss, my pain. And, as if to emphasize this (or could it possibly be intentional?) one is told not to relate to the Almighty in any positive way. Exemption from all positive mitzvot, regardless of any desire to perform them, shuts one out of the world of Gd. The only way you may relate to Him is out of YIR’A (fear) - a weak basis for any positive relationship. We are bidden to obey all the prohibitions. We are permitted to express our anger at Gd – if that be the case – by not being expected to perform positive mitzvot; we may not express that feeling through disobeying or misbehavior. That is where the line is drawn.

But the other side of the coin, that relationship with Gd which is based upon love and rooted in a sense of trust and need, seems to be denied. When everything falls apart and no one can really make you feel better so you turn to Gd, you are told 'no'. You may cry to Him, ask for help, talk to Him, but you may not exhibit the behavior that has always represented your wanting to please Him and praise Him. And although this may be for our benefit in some way, it leaves the person more alone than alone. You are only ANI.

MA YIT-ONEIN ADAM CHAI, GEVER AL CHATA-AV - Why should a living man complain? A man for his sins (Eicha 3:39).

REUVEN, B’CHORI ATA, KOCHI V'REISHIT ONI, YETER S'EIT V'YETER AZ - Reuven, you are my firstborn, my strength and the first of my might; [you should have been] superior in rank and superior in power (B'reishit 49:3).

If the word ANI is, indeed, related to the root ALEF-VAV-NUN, - it has a double meaning of AVEILUT in the pasuk from Eicha, and KO'ACH, G'VURA, strength, from the pasuk in B'reishit.

Regarding the quote from Eicha, perhaps, one who is to be an ADAM CHAI, a person who is truly alive, MA YIT-ONEIN – how can he be one who is focused on the ANI, only on himself? That cannot be true life. But rather he
should be GEVER AL CHATA-AV, be strong, overcome his sins and then truly achieve life.

If a person is only involved in self, thereby becoming the center of his universe, he cuts himself off from achieving what he should during his lifetime because he does not relate to the world which is outside of him, sufficiently; he does not consider his fellow-man as worthy as he himself is. In this sense, it is to be mourned that he has thrown away his life. But on the other hand, a person must have a feeling of self-worth, must know his own strengths and value so that he can interact positively and effectively with those outside of himself. His greatest strength stems from within and then he can give of himself to others and, in turn, be strengthened by them:

IM EIN ANI (ON, OZ) LI, MI LI? UCHSHE-ANI L’ATZMI, MA ANI (ON, AVEIL)...

I found that especially after my son, who has Down's Syndrome, was born, old things took on new meanings. Things I had never thought twice about. Most specifically and most often, this expressed itself in the words of the davening. I began to realize how brilliant and how divinely inspired the men of the Anshei Knesset HaGedola were when they coined the formulae for b'rachot and davening. For although the surface meaning of the words was one thing and very clearly that one thing, so much more could be read into them even at a p'shat level.

The first thing I noticed was the new meaning I found in the b'racha of BOREI N'FASHOT RABOT. It no longer only referred to food or sustenance. It also became very literal:

BOREI N'FASHOT RABOT V'CHESRONAN
- Gd created all beings, even those with 'chesronot'- lackings- large or small. He created my special son.

AL KOL MAH SHEBRATA - He created these particular beings in addition to everything else He created. Why?

L'HACHAYOT BAHEM NEFESH KOL CHAI
- so as to instill through them real "life" and meaning into other people's lives. How their presence enriches and enhances us all. How wealthy we become when we allow ourselves to be open to these nefashot with chesronan and to be touched by them.

Along the same lines, I noticed that its partner b'racha had similar meaning: SHEHAKOL NIHYAH BIDVARO. Yes, even people like my son were created for a purpose with the same "words" as all other beings, all as the will of the Ribono Shel Olam. (Could this even be considered a type of Tzidduk hadin?)

It was interesting how the request in the Shmoneh Esrei of ATA CHONEIN LA'ADAM DA'AT also took on a special meaning. It was no longer simply a statement of gratitude for our intellect and a request to use it properly. Now it was a plea that my son, too, could be granted DE'A, BINA, V'HASKEL to the extent that Gd would permit.
Mashiv HaRu'ach / Morid HaTal

Afterthoughts by Yocheved Bienenfeld

The second b'racha of the Shmoneh Esrei is referred to as G'VUROT (powers). The primary gevura of Gd that is mentioned is T'CHIYAT HAMEITIM, the revival of the dead. Depending upon the season, we insert one of two different phrases between the opening sentence and the rest of the b'racha. We refer to the particular gevura of Gd in terms of bringing either rain - MASHIV HARU'ACH U'MORID HAGESHEM - or dew: MORID HATAL. According to Bartenura in the Mishna of B'rachot (5:2) rain is considered a gevura based upon p'sukim in Iyov (5: 9-10). The main theme of the b'racha, however, is the revival of the dead, so how do these phrases about rain and dew fit in?

We have been taught that receiving rain is similar to T'CHIYAT HAMEITIM because it makes possible the growth or rebirth, of a 'dead' seed in the ground into a plant. Given that the main idea, then, is T'CHIYAT HAMEITIM, perhaps another way of understanding these words is appropriate:

MASHIV HARU'ACH - When it comes time for Hashem to "return the spirit" (soul), the time of T'CHIYAT HAMEITIM, He will also

MORID HAGESHEM - return it along with the physical body (GASHMIYUT) from which it came (as Ramban says, that the physical will be elevated to the level of the neshama so that there will no longer be any conflict between the two.)

What further supports this kind of understanding is the phrase used during the other part of the year: MORID HATAL. (26:19) The dead shall live... awake and sing you who dwell in the dust, for Your dew is the dew of light. Chazal, on the Yerushalmi (B'rachot 5:2), explain this as: this is the dew through which, in the future, the dead will be revived.

How perfect! MORID HATAL - at the time of T'CHIYAT HAMEITIM, Gd will bring down the TAL that will do just that - revive the dead.

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While We Are Alive

If you want to MASHIV HARU'ACH, to return the spiritual to your life and enrich it, then you must MORID HAGESHEM - you must lessen and minimize the role and importance of GASHMIYUT, the physical and material in your life.
In this week's Parsha, Rashi points out something interesting which we might, otherwise, not notice. When Moshe recounts his difficulty in handling all of B'nei Yisrael (1:9), he relates the solution of appointing others to help him: HAVU LACHEM ANASHIM CHACHAMIM UNVONIM VIYDU'IM L'SHIVTEICHEM… [provide for yourselves men who are wise, understanding, and well known to your tribes... (1:13).] But when he tells what he did, he says VA'EKACH ET... ANASHIM CHACHAMIM VIYDU'IM... (1:15) [so I took... men who were wise and well known...], the description of NEVONIM - 'understanding' is absent. As Rashi says: AVAL NEVONIM LO MATZATI [I didn't find men who were 'understanding'.]

In order to suggest an answer to this, I would first like to take a seemingly different idea to connect to this:

According to Chazal (referenced by Rav Moshe Shapiro in MiMa'amakim on D'varim p.20), the book of D'varim, also called Mishneh Torah, is actually a bridge between TORAH SHEBICHTAV [the written law] and TORAH SHEB'AL PEH [the oral law]. The Zohar tells us there is a hint to the Oral law in this parsha: VAYHI B'ARBA'IM SHANA... HO'IL MOSHE BEI-EIR ET HATORAH HAZOT... (1:3;5) [In the 40th year... Moshe began (desired - Ramban) to elaborate on this Torah]. According to Megaleh Amukot (Ofen 246), the Zohar is telling us that the concept of 'Mishneh Torah' is the "secret of TORAH SHEB'AL PEH" that the Jews received after 40 years - MEM SHANA (written in Hebrew, this spells out Mishna). [He adds a kabbalistic statement: "In my opinion, this is the 'secret' (SOD) of VAYHI YITZCHAK BEN ARBA'IM SHANA B'KACHTO ET RIVKA" [Yitzchak was 40 years old when he took Rivka (as a wife).] The initials of B'KACHTO ET RIVKA, are BET ALEF REISH which spell BEI-EIR 'explained' (as Moshe does at the beginning of D'varim). Since Yitzchak is the secret (SOD) of TORAH SHEBICHTAV and Rivka is the secret (SOD) of TORAH SHEB'AL PEH. And Yitzchak had to wait 40 years before taking Rivka since the Jews waited 40 years to get TORAH SHEBE'AL PEH.

How does this relate to our opening question? I would suggest the following:

The miraculous existence of the people in the midbar, under the direct involvement of Gd to sustain them, is now coming to an end as they prepare to enter Israel to live a 'normal' life where these "open" miracles will be hidden. The leader of the people during their supernatural travels, Moshe, is being replaced by Yehoshua, the one who will lead them into and in Israel, conquering the land in a way that might have involved occasional miracles, but the supernatural was not the rule of the day.
Returning to NEVONIM, Rashi defines this as M'VINIM DAVAR MITOCH DAVAR (1:3) [they can derive one thing from another]. A NAVON is one who can take the information given, that which is placed before him and understand the meaning beneath the surface to be able to use it to apply elsewhere. He can take the knowledge before him, expand upon it and gain more understanding than that which would superficially be apparent. If I may be so bold as to suggest this, I would posit that TORAH SHEB'AL PEH, its development and usage would be something that is HAMEVIN DAVAR MITOCH DAVAR - it is something developed through BINA. If this is true, then it could explain the lack of NEVONIM at that point in time. The people had been taught TORAH SHEBICHTAV all by Moshe, not having been exposed to developing deeper ideas yet in the way it would be in the future. The generation of the midbar had no reason to have developed NEVONIM. Now, as they prepare to enter Israel, what do we find? USHMARTEM VA'ASITEM KI HI CHOCHEM UVINATCHM L'EINEI HO'AMIM... V'AMRU RAK AM CHACHAM V'NAVON HAGOI HAGADOL HAZEH" (Va'etchanan 4:6). [You shall guard them and perform them for that is your wisdom and understanding in the eyes of the people... and they will say certainly, this great nation is a wise and understanding people.] B'nei Yisrael are being charged USHEMARTEM - which Rashi defines as ZU MISHNA - this is study.

When they finally enter Eretz Yisrael they will be developing that aspect. As Chazal tell us, TORAH SHEBE'AL PEH was initiated only when they began to settle the Land. And it is only then that the other nations refer to them as NAVON.
Davening with kavana (concentration) has always been a struggle for me. I believe I'm not alone in this. But I'm very conscious of my failings here. Sometimes, this awareness helps achieve greater concentration and sometimes, it does just the opposite by discouraging me. Occasionally, if only rarely, this very despair, the feeling of shame it engenders in me, brings about the kavana unexpectedly. When I said the words ZOCHER CHASDEI AVOT (He remembers the kindnesses of our fathers), I thought of what it must be like for HaKadosh Baruch Hu to listen to the vast amount of prayers like my own, prayers recited dutifully but by rote, religiously, but without feeling. How He must "hurt", how much pain it must cause Him to see what is available today compared to once upon a time. ZOCHER CHASDEI AVOT - when He remembers our forefathers, their greatness, their kindness, their unparalleled devotion and attachment to Him, how He must bemoan the change. And yet, despite this, He still will MEIVI GO'EL LIVNEI V'NEIHEM - He will bless us, ultimately, with the GO'EL, the Redeemer we so pray for, despite our shortcomings.

When I feel lacking kavana, as above, the following comes to mind as well: ELOKAI, N'TZOR L'SHONI MEIRA USFASAI MIDABEIR MIRMA (My Gd, guard my tongue from evil and my lips from speaking deceitfully). This pointedly reminds me at the end of my Shmoneh Esrei - which may not have been said with the best kavana - that I also don't want to deceive when I daven and say words I don't mean or even pay attention to, resorting to simple lip service. Is this not also deception?

But when all is said and done, I think of this: YIHYU L'RATZON IMREI FI V'HEGYON LIBI LIFANECHA..." (May the words of my mouth and the thoughts of my heart be favorable to you...). We beseech the Almighty to accept our prayers, hoping that our IMREI FI - the words of our mouths and HEGYON LIBI - the thoughts in our hearts - be desirable to Him. Why do we separate the context of our davening into two categories, one of words and the other of thoughts from our hearts? Why not use a single phrase to describe our prayer? Perhaps, this can be understood in two different ways:

First, there are different kinds of prayer. One of them is prayer that is uttered with the mouth, expressed verbally. Another kind is the prayer that is wordless, that which is in our hearts, that which cannot find expression in speech. So maybe these two descriptions of IMREI FI and HEGYON LIBI, are meant to thereby include all prayers, silent as well as audible, those defying expression as well as those clearly articulated.
Then, there could be a deeper level to this explanation that is, perhaps, not quite so noble. As a matter of fact, in all honesty, it is an understanding that would be a condemnation of our ability to pray as opposed to a concession to different types of prayer. It might even be a more realistic assessment of most of our prayers, unfortunately. And that explanation would be to understand the words IMREI FI as just that: something that came from my mouth, without kavana, without connection to soul or thought. My mouth rambled on out of habit while my thoughts were elsewhere. But lest we be led to think that we are empty and our prayers are meaningless, we must recognize that although some of our prayer might leave much to be desired, we still do have HEGYON LIBI, the thoughts in our heart. There, indeed, is part of us that in the depth of our hearts says the words of these prayers, as well as its own words, with feeling and sincerity and truly means all that was expressed, if only by our tongues.

And so, we request and hope that both kinds of prayer be accepted.
The Shulchan Aruch tells us that we must say the above pasuk with special kavana and if we forget to, we need to repeat from Pote'ach et Yadecha until the end of Ashrei (O.C. 51:7; Mishna B'rura 15-16). We learn from Chazal (see Rashi, Radak, Metzudos Dovid, et al.) that this pasuk tells us that HaKadosh Baruch Hu provides food, parnasa, and other desires according to what people want. Accordingly, the traditional translation of this verse is, "You open Your hand and satisfy the desire of every living thing." Technically speaking, however, in order to mean this, it should say ... R'TZON KOL CHAI not L'CHOL CHAI RATZON. The technical translation then should be "You open Your hands and fill every living being with desire."

My problem with the explanation of Chazal is twofold:

1) we know that Gd doesn't give us everything we want. (The world simply could not survive were we all spoiled brats.)

2) the pasuk before this one states very clearly that He provides everyone with food: EINEI CHOL EILECHA Y'SABEIRU V'ATA NOTEIN LAHEM ET OCHLAM B'ITO (The eyes of all look to You with hope and You give them their food in its time). In addition, it says two verses later that R'TZON Y'REIAV YA'ASEH (He does that which those who fear Him desire). Again, seemingly the same thought, so why repeat it?

I am not about to dispute Chazal, they know a lot more than I do. There must be something here that I don't understand. But because these questions stand, it would imply that we are to learn an additional message.

To be true to the p'shat, I offer the following: To be MASBIA RATZON, would seem to mean that Gd satiates, gives to all a complete portion of RATZON - of will. Meaning that He makes sure all of us are blessed with the necessary desire to continue living our lives regardless of the portion that has been meted out to us - rich or poor. So, if what one receives from Gd is sparse and one is an oni, what enables him to continue and go one and not give up? RATZON. What makes it possible for anyone who has been handed difficulties to continue and not give up? RATZON. And that will, that RATZON, is what Hashem gives us so that we can successfully deal with the lot we have been given. We have always been told that Gd never gives a person a NISAYON or burden that he can't handle. It must be because He has blessed us with the necessary amount of RATZON to continue.

If this is true, then it is easier for me to understand the halacha that requires us to repeat from POTE'ACH ET YADECHA.
until the end of Ashrei, if we haven't properly concentrated on those words. Why not simply repeat that one verse? Because if the above meaning is true, then the verses are all one unit: What helps the person activate this RATZON to continue? What assurance does he receive? The knowledge that although TZADIK HASHEM B'CHOL D'RACHAV (Hashem is righteous in all His ways), although Hashem is a Gd of DIN and justice, He is CHASID B'CHOL MA'ASAV (magnanimous in all His deeds) - He operates LIFNIM MISHURAT HADIN, not in strict judgement, and so we are dealing with a compassionate Being and there's every reason for hope. Especially since KAROV HASHEM L'CHOL KOR'AV, L'CHOL ASHER YIKRA'UHU VE'EMET (Hashem is close to all who call to Him, to all who call Him in truth) - when we are having difficulty with our portion, despite being blessed with the necessary RATZON, Gd is close to us when we call out to Him sincerely for His help. And R'TZON Y'REI'AV YA'ASEH … - He won't ignore our pleas, but will respond and redeem. SHOMER HASHEM ET KOL OHAVOV V'ET KOL HOR'SHAI'M YASHMID. And for those who are on the high level of coping without complaining and operating purely out of a love of Gd, He responds by protecting them so there is no need for them to call out, while He deals with their enemies. Therefore, T'HILAT HASHEM Y'DABER PI VIVARECH KOL BASAR SHEM KODSHO L'OLAM VA'ED (My mouth will speak the praises of Hashem...), it more than behooves us to proclaim the praises of He Who granted us the will, the desire, the strength to continue against all odds and to be able to trust in His help always.

I can't ignore, however, the understanding of Chazal so, perhaps, the meaning that is eluding me is something like this:

If we look at the word RATZON in a different way, understand it on more than a superficial level, a truer meaning can emerge. We have RATZON of which we are aware and RATZON of which we are not aware. The RATZON of which we are aware would, more often than not, fall into the category of material needs and desires. We know what we want. And, very often, what we want is not necessarily what we need or even that which is good for us. The RATZON of which we are less aware is the one that is related to our spiritual needs, the desires of the NESHAMA. We are usually not tuned in to those desires. Our lives are spent in a struggle between the desires of the NESHAMA, indeed, its needs, and material desires. Sometimes, they are in harmony with each other, but, more often than not, this is not the case. Despite this, we know that what is truly best for us is that for which the unsullied NESHAMA longs.

An example of this true desire of each person is in the Rambam (Hilchot Gerushin 2:20) where he discusses forcing a man to give his wife a get. On the one hand, a get that is given through
coercion, is not valid. On the other hand, we are told that the Beit Din can administer lashes, they are KOFIN OTO, they force him until he agrees to give the get. So how is this not coercion? Because, says the Rambam, the man is actually doing what he wants to do - as a Jew, he wants what his NESHAMA wants, to do the right thing.

If this is so, if we place that definition of RATZON into the verse in Ashrei, it becomes more believable. Because Gd, indeed, does satisfy the desire, this inner RATZON of everyone. For the desires of the NESHAMA are pure and are exactly what is good for the person and the same desires that He would want for us as well.
Afterthoughts
by Yocheved Bienenfeld

I've been reviewing parsha every week for quite a few years and once in a while, I am lucky enough to notice things I've never noticed before which give additional meaning to what I'm learning. Very often, it comes in the form of a certain usage of a word where it can be understood in more than one way.

For example, in Va'etchanan (5:19) which we read a few weeks ago, Moshe recounts the scene at Mt. Sinai and describes how the 'voice' of Hashem was a KOL GADOL V'LO YASAF - [a great voice which didn't cease] (according to the Targum as cited by Rashi). A few verses later, he tells how the people were afraid of hearing this voice: "Why should we die for this great fire will consume us if we continue to hear the voice of Hashem Elokeinu." Whenever the Torah uses similar wording in two (or more) places that are close to each other, it's always a good idea to look for a reason for it, even if the reason is simply a play on words. So here we have the word YASAF/YOSFIM meaning 'to stop' in one verse and meaning 'to continue' in the other. There is a similar occurrence of this debated definition of YASAF in Parshat Vayeishev (B'reishit 38:26) in the story about Yehuda and Tamar. After Yehuda publicly admits that it was he who impregnated Tamar, the verse tells V'LO YASAF OD L'DA'ATAH [and he didn't continue/didn't cease being intimate with her]. This translation reflects Rashi's informing us that the word can be understood in two different ways. If so, then using that information in Va'etchanan maybe we can understand the verse about the people not wanting to continue to hear the voice of Hashem as an implied warning to us: "If we stop listening to the voice of Hashem VAMATNU - we will die." True.

Similarly, I found an additional message in this week's parsha of R'ei, based upon different legitimate understandings of certain words. It is also, I believe, an appropriate message as we approach Elul. BANIM ATEM LASHEM ELOKEI-CHEM LO TITGOD'DU V'LO TASIMU KORCHA BEIN EINEICHEM LAMEIT (14:1) [You are children to Hashem your Gd, you may not cut yourselves and you may not make a bald spot between your eyes over the dead]. The content of this verse tells us of the limitations in the way we are allowed to mourn over the dead. In essence, we are not to indulge in the practices of the other nations. Why? Because you are a holy nation to Hashem your Gd. And Hashem chose you to be a treasured nation for Him out of all the nations on the face of the earth (14:2).

TANYA: LO TITGOD'DU - LO TA'ASU AGUDOT, AGUDOT... Don't create separate groupings for yourselves, e.g., a beit din in the city where part of the members holds according to the opinion
of Beit Shammai and another part holds according to the opinion of Beit Hillel.

It's interesting that Chazal in the gemara (Y'vamot 14a) choose to define LO TITGOD'DU in a way that differs significantly from the p'shat, the simple meaning, a way that doesn't seem to fit into the context of the verse. They see it as meaning that we shouldn't behave in a way that breaks us into separate groups. There is even a halacha derived from here that a city should not have two batei din with each one holding according to a different authority (Rambam Hilchot Avoda Zara 12). The reason I find this interesting is because of what follows in the pasuk: V'LO TA'ASU KORCHA BEIN EINEICHEM. The simple meaning of this half of the pasuk is consistent with the first half - don't behave in self-mutilating ways because of mourning a death. But the wording also seems consistent with the first half on a deeper level. Look at the root of KORCHA. Is it not KORACH - the master of machloket and divisiveness? (V'LO YIHYEH K'KORACH UK'ADASO (Korach 17:5) - don't be like Korach and his group).

LO TA'ASEH KORCHA - don't let there be splits among you; distance yourselves from divisiveness. BEIN EINEICHEM - don't let your eyes see things in a way that separates you from others. Because this can only result in LAMEIT - whether actual death (as in the SIN'AT CHINAM present during the siege of Jerusalem before the destruction of the Second Temple) or in the punishment of TZORA'AT for the unavoidable LASHON HARA that will result from MACHLOKET, and one with TZORA'AT is considered as dead.

This would mesh well with the Ha'amek Davar on the pasuk, for he questions the use of apparently two reasonings for this warning.

1) BANIM ATEM LASHEM - you are HaShem's children, and

2) KI AM KADOSH ATa - because you are a holy nation. Since we are separate from the other nations, unique, and holy to HaShem, we should demonstrate this by not using their practices, such as those in the pasuk.

In understanding the meaning behind BANIM ATEM LASHEM, however, he uses Chazal's second understanding of LO TITGOD'DU while combining it with the simple meaning of the second phrase: Since you are children to HaShem, therefore it isn't proper that you should appear separate in customs belonging to the Torah, for the nature of children is to go in the same path.

My conclusion has to be that there are, indeed, two messages here and the entire pasuk can be read and understood each way:

1) Since you are children to HaShem your Gd, you may not cut yourselves and you may not make a bald spot between your eyes over the dead and thus
behave like the other nations who
practice such acts of self-mutilation.

2) Since you are children of HaShem,
don't break up into differing groups and
don't behave like Korach to cause
divisiveness and machloket which will
only lead to death.
I usually try to prepare myself, during the month of Elul at least, for the approaching New Year. T'shuva is not a new concept for me and I probably read some of the same things year after year for inspiration. Among the reasons that t'shuva at this time is difficult for me is that I try to do t'shuva most of the time during the year. I believe that any good, religious Jew does the same. We take account of our behavior on a regular basis and don't really need the blast of the shofar during Elul to wake us up to the fact that we are always accountable for our deeds. I think that what makes this time of year a time of more focus - aside from the fact that Chazal emphasize that this is an EIT RATZON for t'shuva - is that the judgment factor comes into play. When we do a CHESHBON HANEFESH - a self-evaluation - during the year, it's more with an eye to improving and to undoing improper behavior (yes, this is still considered t'shuva) with little, if any, thought given to DIN, to judgment. Now, however, the very real and almost palpable atmosphere of judgment makes us very aware of the fact that we have to account for our actions before Gd.

All that said, I need to read something during Elul that might help inspire me. So, I was reading (re-reading) material about t'shuva by Rav Kook zt"l - whom I greatly admire. He explains that t'shuva is a universal phenomenon, not something limited to the Jew or even to mankind in general. The gemara (Pesachim 54a) lists t'shuva as one of the things that was 'created' before the creation of the world. This idea that "t'shuva predated the world" is not a chronological statement, but a causal one. In other words, "t'shuva makes the world go round" - it enables the world to exist. If, indeed, t'shuva existed before the world, by definition, there was yet no sin nor sinners to necessitate it. It is the "foundation of the universe, the energy that pushes the world onward to elevate it to its true nature and destiny... waves of t'shuva cascade all over existence... the universe calls out for perfection... The voice of the universe cries out to mankind: Can't you hear? Can't you feel the pain? Aren't you ashamed?" (Moadim L'Simcha, pp. 14-15 by Rav Shlomo Aviner). Our thoughts of t'shuva are actually caused by these "waves" filtering in from the world outside. In essence, t'shuva is a return to the point of birth. The world needs to be perfect, as intended; we need to return to the pure nature with which we were created.

Thinking about the way this whole process of t'shuva was described, and recognizing that its root, SHUV, shares a cognate meaning with SOV (turn
around) and SOVEIV (surround) led to my seeing this process as a circular one: when we say someone returns to from whence he came, it implies a movement in a circle, as opposed to linear - at least, that's how I envision it. Given that, I started thinking about some "universals".

The universe is round in nature. The cosmos, planets, everything is circular. There seems to be a natural flow in Nature. Thinking about this circular formation led me to focus on the fact that not only did Gd create the world "circular" but also the systems that exist in the world are also cyclical: physical Mankind begins and returns to dust; spiritual Mankind (the neshama) begins and returns to its source; many creatures (animals, fish, birds) return to the places of their birth to recreate - and in some cases, to die; Nature recycles itself: seeds to plants to seeds; animal carcasses replenish the earth; water is recycled - there is the same amount of water in the world now as there was at the time of Creation. The movement of the Sun, Moon, and planets is circular; planets rotate and revolve. Everything goes around.

What about the cyclical nature of time? We Jews believe that certain periods of time have certain characteristics. Historic events that have occurred stamp their imprint on a given time for all the future, which means that when that period of time returns (implying a cycle) it is colored with the effect of that event. From a mystical point of view (I don't have the sources), time is defined by the different energies and emanations that infuse it. And when these times re-occur those energies are at their fullest and can be tapped into and captured. (This would seem to fly in the face of our belief that we shouldn't hold by "good luck" or "bad luck" times. But we do hold this to a certain extent: the 9 days, the 9th of Av, 40 days from Rosh Chodesh Elul to Yom Kippur... They don't, however, determine history and events and we have the power to overcome those "negative" times or ignore the "positive" ones.)

So, what is it about circles (and cycles) that describe the act of t'shuva that makes it such an important force in the universe? One possibility could be in the message of HaRav Ben Tzion Firer about the merits of the circle (Eileh Heim Mo'adai: SOD HAMA'AGAL p.191). "The circle is eternity. There is no beginning and no end. It represents equality - in a circle, every point is equidistant from the middle. Nothing closer or farther, no concept of greater or lesser importance. The secret of the circle was placed in the creation of the world …" The ways of the Torah are referred to as a circle by Rav Shmshon Refael Hirsch in his definition of MAG'LOSECHA (T'hilim 17:5) and MAG'LEI TZEDEK (23:3). These words mean "your circles". "MAG'LOSECHA are the circles or bounds drawn by Gd's Law which circumscribe all our acts" (Hirsch
T'hilim, Feldheim, p.125). T'shuva pre-dated the world; Torah pre-dated the world. The universe is based upon these circles.

Coming full circle: we return to our original selves, full circle; we return to the boundaries, the circle of the Torah which surrounds us; we return to the essence of the universe.

And I always thought t'shuva was simply a personal thing.

P.S. Just wondering: is it at all possible that this SOD HA'IGUL (secret of the circle) has anything to do with what B'nei Yisrael saw at Mt. Sinai that influenced them to form davka an eigel?
T'KA B'SHOFAR GADOL

Afterthoughts
by Yocheved Bienenfeld

...L'CHEIRUTEINU ... V'KAB'TZEINU YACHAD MEI'ARBA KANFOT HA'ARETZ

Sound the great shofar for our freedom ... and gather us together (YACHAD) from the four corners of the Earth.

(from the weekday Amida)

Could the word YACHAD be considered an extra or unnecessary word? Would V'KAB'TZEINU meaning "gather us" automatically imply that this would mean "together"?

If this is a possibility, then I suggest that the word YACHAD is referring to Gd together with us. May we gather together Klal Yisrael from galut along with (YACHAD) the Sh'china in exile - to return to Israel. We daven for kibutz galuyot (the ingathering of exiles) and make the mistake of thinking that its purpose is simply to bring all Jews back to Israel. But the reason we want all Jews out of galut involves more than that. For when we all return, it means that the Sh'china will return as well; for we know that Gd promised us He would be with us in galut. And so, if we are lacking all Jews here, we are lacking - more significantly - the presence of the Sh'china.

With this backdrop, I prefer to understand a quote in our morning daily davening from Tz'fania 3:20, differently than it is usually translated:

... BA'EIT HAHI AVI ETCHEM U'VA-EIT KAB'TZI ETCHEM ... B'SHUVI ET SH'VUTEICHEM L'EINEICHEM... [at that time I will bring you and at that time I will gather you ...when I bring back your captivities before your eyes]. "When I bring back your captivities". The word SHUVI, however, in its correct grammatical form doesn't mean "when I bring (you) back; it means "when I (Myself) return". If so, the p'shat (simple) meaning of this would use the word EIT in its meaning of 'with' and thus be: "When I return with your captivities". Gd's Sh'china will, indeed, return when we have all returned.

Along the same lines, the b'racha that closes this request could be interpreted accordingly, as well: M'KABEITZ NIDCHEI AMO YISRAEL - the simple meaning is - "He Who gathers together the NIDACHIM - the dispersed of His nation Israel." Alternatively, it is possible to understand this as meaning - "He who gathers together those who were NIDACHIM, dispersed because of His nation Israel." The Sh'china was NIDACHAT because the nation of Israel was in galut - for Gd promised that He would remain with us in exile and not forsake us. Therefore, this ending would refer to the gathering in of the Sh'china as well.

It's time to bring Him back.
Afterthoughts by Yocheved Bienenfeld

The importance of truth is fairly obvious. Without it, the world would be even more absurd than it already is, even more confusing. The confidence that things were truly as they seemed would be gone and, as such, we could not possibly function effectively; we would flounder even more. Simply put, the world couldn't survive. As if to underscore the seemingly obvious need for truth, we are told here to speak the truth even in our hearts - to be honest with ourselves. And what might appear to be a simple statement, is advice that isn't as easy to follow as it might seem.

Most of us find it quite difficult to do, I believe. We've all been there. It's called rationalizing. We make all kinds of excuses to justify certain behaviors or conclusions - not just in order to look good in the eyes of others - but to be able to live with ourselves. It is interesting how effective we can be in lying to ourselves. But we couldn't really do this if we were able to DOVEIR EMET BILVAVO. I understand why we might find it difficult to admit the truth to others, we may feel embarrassed about our opinions or our behavior. But why is it so difficult to admit the truth to ourselves?

I'm not really sure, but I do have some thoughts. One reason could be that by being truly honest in our deepest selves, we rob ourselves of any illusion we may have had about who we really are. We also destroy our rationalizations for behavior that is beneath us, yet to which we still cling. To a certain extent, we are baring our souls to ourselves and, sometimes, it might not be such a pretty picture. Obviously, being honest with ourselves would afford us the opportunity to evaluate, to change, to do t'shuva where necessary. After all, what kind of a vidui (confession) can a person do if he is clueless as to his faults?

On the other hand, we might very well discover positive elements, admirable traits we hadn't focused on and, perhaps, even a greatness of being.

Having said that, I think there is a more profound importance to being able to recognize and admit the truth to ourselves: after 120 years, we are told, some of the YISURIM we will have to endure in order to purify our souls in the OLAM HA'EMET (world of truth) is just that: facing the EMET. Scrolling through scenes in our lives in which we may not have behaved the best possible way; times we did wrong and knew - deep down - that we were wrong. To the extent that we hide these truths from ourselves, why is it so difficult to admit the truth to ourselves?
ourselves during our lifetimes, to that extent will the experience be more painful. The humiliation felt while "watching" these scenes while in the presence of the most merciful Father is, indeed a GEHINOM. Emotional pain, as we all know, is greater than physical pain; and that's exactly what we will have to expect at that time.

With that insight, I would like to try to get a better understanding of what we are told about Yitzchak (Toldot 27:33): When he becomes aware of the fact that he has just been fooled by Yaakov and with Eisav standing now before him, it says "and Yitzchak trembled with an extremely great trembling". Many suggestions for his trembling have been offered but I would like to focus on the Rashi which says 'he saw GEHINOM open before him'. The Gur Aryeh says that Yitzchak experienced a "taste" of GEHINOM. Again, there are a few explanations of why the concept of GEHINOM suddenly appears here (e.g., see Targum Yonatan). But the bottom line is that he saw GEHINOM associated with Eisav. And that means - according to those who hold that Yitzchak truly had been deceived all these years by Eisav and really believed him to be good - that Yitzchak realized that he had been living in a world of deceit and falsehood; that he had been wrong all along. "Yitzchak sensed deceit; but he wondered who was the guilty one: was it Yaakov, who had acted, outwardly, at least, with deceit? Or was it Yitzchak himself, who had allowed himself to be misled?" (Strive For Truth, part 1; Eliyahu Dessler; pp.268-269). And only now did the EMET - the unvarnished truth - appear before him. This was shades of GEHINOM, hints of that emotional torment one experiences after 120 years when confronted with the truth.

And if this is the reaction to recognizing the truth in a situation where, through no fault of his own, Yitzchak was "living a lie", so to speak, then certainly we can expect the reaction to "the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth" that will confront us after 120 to be no less.

I submit, then, that the authors of our prayers were giving us more than just good advice when they said L'OLAM Y'HEI ADAM Y'REI SHAMAYIM... UMODEH AL HA'EMET, V'DOVEIR EMET BILVAVO. One should always (forever - l'olam) fear Heaven... and admit the truth and speak truth in his heart. In order for us to have as smooth a transition as possible L'OLAM - to that eternal world, it behooves us to 'fear Heaven', etc. and to have the ability to recognize the truth and admit it - even to ourselves.

P.S. Interesting footnote: consider T'hilim 15 which is commonly read at funerals: Mizmor l'Dovid... A psalm of David. Gd, who shall live in Your Tabernacle, who shall dwell on Your holy mountain? He who walks in moral integrity and speaks the truth in his heart...
GADOL, GIBOR, NORA

Afterthoughts
by Yocheved Bienenfeld

THOUGHTS ON GD AS GADOL, GIBOR, NORA

If I were to be asked what Gd's primary description or characteristic would be, I would say GADOL - which Chazal identify as His attribute of CHESED V'RACHAMIM, kindness and mercy. For despite what we do and what we see in the world, a reality that would clearly not be what He wants and for which we would deserve punishment, if He operated exclusively out of His MIDAT HADIN (attribute of justice), our very existence would be in jeopardy. And, from a personal standpoint, I have been most fortunate to feel myself the beneficiary of Gd's CHESED V'RACHAMIM, of His goodness and love, B"H, as opposed to the opposite. Gd is known as the GOMEL CHASADIM par excellence. Chazal tell us that He created the world as an act of CHESED because of His 'desire' to give.

If, however, we leave this as the final conclusion as to the nature of Gd, we are left with the problem of His G'VURA, of this MIDAT HADIN. If He is both equally and entirely CHESED and G'VURA and we cannot conclude that He is primarily one or the other, how, then, are we to balance this picture? Perhaps, we need to return to the previous thought that if Gd were to judge us according to our deeds, through MIDAT HADIN alone, the survival of humankind would be in doubt. If then, that is so, how is it that it doesn't happen? Because of that self-same G'VURA: EIZEHU GIBOR? HAKOVEISH ET YITZRO. Who is considered a GIBOR? One who conquers his YETZER. Gd activates His G'VURA to conquer and overcome His MIDAT HADIN and allows the MIDAT HARACHAMIM to reign. This means that at the same time that Gd's MIDAT HARACHAMIM functions, His G'VURA does as well. Otherwise, the CHESED couldn't be operative.

Similarly, when we see or feel that Gd is behaving towards us through G'VURA, through His MIDAT HADIN, here, too, it is not operating by itself. For, in truth, when this happens, is it not because He wants what is, ultimately, the best for us? Punishment is never given for its own sake. We are, after all, dealing with Master of the universe, not with a human motivated by petty concerns. If Gd deems us deserving of punishment or of difficulties, then when He punishes, or deals us a rough hand, it is only because that is what is best for us - even if it doesn't feel that way - so our souls would not forfeit their rightful place in OLAM HABA. And so, the punishment, too, is an act of CHESED.

This understanding now gives us the true combination of CHESED and G'VURA, of RACHAMIM and DIN, in equal measure. And, in essence then, it
would seem that the two are inseparable and blend together as one - which would explain the paradox of Gd's being entirely CHESED and entirely DIN at the same time. This combination is what Chazal refer to as NORA. Describing Gd through these character traits is an invention of the human mind to help us understand how He functions. As odd as it may be and as foreign as it may be to our limited understanding, in reality, Gd is, indeed, ECHAD - there is no compartmentalization. And that is EMET.
GRATITUDE

Afterthoughts
by Yocheved Bienenfeld

While reading Rav Schwab's book on prayer, I was stricken with the fact that there seemed to be a certain pattern presented in P'sukei d'Zimra. According to the Ashkenazic siddur, we precede BARUCH SHE'AMAR with MIZMOR SHIR CHANUKAT HABAYIT L'DAVID in which we recognize how Gd keeps us alive and functioning even in difficult times and so we conclude HASHEM ELOKAI L'OLAM ODEKA (HaShem, my Gd, I will always thank You.) The theme of gratitude is introduced. We now proceed in BARUCH SHE'AMAR, to recognize Gd for Who and What He is, which is - in truth - unknowable, so we can only "bless" His name, that which we know of through His behavior. Being recipients of all this, we are directed to HODU LASHEM, don't take it for granted, thank Him. Indeed, we then respond with MIZMOR L'TODA, a psalm of thanks. Having expressed our gratitude to Gd, His honor and glory have been enhanced and, therefore, Y'HI CH'VOD HASHEM L'OLAM (may Gd's honor endure forever). Gratitude to Him increases His honor. (As a matter of fact, the very psalm with which we started, lays down this very rule: L'IMA'AN Y'ZAMERCHA... - in order for honor to 'sing' to You, I will first offer up my thanks.)

I was unsuccessful in trying to follow this concept of gratitude through the rest of P'sukei d'Zimra, so I stopped trying. But what I found pre-occupying my thoughts was this very concept of gratitude which involves much more than what we find in the daily davening. We are taught that gratitude is a fundamental tenet of Judaism. The mitzva of honoring parents, for example, is totally based upon it; we acknowledge - repeatedly - our debt to Gd for having redeemed us from Egypt; we say blessings over everything from which we derive benefit; we are not allowed to hate the Egyptians because we "owe" them for having hosted us in their land (before slavery), etc. As such, the lack of gratitude is seen as a heinous offense. We are not allowed to permit Moavite males to come into K'HAL HASHEM. Why? Just because they didn't provide us with food when we were travelling in the desert? Is that really so terrible? Obviously, the reason must be of significantly greater import. We are all familiar with the explanation of how this was a blatant display of ingratitude on their part, given that as descendants of Lot - who benefited from and owed so much to Avraham - they really "owed" this to the Jewish people, his descendants. Rav Eliyahu Dessler says "the true service of Gd is built on a foundation of gratitude" (Strive For Truth - vol 1; p. 153). Ingratitude in Judaism is not tolerated. Rav Saadia Gaon and Rabbeinu Bechaye
say that "the sense of gratitude is the basic religious emotion in Judaism, for the whole Torah is based upon it" (The Lord is Righteous in All His Ways, Rav Soloveitchik, p.70).

Why should this be so? What is it about gratitude that bestows upon it such importance? Perhaps, a hint to a possible answer can be found in the Hebrew term for it: HODA'A - TODA. The root of the word is identical to that of VIDUI - confession. A statement of thank you is an admission - a confession, if you will - that you owe something to someone else. It could mean you had been lacking in an area and they filled the need; or it could mean that even though there was no need, you benefited in some way from someone else. It could also be an admission that you cannot properly repay the other person.

The importance of recognizing this might be reflected in the very fact that people often find it difficult to express gratitude. What is so frightening or difficult about this "admission"? I think what could be unsettling is the following: firstly, it would mean you were unable to function adequately on your own - you needed help. And maybe that makes you aware that you are not self-sufficient. There is nothing wrong with that for, indeed, we are not self-sufficient, nor were we meant to be. But for some people, this could be a blow to a fragile ego: we don't like to feel dependent. Secondly, accepting help, or gifts, very often leaves you feeling beholden to someone else. You feel you "owe" them, whether or not this is true. And if you can't "pay them back", you feel less of a person. Again, it is an affront to the ego. Thirdly, it simply means that now you are "connected" to someone else and you may not want to be.

All of the above share one common thread and that is an involvement with another person. A recognition that "no man is an island". It is humbling to be a recipient of deeds or gifts even though it can also be uplifting. But regardless, it means you need to interact with another person and in a kind and grateful way. Maybe that is why gratitude is considered so important. You are placed (sometimes, forced) into a situation that insists that you interact positively with another being so that you are forced to admit, perhaps, that you need others in order to be whole. We see the opposite in ingratitude. Ingratitude could very well reflect a dangerous tendency. Not that you are afraid to admit that you needed or benefited from someone but that you are so self-involved that you might not even be aware that someone else did something special for you. You are only thinking of yourself, you actually expect others to do for you. The ultimate in conceit. And a world or people who cannot think of others is the opposite of what Gd wants. We know what happened to the Generation of the Flood.
And maybe this is what Gd wants us to realize: we do need each other. We are not gods; we cannot survive on our own - we were not meant to. BOREI N'FASHOT RABOT V'CHESRONAN AL KOL MA SHEBARATA L'HACHAYOT BAHEM NEFESH KOL CHAI - we were created with our deficiencies so that we could interact with others and benefit each other. Going the obvious step further then, we arrive at our need for the Highest Being, the Adon Olam. Being dependent upon Gd should be a liberating experience. It's call BITACHON. This awareness requires a constant state of gratitude to Gd. Yes, even to the extent that we are expected to bless over the bad as well as over the good. It makes it impossible to forget about Gd or even be unaware of His presence.

Aside from this obvious need and reason for our gratitude to Gd, I think the true importance rests on the previously mentioned fact that showing gratitude is an admission that we are not all-powerful and that we have needs. If I can recognize that and accept that, it will be simply impossible to make myself into a god or create anything that would resemble a god. If I am at peace with the fact that I am not in control - nor am I meant to be - then I won't be tempted by false idols or ideals but will recognize the true source of all I need.

We have, then, in gratitude, a heightening of our behavior - person to person - and the basis of our behavior toward Gd.

In view of all this, I would like to propose that we understand the psalm of the day for Shabbat in a significantly different way. Our davening on Shabbat says: ...TOV L'HODOT LASHEM..." (...and the seventh day praises and says: a psalm for the Shabbat day: it is good to give thanks to Gd...). Shabbat is our MEI'EIN OLAM HABA - a taste of the world to come. And what is the essence of this world to come; what is its ultimate praise, its song? TOV L'HODOT LASHEM - it is good to be grateful to the One Above. We achieve the future world through this attribute and it is the essence of that world.
Here is a problem I've always had with the story of B'reishit: How could (why would) Gd create the world in such a way that it was CHASEIR (incomplete)? Not just CHASEIR but full of disobedience on the part of the animate and the inanimate, making it seem that it was possible (or maybe even probable) that the world would be TOHU VA'VOHU even after creation.

Maybe the answer lies in the understanding of what Chazal meant when they said it was up to Man to complete the work and be a "partner" in Creation. I had always understood this in a simplistic manner: Gd made the physical world, Man was to bring it to fruition. But after reading a d'var Torah of R. Moshe Tzvi Neria, zt"l (Ner La'Ma'or, p.86-87) about Avraham, I think I have a better understanding that might explain this more adequately. He notes the Gemara (Bava Metzia 87a) that AD AVRAHAM LO HAYA ZIKNA (Until Avraham, there was no sign of old age) - that Avraham requested signs of ZIKNA so that the elders would be respected (Tanchuma Chayei Sara 1). Then he asks, how is it that Avraham felt it necessary to make a minor adjustment in MA'ASEI B'REISHIT (and that Gd agreed)? And he answers that, of course, Gd had intended this and had "created" this but waited for Avraham to propose it so that it would be associated with Avraham.

Now I can better handle my inability to understand Gd's way of "thinking" by creating a "flawed" world. It's just like the second chapter in B'reishit where it tells us that everything, the raw material, was ready, waiting for Man to act upon it. So, too, then, with all other matters, including the conquering of evil and the perfection of those "imperfections" in Creation. It's all there, waiting for the person Gd chooses to activate them, to put them into effect - just as He had planned.

(Of course, this doesn't explain the disobedience present in nature, but that's for another time.)
I noticed that there are certain similarities in the episodes described in the Parashot of B'reishit and No'ach, which - as usual - I had not noticed before. Specifically, I am referring to the sin of Adam and the sin of DOR HAFLAGA:

**SIN**

Adam - sins against Gd by not listening to the one command he had. The lure of the sin was "to be like Gd" - VIH-YITEM KEILOKIM

Dor Haflaga - sins against Gd by challenging His authority; wanting to fight Him. They want to be like Gd (or greater).

**INGRATITUDE**

Adam - shows ingratitude when he responds to Gd's question by blaming Chava: HA'ISHA ASHER NATATA IMADI, as if it were Gd's fault, chas v'chalila, for having given him Chava to begin with.

Dor Haflaga - shows ingratitude in their "attack" on Gd, ignoring the fact that He promised not to bring a flood upon them.

**PUNISHMENT**

Adam - Gd prevents Adam from eating from Etz HaChayim: - lest he become too powerful with his 'knowledge of good and evil' by living forever - and He expels him from Gan Eden.

Dor Haflaga - Gd's response seems similar: - the same concern over Man's overstepping his boundaries and becoming too powerful. And he punishes them by confusing their language which leads to His scattering them out from there all over the earth. They, too, are displaced.

The punishments put Man in a position where he is weaker (as opposed to his desire for power) and, perhaps, this is meant to make him feel his dependence upon Gd even more (as opposed to becoming Gd-like).

When compared to the other two major catastrophes, in terms of punishment, that appear in B'reishit, these consequences are different.

1) The world was destroyed by flood - not because people challenged Gd's power - but because they didn't care about each other and wronged each other.

2) S'dom and Amora, too, were totally destroyed, again - not because they challenged Gd's power - but because their behavior towards other people was despicable. One must conclude that Gd cares more - "feels" more strongly about, and will not tolerate humans hurting each other - than about any "threat" to Himself by Man.
As usual, something which should have occurred to me a long time ago, first hit me now. We say in Sh'ma, we shall love HaShem our Gd with all our heart, with all our soul, and with all our might. And we've been taught over and over again how these three descriptions refer to the ways in which we are to serve Hashem:

B'CHOL L'VAV'CHA - as its simple meaning, emotionally, with all our heart;

UVCHOL NAFSH'CHA - even with our souls, if, Gd forbid, we are required to sacrifice our lives for Him

UVCHOL M'ODECHA - with all our "means" - financial; and/or B'CHOL MIDA UMIDA SHEHU MODED L'CHA HEVEI MODEH - BEIN TOVA, BEIN RA'A... (Brachot 54a) - no matter what MIDA with which Gd treats us.

Suddenly, the fact that these requirements are three in number struck me. My first thought was the three AVOT - our forefathers. And with that, the three-character traits that are attributed to them: GADOL, GIBOR, NORA - this is how each of them related to Gd.

What if these three B'CHOLs are meant to coincide - or even if not meant to, do - with these three midot:

B'CHOL L'VAV'CHA - would imply unconditional love which, to my way of thinking, would be a natural and easy way to respond to a Gd Who treats us with chesed as Avraham did.

UVCHOL NAFSH'CHA - sacrificing our lives - which would require the MIDA of GEVURA, which Yitzchak exhibited.

UVCHOL M'ODECHA - this would require our serving Him regardless of what He metes out to us chesed or gevura, or both, as is defined in NORA, as depicted by Yaakov in his very complicated life.

It occurred to me (about 60 years late) that if we are interpreting B'CHOL L'VAV'CHA and UVCHOL NAFSH'CHA as referring to OUR hearts and OUR souls, why should we switch in terms of M'ODECHA to mean Gd's behavior towards us? If M'ODECHA can be used to mean MIDA then there should be no reason that we can't use it to refer to OUR midot, not just those of HAKADOSH BARUCH HU. Therefore, it can additionally mean that we should love Him B'CHOL M'ODECHA - with all of OUR midot.
I've always wondered about the sequence of requests in the Amida on Shabbat and on Yom Tov:

**KAD'SHEINU B'MITZVOTECHA** [sanctify us with your commandments]

**V'TEIN CHELKEINU B'TORATECHA** [and give us our portion in Your Torah]

**SAB'EINU MITUVECHA** [satiate us from Your goodness]

**V'SAMCHEINU BISHUATECHA** [and gladden us with Your salvation]

**V'TAHEIR LIBEINU L'OVD'CHA BE'EMET** [and purify our heart to serve You truthfully]

I, personally, felt that the need for service with a pure heart was the primary one. And if I could achieve that purity in my service of Gd, if only I could approach Gd with love and not because I needed something from Him - no ulterior motive - I'd then be deserving of **SAB'EINU BISHUATECHA** - the yeshua would then come (understanding yeshua in terms of the ultimate one, the geula). But after some thought, I had to sadly admit that truly pure service of Hashem is probably not achieved prior to the geula. It is only after we merit the arrival of the mashiach that we can hope to serve with a pure heart.

The **SAB'EINU MITUVECHA** also posed a problem for me. It seemed inappropriate to insert a "gimme" request amidst the more noble things we were mentioning: **KAD'SHEINU B'MITZVOTECHA** - make us more sensitive to your mitzvot to seek to do them and to sense opportunities for this; **V'TEIN CHELKEINU B'TORATECHA** - let our portion be among those who learn Torah. Asking for the more mundane in **SAB'EINU MITUVECHA** seemed inconsistent. Perhaps, it is meant to be understood in a different way. Gd always blesses us with His good - we may not realize it, but it's there. The request here is not for more good things, it is a request that **SAB'EINU** - we feel fulfilled and satisfied with whatever good He gives us, not that we feel lacking and want more. And so, it really is a request for us to elevate ourselves to a level where we can appreciate that good and be grateful. As such, we are not asking for the mundane, for "more", we are asking for help in being satisfied with anything we receive. This, then, would also fit in terms of the sequence in general:

A person who

1) has become more sensitive to the opportunity to do mitzvot, who seeks them out more;

2) one who devotes time to Torah study - not as an afterthought, but as a goal - this kind of person will be one who, indeed,
3) feels satisfied with the good Gd grants him and will reach the level of

4) being deserving of the yeshua and, after which,

5) will merit to serve HaShem with a pure heart.
WHY THE BOOK OF B'REISHIT?

Afterthoughts
by Yocheved Bienenfeld

When Rashi brings the question of R' Yitzchak regarding the opening of B'reishit (who questions why the Torah didn't start with the first mitzva, as opposed to the story of Creation), he is informing us that the essence of the Torah is not a recounting of history but rather a halachic guide to life according to the commandments of Gd for the Jewish people. If so, why does the Torah begin with the many stories in B'reishit? How do we explain the recorded details of the lives of our ancestors? With the exception of the seven Noahide commandments - which, in truth, are not clearly listed - the mitzva of brit mila; and the prohibition of eating gid hanasheh - both of which could have been learned in the course of the Torah's specifying the other mitzvot and not in the context of a story - B'reishit doesn't fit the description of the purpose of the Torah.

The answer, as Rashi records, is that we are to learn something other than mitzvot from the first book of the Torah. The first thing we can learn, as explained by Ramban, is something about how Gd functions. According to Ramban, R' Yitzchak's question of why start the Torah with an account of Creation is basically implying: we don't understand anything about Creation.

The concept of 'creatio ex nihilo' is beyond us. Understanding the creation of Woman from Man - let alone the creation of Man - is also beyond us, as is much of this story. But, as Ramban explains, we are being told these things to understand that, yes, Gd owns everything and He can give to and take from anyone or any nation what He chooses. And the story of the expulsion from Gan Eden, the flooding of the world, the dispersion of the nations, illustrates for us that when you don't live by Gd's rules - Jew or not - you will be expelled from your place.

But again, what about the Avot, our forefathers? Indeed, we can also learn lessons from their lives as to how Gd functions. But, oftentimes, we are left with many questions about this that are left unanswered: e.g., why does Gd deem it necessary to decree that Avraham's descendants must be enslaved and that has to be for 400 years? Why need Yitzchak become blind? Why go through the whole charade with Eisav and Yaakov? Why is trickery necessary? Why does Yaakov have to go through the myriad complications in his life (his father and grandfather didn't)? Chazal succeed in suggesting many solutions to the various questions. But the bottom line is we will never really understand how Gd functions and that's the way it's supposed to be.

Therefore, I believe we need to conclude that the purpose of our knowing about the trials and tribulations of the Avot is
in order to prepare us for the receiving of the Torah that follows the book of B’reishit. Despite any questions we might have about why Gd or why the Avot acted in certain ways, we are being informed, at the very least, of their noble attributes. And that is the necessary precondition for a Jew to receive the Torah. Whatever weaknesses they exhibited, we are to learn from them. Whatever strengths, whatever midot they displayed, we are not only to emulate them, but to realize, even more, that we have inherited them. They are part of our ethnic DNA, and only a people which exhibits these characteristics is a people that can receive the Torah and abide by its laws. Put differently in Chazal's famous words: DERECH ERETZ KODMA LATORAH.

These thoughts came to me when I noticed in the davening in T'hilim 34, that I could read a different message in the famous quote MI HA'ISH HECHAFEITZ CHAYIM [who is the one who wants life]. If I may be allowed poetic license, I saw the following:

MI HA'ISH HECHAFEITZ CHAYIM - we know that the Torah is also referred to as CHAYIM (as in EITZ CHAYIM HI) so maybe, homiletically, we can read this as 'Who is the man who wants to learn Torah, to live a life of Torah?'

OHEIV YAMIM LIR-OT TOV [who loves days, to see goodness] - be a person who sees the good in others. Be a ba'al chessed like Avraham.

N'TZOR L'SHONCHA MEIRA [guard your tongue from speaking evil] - restrain yourself, hold back from speaking poorly of others. Practice GEVURA to limit yourself just as Yitzchak, who exemplified GEVURA.

USFATECHA MIDEABEIR MIRMA [and your lips from speaking deceitfully] - and don't engage in trickery and deceit as Yaakov had to, but remain truthful, be involved in EMET, which Yaakov represents.

By emulating the midot of the Avot, we are ready to receive and live by the mitzvot of Gd in the Torah which He gave us. And that's why the Torah had to begin with B'reishit.
DUDA'IM, CHANUKA, RACHEL AND LEAH

Afterthoughts by Yocheved Bienenfeld

"HADUDA'IM NAT'NU RE'I'ACH" - EILU DUDA'EI REUVEN. "V'AL P'TACHEINU KOL M'GADIM" (Shir haShirim 7:14) - EILU NEROT CHANUKA (brought in the Chasam Sofer and K'sav Sofer on the Torah: Vayeitzei)

The mandrakes give forth fragrance, and at our doors are all manner of precious fruits...

The Midrash somehow connects the episode of the Duda'im of Reuven with Chanuka. In an effort to understand this mysterious connection, R. Moshe Zvi Neria zt'l (Ner LaMa'or, p. 117) suggests the following:

On the surface, the behavior of the Chashmona'im in the Chanuka story, their successful fighting and ruling, is something not only out of the ordinary, but not right. Kohanim are not supposed to fight, not supposed to rule, U'MIN HAMIKDASH LO YEITZEI" (Vayikra 21:12) [He shall not leave the Sanctuary]. What they did goes against what they are supposed to do. And yet, as a result, they succeeded in freeing the Jews of Greek rule and in re-instilling Torah among the people. According to Torat haSod, however, it was necessary, in particular for the Kohanim to be the ones to do this in order to counteract the effect of the tum'at Yavan [impurity of Greece]. The political framework of the time required an abundance of the influence of Priestly Kedusha.

In a similar fashion, Leah's going out to greet Yaakov to inform him of the exchange with Rachel for conjugal rights that night is something frowned upon by Chazal as not appropriate, not tzniusdik, modest, for a Mother of Israel. Gd, however, sees the truth and shows His approval by granting the subsequent union the gift of Yissachar - the tribe of Torah scholars, the YOD'EI BINA L'ITIM (Divrei HaYamim Alef 12:33). The tribe of Yissachar had the BINA to know how to determine ITIM: times that were set, and those times that required bending - EIT LA'ASOT LASHEM, HEIFEIRU TORATECHA [when it is time to act for HaShem's sake, modify the Torah]. It was the sons of Yissachar, maintains Rav Neria, who understood that the period of the Chashmona'im was a 'time' that needed flexibility, that needed Kohanim to take on a role foreign to them. And thus, they established the holiday of Chanuka: B'NEI VINA, Y'MEI SH'MONA KAV'U SHIR URNANIM (from Ma'oz Tzur).

After reading the explanation of Rav Neria, citing 'Torat haSod', I saw the episode of the duda'im in a different light. I must admit, I never saw anything wrong in Leah's actions to begin with. After all, she wasn't "going out" in the marketplace to wait, she waited in the field for Yaakov's return. And, according to Yonatan ben Uziel, she only did this...
when she heard the sound of his donkey, so she knew that he was approaching. Through her actions, she also prevented an embarrassing encounter between Yaakov and Rachel, not making it necessary for Rachel to "throw him out", as it were. It was a sensitive act.

As for Rachel, Chazal also fault her for 'swapping' a night with Yaakov and, as a result, she forfeits her place beside him in M'orat HaMachpeila. I prefer, however, to choose the explanation of Rashi about her burial place: "...but you should know that according to the word of Hashem, I buried her there so that she would be a help to her children when Nevuzaradan would exile them and they would pass by the road there, so Rachel would come out of her grave and cry, begging for mercy on them" (Vaychi 48:7). This was not a punishment; this was meant to be. Rachel, who is considered 'Rachel Imeinu' - Rachel, our mother, the one who is "M'VAKA AL BANEHA, crying over her children", earned this title and this right since it was only because of her, that Yaakov ended up marrying his other three wives and thus producing the 12 tribes of Israel.

So, although Chazal see this episode of the duda'im as a negative one, both on the part of Leah and on the part of Rachel, I humbly see it differently. The birth of Yissachar proved this to me. And how about understanding the famous quote from Yirmiyahu in an additional way? KOL B'RAMA NISHMA, N'HI B'CHI TAMRURIM. RACHEL M'VAKA AL BANEHA... KO AMAR HASHEM: MIN'I KOLECH MIBECHI V'EINAYICH MIDIM'A KI YEISH SACHAR LIF-ULATEICH N'UM HASHEM... (Yirmiyahu 31: 14-15) [A voice is heard in Rama, a bitter wailing cry. Rachel is crying over her children... So says HaShem: hold back your voice from crying and your eyes from tears, for there is a reward for your deeds, says HaShem.] Yes, no denying the Chazal that tells us that 'your deeds' refers to her switching with Leah on what was to be her wedding night and giving her the secret signs to fool Yaakov so as not to have her be humiliated. But look at the words carefully: YEISH SACHAR LIF-ULATECH - YISSACHAR - was the result of your actions (P'ULATEICH) with the duda'im. And, as my husband pointed out, both these acts were acts of 'exchanging' - of allowing Leah to take her place on the wedding night and of allowing Leah, once again, to take her place in exchange for the duda'im. P'ULATEICH, both the first time and the second, were actions that were sanctioned and blessed by Gd.
We are told that men say the three b'rachot of SHELO ASANI GOI; SHELO ASANI AVED; SHELO ASANI ISHA in the negative sense to express what the male adult Jew is not, and, therefore, by default, what he is: a free Jewish male and thus responsible for all the mitzvot (which a goy, eved, or isha are not). The first two of these b'rachot are also said by women and they express the same idea. For although a woman and an eved share the same positive mitzvot that are not bound by time, a woman is obligated in certain positive commandments, e.g. separating challah, Korban Pesach (and others) that an eved isn't, so she too is obligated in mitzvot more than an eved.

The traditional understanding, or perhaps, not traditional as much as popular - in a negative way - of the third bracha OF SHE'ASANI KIRTZONO is that it is basically a form of TZIDUK HADIN: 'I accept upon myself my lot, this is what Gd has meted out to me and I accept it' - implying a making-of-peace with a role that is not ideal. And this understanding remains the most common one, despite the abundance of commentaries that reject it.

The problem with accepting this as the real meaning is that these two b'rachot, male and female, don't parallel each other in outlook, as do all the other b'rachot. We have the male version proudly proclaiming contentment and pride in his role. In the female version, however, although it begins with the same proud note, it suddenly switches gears to humbly accept the lot which the Almighty has determined for her. The inconsistency in the statements is disturbing. Perhaps we can look at both sets with two different meanings each: one where all three b'rachot are meant to be a statement of pride and another where the statements recognize that despite our (male and female) satisfaction with our roles, we are each missing something that the other has, and we accept it as a TZIDUK HADIN - acknowledging that Gd, in His infinite wisdom has created us in these two different ways intentionally and therefore, each way must be good as it is, and we need to recognize that in the other and value it.

APPROACH #1 - Positive

Male - As stated above, the b'rachot tell what the man is not, emphasizing what he is and extolling the opportunity to perform the 613 mitzvos as he has been commanded.

Female - The first two b'rachot are understood as above but, the third, rather than a TZIDUK HADIN, is to be seen as Rav S.R. Hirsch and others see it. Woman was created KIRTZONO - according to the will of Gd alone without "consulting" the angels as He did with
Man; KIRTZONO - that she is innately closer to what Gd wants mankind to be like, more spiritually - oriented.

APPROACH #2 - TZIDUK HADIN

Male - The first b’rachot are understood in the same way but, the third, is a TZIDUK HADIN that although he is not a goy or an eved and can, therefore, do 613 mitzvot, man is lacking. He is lacking those positive qualities that HaKadosh Baruch Hu granted to women and not to men - e.g. not having the ability to be MOCHEL BICHVODO as much as a woman (see Sforno on EIZER K’NEGDO); and, being accustomed to a role of more power, a man has more difficulty fulfilling those very 613 mitzvot (11 more than women) which a woman might not need, given how she was created. This idea is expressed by Kalonymus ben Kalonymus: "Why do I make the blessing 'that He hasn't made me a woman'? Because we have an obligation to bless over the bad as much as over the good" [V’AHAVTA L’RA’AYASECHA KAMOCHA; R. Shlomo Aviner, p.115].

Female - The first two b’rachot remain understood in their usual form. But the third is a TZIDUK HADIN. Indeed, it was the will of the Creator to create woman in such a way that she is not expected to perform 613 mitzvot and is physically incapable of doing some, even if she wanted to, and it leaves a feeling of lacking.

In the TZIDUK HADIN approach each gender comes to terms with innate, yet Gd-given, deficiencies and recognizes the greatness in the other to appreciate rather than to begrudge it.
Afterthoughts
by Yocheved Bienenfeld

The Midrash (Vayikra Raba; Midrash Tanchuma) tells a story of how R. Yannai heard a peddler selling the "elixir of life" and he asked what it was. The peddler proceeded to show him these famous p'sukim from T'hilim: MI HA'ISH HECHAFETZ CHAYIM, OHEIV YAMIM LIR’OT TOV; N’TZOR L’SHONCHA MEIRA USFATECHA MIRMA (T'hilim 34) [who is the person who wants life; loves days that he may see good? Keep your tongue from evil and your lips from deceitful speech]. R. Yannai then responded, saying, "All my days, I would read this text and I never understood how simple it was until this peddler came and informed me."

Could the great R. Yannai really not understand the simple meaning of the verses when they seem obvious to lesser folk such as ourselves? It is truly difficult to understand this story. Maybe that is what prompted me to try to understand a different meaning from these verses.

Let's read the first verse as a question and an answer in itself, rather than just a question with the answer coming in the next phrase:

MI HA'ISH HECHAFETZ CHAYIM? - who is the person who wants to merit Olam HaBa?

OHEIV YAMIM LIR'OT TOV - that person is someone who loves and looks forward to spending days LIR'OT TOV - in seeing the good in everything. He is more than an optimist; he simply develops the ability to see the good that is truly present in everything.

And because this is how he is, he doesn't speak LASHON HARA or behave in a deceitful manner; he is automatically repulsed by RA and does that which is good; seeking and chasing after peace. I found this approach verified in Mima'amakim on Parashat Metzora (p. 184; based upon the lectures of R. Moshe Shapiro zt’l): "...it is simple. Only one who himself is 'good', who appreciates the true reality - he is one who is accustomed to praise and speak well of all the creations that were created to honor HaShem... good speech demonstrates appreciation and recognition of the true roots of the world." One who is "good" tends to see the good in the world around him and to speak well of it.

In addition to the above, I learned an explanation for the punishment of the sin of the spies - why 40 years, a year for a day, that the spies were gone and not just for the one hour in which they spoke LASHON HARA? It was explained that the LASHON HARA began way before their report. It was present in their negative attitude toward the Land. Everything they saw, they saw with a jaded eye, wanting to find the bad and
not the good. From this, one must conclude that one way to avoid the sin of LASHON HARA is to see the positive in things and not the negative.

In essence, then, how is this really different than simply understanding the whole first phrase as the question and the following one the recommendation? After all, it is basically telling us the same thing. I think the difference is on the focus of the behavior. In the first 'simple' understanding, we are given guidelines that seem to basically say: "Listen, if you want to earn Olam HaBa, you'd better not speak LASHON HARA, etc." It is almost like taking a medicine which you're not thrilled about. According to the second interpretation, the emphasis seems to be a more positive one: "Do you want to earn a place in Olam Haba? Then recognize all the good and wonderful things in life." So, although the outcome is, indeed, the same, it feels different. It is more upbeat. We know this makes a difference in how one approaches a challenge. The more positive the attitude, the greater the chance of success.

Maybe this way of understanding these phrases in T'hilim escapes us because we are accustomed to having to focus on the LO TA'ASEI, on restrictions, in order to succeed. We're not that used to looking at a life requirement in a positive way. And maybe we should.
I have found that most of my "profound" thoughts, ideas with the most meaning to me, have come by accident, almost as afterthoughts rather than by intention. Maybe it is meant to be that way. The harder we look for something, the more it escapes us. But leave the mind blank for a moment so it can be impressed with words and ideas unbidden and we perceive with greater depth than before.

Have you ever noticed the following in the Hallel in the following pasuk?

HAL'LU ET HASHEM KOL GOYIM... KI GAVAR ALEINU CHASDO VE-EMET HASHEM L'OLAM, HALLELUKAH

Praise HaShem, all nations... For his LOVINGKINDNESS is MIGHTY over us; and the TRUTH of HaShem endures forever. Praise HaShem.

- that these three words describe our Avot: Avraham - CHESED; Yizchak - GAVAR (G'VURA); Yaakov - EMET. Very interesting.

Years ago, my Down's syndrome son, Yaakov Mosheh, pointed out something that I surely should have seen by myself, way before then. He showed me that the word MISHPACHA (one of his favorite words) was centered around the word SHIFCHA (maidservant). I had, indeed, never noticed that before and it had been staring me in the face all the time. I wasn't able to attribute any significant meaning to this fact or to figure out any connection for quite a while until a possibility popped into my mind. And even though this clearly may not be the source of the connection, it certainly teaches a lesson worth learning.

I believe that the presence of the word SHIFCHA in the middle of the word MISHPACHA (family) tells us that in order for a family to be truly successful and unified, everyone in it has to be MESH'ABED ('enslave') him/herself to it. There is no room for selfishness and self-centeredness. There needs to be a SHI'ABUD - a submission, that trait demonstrated by a SHIFCHA to the members of the family and to the concept of the family as a whole in order for the family to remain healthy and intact.

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We, as Jews, are fully aware of the importance and value of humility and the negative connotation of GA'AVA - conceit: "The abomination of HaShem are all who are haughty of heart" (Mishlei 16:5). I see a hidden reference to the effect of humility in the Hallel HaGadol (T'hillim 136). Towards the end of the list, it says SHEB'SHIFLEINU ZACHAR LANU, KI L'OLAM CHASDO (in our lowliness, He remembered us...). If we want HaShem to "remember" us and show His chesed to us, we need to show SHIFLENU - our humility.
B'CHOL YOM AVAR'CHEKA... (T'hilim 145). We know that David HaMelech had Ru'ach HaKodesh and it was through this ru'ach that he composed all of his T'hilim. But despite the fact that he was not a prophet, I believe we can find a situation of NIVA V'LO YADA SHENIVA (he prophesied and wasn't aware of it) in at least one of the T'hilim. At the beginning of Ashrei, he says AROMIMCHA ELOKAI HAMELECH VA'AVARCHA SHIMCHA L'OLAM VA'ED. David could certainly praise and 'bless' HaShem all his life, but no one lives 'forever' - L'OLAM VA'ED. And yet, that is exactly what has happened. Jews throughout the centuries have been using his words to do just that. And David's words of praise will, indeed, be said L'OLAM VA'ED by the Jewish people.
Afterthoughts
by Yocheved Bienenfeld

While enjoying the unique feeling that comes upon us only on Shabbat, I was able to understand the bracha of BOREI N'FASHOT in yet another way.

The Bartenura, in explaining the meaning of that bracha, tells us that it refers to Gd's creating, along with the many souls He created, that which is also CHASEIR - that which is missing from them to make them complete. We are incomplete for six days of the week. Then, on Shabbat, Gd gives us a N'SHAMA Y'TEIRA, the 'extra' soul that is V'CHESRONAN - that we lack so much on every other day. And with this N'SHAMA Y'TEIRA, He renews us so that LHACHAYOT BAHEM NEFESH KOL CHAI - so that we are able to continue refreshed and revitalized through the rest of the week.

I believe that it is this N'SHAMA Y'TEIRA that makes my davening and concentrating so much greater on Shabbat. That's when the following occurred to me:

In an earlier entry, I mentioned how we are taught that the verse of POTE'ACH ET YADECHA UMASBIYA L'CHOL CHAI RATZON is of critical importance in the ASHREI. The standard understanding of this is that it relates to how HaShem provides for our physical survival, whether it be through food and parnasa or with the necessary desires (ratzon) and instincts crucial for our survival. Using the literal meaning of the words that Gd opens His "hands" and satiates us, fills us with desire, I would like to suggest that there is another message here on a spiritual level that is, perhaps, also as critical as the other ideas in terms of what enhances our survival. When Gd opens His "hands", that very act fills us with the desire to reach out and hold them as in "I am always with You; You had grasped my right hand (T'hilim 73:23).

T'hilim 27:8 tells us LICHA AMAR LIBI... and the following translation and explanation of Rav Shimshon Refael Hirsch reinforces the above idea: "Of You does my heart say, Seek My countenance; Your countenance, O Gd will I seek"; Of You, on Your behalf, my heart tells me that You have said, 'Seek My face'... It is Your own will, Your command that men should 'seek Your face'... If, then, my heart strives for Your presence, it does so only in answer to the call that came to it from You." And if we are sensitive to when Gd opens His "hands" so that we want to cling to Him, we ensure our survival in this world and the next.
AHAVA RABBA AHAVTANU
Afterthoughts
by Yocheved Bienenfeld

"...for the sake of our fathers who trusted in You, and whom You taught the statutes of life..."

Although one English translation of this sentence chose to see it as referring to the wisdom with which Gd endowed Chazal in the Gemara, to me it says something else. I have always felt that AVOTEINU - our fathers - referred to THE AVOT, to Avraham, Yitzchak and Yaakov. I've never understood avot to mean Chazal, although the term certainly has been used to refer to our forefathers in Egypt. That's why this sentence says something totally different to me.

We have been taught that the avot kept the whole Torah even before it was given. And the best way for me to understand this is to recall what I was once taught - that this means they were blessed with the ability to inherently know what Gd would desire, in terms of mitzvot. Given this explanation, I can't help but understand these words as meaning the following: "...for the sake of our forefathers, whom You taught the 'tenets' of life..." that Gd blessed them with this innate ability. After all, chukim are laws we don't necessarily understand or for which we know the reasons. CHUKEI CHAYIM, therefore, could well mean these laws for which they may not have known the reason, some of which, based upon events that were yet to happen, were CHUKIM - laws they did regardless of their meaning.

So, too, if we look at the words that follow, it becomes clearer that this is what we are requesting: Please also be gracious to us and teach us... give us understanding and discernment, so that we can grasp all the words of Your Torah's teaching... We implore the Al-mighty to bless us, as well, with the ability to intuit His desires and act accordingly.

[What supports this idea is the following from Tanchuma Vayigash 11: From where did Avraham our father learn the Torah... he learned it from himself.]

Upon paying more attention to this passage of AHAVA RABBA, I saw what I consider to be an important addition to this. At the beginning of the sentence, it says BA'AVUR AVOTEINU SHEBAT'CHU BECHA VATELAM'DEM CHUKEI CHAYIM - I had ignored the cause and effect of the reason Gd blessed the avot with the ability to intuit what He wanted - so that they are said to have observed the Torah before it was given - was because SHEBAT'CHU B'CHA - that they had such total bitachon in Him. And the result of that bitachon was the gift He gave them of VAT'LAM'DEM CHUKEI CHAYIM.

At the end of the passage, we find support for this idea of bitachon producing these kinds of positive
results: When we trust, have bitachon in You, we merit rejoicing in Your salvation.

Postscript to the above:

In davening Shemoneh Esrei, I never paid much attention to the part that says ZOCHER CHASDEI AVOT in the first bracha. I had always assumed that it simply meant that Gd 'remembered' their exemplary behavior, their wonderful deeds, etc. But upon concentrating more on it and with the backdrop of what I wrote above, I believe that the CHASDEI AVOT that is being remembered is their total and complete bitachon in Gd. How else could they have functioned as they did, in the world in which they lived, influencing and succeeding in their mission in such an incredible way? There were never any doubts or questions. Absolute bitachon. And what was the result of this? What is Gd's reaction to this bitachon? U'MEVI GO'EL LIVNEI V'NEIHEM - He brings a redeemer to their children's children. Again, just as in AHAVA RABBA, the promise of GEULA is assured when BITACHON is ever-present.
"HIS SONS ... WITH HIM, HIS DAUGHTERS AND HIS SONS' DAUGHTERS... HE BROUGHT WITH HIM (Vayigash 4:7)"

In his work, HAGUT B'PARSHIYOT HATORAH, Rav Yehuda Nachshoni comments on the above verse in Vayigash (p.180). He references the Netziv in Ha'amek Davar who points out that the verse can be divided, as it were, into two halves. Regarding those mentioned in the second half of the verse, the women, it says HEIVI ITO (he brought with him), while BANAV UVNEI BANAV ITO - the men, 'came with him'. The Netziv concludes that this difference in the choice of words implies that the men came willingly - ITO, while the women came BAL KORCHAN, unwillingly - HEIVI ITO; that the men accepted upon themselves the 'decree of The King' whereas the women didn't. I would like to suggest a reason for this apparent refusal to accept the G'ZEIRA. As we have learned from incidents in the Torah, the women had an intense love for the land of Israel, more so than the men. Is it possible that the women didn't want to leave Eretz Yisrael simply because it was Eretz Yisrael?

The Ohr HaChayim HaKadosh says the same thing as the Netziv, strengthening the idea by pointing out the hefsek - break - in the te'amim (Torah notes) after the word ITO and only then continuing with B'NOTAV UVNOT BANAV (his daughters and the daughters of his sons). He then suggests that this attitude had consequences: Chazal tell us that as long as someone from that generation was alive, the SH'IABUD - enslavement - didn't begin. The Ohr HaChayim posits that this was a reward for accepting the decree of Hashem. With this understanding, he concludes that the fact that, of that first generation, Yocheved and Serach bat Asher were still alive when the SH'IABUD began might be because they came unwillingly and forfeited the reward.

Given my bias about the attitude of the Jewish women towards Eretz Yisrael, I still see this differently. The Ohr HaChayim has brilliance, wisdom and, probably, a bit of RU'ACH HAKODESH backing up his explanations, so there is no questioning it. All I have is an emotion which cannot stand in the face of all that. But it still allows me to express my read of this, even if based on emotion alone. I think the SH'IABUD began for all the women, as exemplified by Yocheved and Serach, the minute they came to Mitzrayim. Their love for the Land of Israel was so intense that as soon as they were in this foreign land, it felt like SH'IABUD to them. Shouldn't there be TAGMUL - a reward for that love? I think there was. Serach merited to return to her beloved Land and live there for many, many years. And both Serach and Yocheved were ZOCHEH to be present at MATAN TORAH.

Not bad.
KI B’YAD CHAZAKA HOTZI'ACHA HASHEM MIMITZRAYIM (Sh'mot 13:9)

"And it shall be for you as a sign upon your hand and as a remembrance between your eyes for with a mighty hand HaShem took you out of Egypt".

The Netziv, in his Ha'amek Davar, says something unique. This mitzva of Tefillin is mentioned here amid the mitzvot of the Korban Pesach and the holiday of Pesach along with the concept of PETTER RECHEM (opener of the womb), to serve, along with those mitzvot, as a reminder of the exodus from Egypt (13:3; 13:8; 13:14). He tells us not to be astonished at the fact that we were given so many reminders and mitzvot to aid in our BITACHON and Gd's providence because, he says, "you know that the Exodus from Egypt was not accepted so willingly, so that BAL KORCHACHA… HOTZIACHA (He took you out against your will)". He shows how the Jews were not so thrilled to accept upon themselves Gd's hashgacha, by citing the Midrash in Va'era on "and they didn't hearken to Moshe because of (their) shortness of breath and hard labor." He then points out that the first reaction of the Jews to Moshe, after he introduces himself and relays the promise of Gd, was that they believed him - "the nation believed and hearkened... and they bowed down" (Sh'mot 4:31). The second time, however, he tells them, among other things, that V'HOTZEITI... V'HITZALTI... V'GA'ALT... V'LAKACHTI ETCHEM LI... V'HAYITI LACHEM LEILOKIM..." (6:7) that now they have an obligation to Gd - they will be His nation and He will be their Gd. The reaction there is V'LO SHAM'U - they did not hearken. They were not so happy that this involved a commitment on their part and that Gd's behavior towards them would depend upon their own behavior.

Based upon this interpretation, the above pasuk in Bo about Tefillin (as well as the final verse in the parsha: "And it shall be for a sign upon your hand and for ornaments between your eyes for with a mighty hand did HaShem take us out of Egypt", is telling us that the purpose of the Tefillin is to serve as a reminder that HaShem took us out of Egypt B'CHOZEK YAD - against our will. Given this understanding, then, this would serve as a reason why the mitzva of Tefillin is for the men and does not apply to women. The women were not part of the people who did not want to leave Egypt. They were the ones who had the faith - who encouraged their husbands to have children; who brought drums with them when they left, convinced that they would use them to celebrate the Geula - and who, consistently, throughout the travels in the desert, exhibited the desire to go to Israel and not to lose hope. The women did go into Eretz Yisrael but not all the men. If this is a reason for women not to
require Tefillin then, to a certain extent, for a woman to wear Tefillin is a step down, in that she is saying that "I need this to remind me of something" that they don't need to be reminded of - it simply doesn't apply to them.
Before we begin the Shmoneh Esrei, we say the above - HaShem, open my lips and my mouth will tell Your praises. I am requesting that HaShem give me the ability to speak by opening my mouth and then I can proceed with His praises as I say the Shmoneh Esrei. Given the way I often daven, however, I think to myself that I need help in "opening my mouth" literally - in being careful in pronouncing the words and not davening the gibberish that often comes out.

In addition, these words tell me even more. If Gd is behind my opening my mouth, then what will come out will serve as a praise of Him. If I open my mouth on my own, however, and not HaShem, I can't be so sure that what will emanate from it will be praiseworthy. More likely than not, this won't be the case. Therefore, it would be best to speak only when I'm sure that it is HaShem Who is there in the opening of my mouth.

I find a hint to this idea in T'hilim 81:11. King David tells us 'I am HaShem, your Gd, who brought you up from the land of Egypt; open your mouth wide and I will fill it.' Gd is reminding us that if we follow Him, He is willing to do anything we request: "just open your mouth wide and I will fulfill your request." Unfortunately, in that chapter of T'hilim, Gd bemoans the fact that V'LO SHAMA AMI L'KOLI - His nation did not listen to Him.

If I can be allowed to wax homiletic a bit, I learn something else from this verse. HaShem is telling us HARCHEV PICA - open your mouth - and when you do, let VA'AMALEHU - let it be Me who fills it - anything that reflects who I Am, which will result in My praise. And a different text from King David's T'hilim tells us what the result of this will be: T'HILAT HASHEM YIDABEIR PI - My mouth will declare the praise of HaShem - if what my mouth produces is a praise of HaShem; VIVARECH KOL BASAR... - and all people shall bless His holy name forever - the result will be that it leads to all of humanity "blessing" His holy Name. Our mouths will produce a Kiddush HaShem.
KAFA ALEIHEM HAR K'GIGIT

In a shiur given by my husband a few years ago, he discussed this midrash about Gd lifting Mt. Sinai over the heads of the Jewish people like a barrel, basically 'forcing' them to accept the Torah. He discussed the obvious problems associated with that statement: if the Jews said 'na'aseh v'nishma' {'we will do and we will listen'} before even hearing the commandments, how could we say Gd 'forced' them with 'har k'gigit'? And if there was force, how could the Jews be blamed for not keeping the Torah when they never really voluntarily accepted it? Many theories and explanations are offered and my husband presented many of them.

In the course of the shiur, I found myself actually visualizing ma'amad Har Sinai with and without this 'har k'gigit'. But this visualization was so constant that it reappeared to me a number of times much later that evening. Maybe this happened because the scene was a very pleasant one to me, and I think that was because of one of the explanations which spoke to me because it was a positive one. It's the one that explains the occurrence simply as the Jews not having bechira - free choice - not because of force, but through reality - it was a "no-brainer". How or why would they not accept the Torah after all Gd had done for them, after seeing the revelation - as R' Yonatan ben Uziel put it "k'aspaklaria" - clear as glass? In addition, one of the explanations offered, actually said that this 'har k'gigit' was to shelter them from the intense heat of the midbar (desert).

The positive associations of 'har k'gigit' added a dimension to something in davening that always affected me. In the Shabbat morning davening, we include T'hilim 91 - Yosheiv b'seiter Elyon". Since on Shabbat I tend to have more kavana in davening than during the week because I take my time and focus more on what I'm actually saying, this mizmor usually moves me.

After expressing how one who lives in Gd's "shadow" can feel real bitachon in Him, the mizmor paints this picture of HaShem as the loving care and protection of a mother bird for her young: "He will cover you with His pinions and you will take refuge under His wings, His truth is His shield and armor."

There are times when I can imagine and feel these "wings" actually holding me around comforting and assuring me. So, after hearing the shiur on 'har k'gigit', I thought that maybe this picture of His covering us with His wings could also be describing this mountain experience, especially because His 'truth' is His shield; His emet is Torah. In other words, the Torah, which Gd is giving us, is the protection - the shield and armor.
we need in life. As the Etz Yosef on t’fila says: He will cover and protect you… on condition that you will take cover under His wings. Whoever walks in the ways of His Torah, HaShem will be a shield and armor for him.}

[It's also interesting that this is one of the chapters of T'hilim that Moshe Rabbenu authored. Reading the Mt. Sinai experience into these words would not be such a stretch.]
Afterthoughts
by Yocheved Bienenfeld

MISHENICHNAS ADAR (part 1)

Ever since my mother a"h, passed away in Adar, Adar has not necessarily been a month of simcha for me. This feeling was only reinforced when, soon after my mother's death, my oldest sister was in a car accident serious enough to place her in the same hospital in which my mother had died. After a little thought, I realized that my paternal grandfather, my maternal grandfather and one of my great-grandmothers also died in Adar. So, when I put all this together, it made me worry a bit about this 'joyous' month of Adar. As a matter of fact, my siblings and I adopted our own version of mishenichnas Adar marbim b'simcha. Our own personal version was mishenichnas Adar - DUCK!

And although this can be seen as humorous, it made me focus on a more serious dimension of the month when my husband pointed out some unusual things about the simcha expected in Adar, and it made me think: Why is there all this emphasis on joy in Adar and on Purim more so than at any other time?

First of all, we already have a Yom Tov that is mi'd'oraita (from the Torah) that is totally defined by simcha: Sukkot. Yet, we find no requirement or request to enter into the holiday with increased joy. Certainly, we could not expect this advice to apply to the entire month of Tishrei given the very solemn nature of the Yamim Nora'im at the month's outset. But beyond that, we find no requirement to approach Sukkot, even if only in terms of mere days, with additional joy.

Second of all, we know that halachically, we define simcha as involving eating meat and drinking wine at the meals, but since when are we enjoined to display our joy by becoming drunk? On the contrary, Rambam tells us that there were people appointed as overseers to make sure that on these Yamim Tovim, the expressions of joy didn't degenerate into inappropriate frivolity. The requirement on Purim to drink so much that we become confused enough to mix up our "blessing of Mordechai and cursing of Haman" is unique in our celebration of religious rites. Not only is it unique, but it is not at all consistent with our demeanor in general. Jews are, after all, known for their abstinence and limited consumption of alcohol. Real joy doesn't require one to become inebriated to express it or to realize it. It is almost as if we need this semi-intoxication to produce joy that wouldn't be there otherwise. It seems unnatural.

Third of all, this month of supreme joy is due to a one-day holiday which is preceded by a day of fasting. Not exactly in keeping with a joyous month, is it? Think about it: Adar begins with simcha and then, quite suddenly, we are told to push the 'PAUSE' button, as it
were, and put everything on hold: no more silliness, no more shtick in school. And then, this fast - whose purpose is to remind us of the sins of our ancestors so that we don't repeat them and to urge us to introspect and do teshuva - culminates in the reading of the megila - the equivalent of the Hallel recitation - and in rejoicing. A fairly good example of a non-sequitur at best. Once again, something quite strange.

Maybe our concept of simcha in Adar and on Purim is not the same as that which is expressed on all other Jewish holidays. Perhaps, we need to examine these two kinds of happiness and see wherein lies the difference.

(to be continued next week, be"H)
MISHENICHNAS ADAR part 2

The simcha we feel on the shalosh regalim is one that reflects gratitude to Gd for some favor or wonder He performed for us:

1) We celebrate our freedom from slavery and birth as a nation on Pesach - all due to Gd's miracles.

2) We celebrate our acceptance of Gd as our King, our chosenness as His people, our receiving of the Torah and, along with it, the charge of a mission to spread Gd's glory throughout the world - on Shavuot.

3) We express our gratitude for the miraculous sheltering and protection of our nation during our travels in the wilderness to the Promised Land - on Sukkot.

All of these share a theme of gladness and gratitude over the past along with hope and optimism for the future.

Chanuka is different inasmuch as we are not obligated to demonstrate our simcha with meat or with wine, yet, it too, reflects joy and gratitude for a miraculous saving and a promise for the future as we re-established a Jewish government for approximately 250 years.

What about Purim? Yes, we are celebrating our escape from the 'jaws of death', from annihilation as a people by Haman and the apparently willing Persian population. But there is something about having survived a near-death experience that cannot truly be expressed in joy and happiness, especially when the salvation was not miracle-based in the traditional sense.

There is, first and foremost, I believe, an enormous sense of gratitude to the Almighty for His mercy, kindness, and deliverance. Perhaps, if the happy ending would include a hope for the future, we would be able to rejoice. But there is no real future here. We were saved and we thank Gd for that. Nonetheless, we remained an alien people on foreign territory and even those in Israel were still ruled by a foreign power and the exile remained. Therefore, even though there is happiness and gratitude for the salvation, it is accompanied by the sobering recognition that we almost didn't make it. Gd remained hidden. And the lack of a future to anticipate, leaves us with the feeling that maybe Gd isn't so happy with us. Maybe we were getting what we deserved and were lucky that Gd had mercy on us. This is, indeed, reason to celebrate but one doesn't really feel like dancing.

The simcha generated by Purim, then, differs from the rest. It remains connected to the act itself, in the present, and not in its promise for the future. Its true essence, however, lies in the profound realization that we are inextricably bound up with Gd and His Torah, even while in galut and that we
will always be punished for being unfaithful, but - and this is the source of the simcha - He will never allow us to be destroyed. We, as a people, are immortal. It is a deep sense of contentment and happiness that carries with it a responsibility of major proportions. This is not the light-hearted joy of the other holidays. This is a simcha that is felt deep inside and is expressed, perhaps, merely with a Mona Lisa smile on the outside. It remains, at its core, internal.

Now, perhaps, it is possible to understand or to posit, at least, a guess as to why we are enjoined to be MARBEH B'SIMCHA on this particular holiday and not the rest. The additional amount of wine is needed to help transform the solemn sense of happiness into an expressive form of joy. And this transformation doesn't happen overnight, so we need to provide a setting that will enable it to happen more readily from the beginning of Adar. And ultimately, we pay respect to the true meaning of this holiday's simcha through the reminder of ta'anit Esther before exploding into an unusual form of revelry on Purim itself.
Out of the mouths of children and sucklings have You established might... (T'hilim 8:3)

Rav Shimon Schwab, in his book on prayer (p. 135), in explaining DIRSHU HASHEM V'UZO - seek Hashem and His strength, cites Shir HaShirim Rabba (2:3:3) as equating OZ with Torah. In addition, we have learned that Torah brings SHALOM and is SHALOM. Certainly, one of the source texts for this is EITZ CHAYIM HI... - it is a tree of life for those who hold on to it and all its pathways are peace. If so then, when it says HaShem OZ L'AMO YITEIN..., we can understand it as follows: when HaShem gives His people the Torah, He thus blesses them with peace.

With this understanding of the word OZ as referring to Torah, the title phrase of this "Afterthought" - MIPI OLALIM V'YONKIM - becomes very telling.

It has happened, more than once, that one of my grandchildren has explained the pshat of a verse in a way that I never saw! It was with clear, unjaded, uninfluenced eyes that they found an "obvious" meaning that escaped us adults. When that would happen, I would often say to myself the above phrase - that it was "from the mouths of babes" that true Torah comes forth. To deepen this idea, the gemara (Bava Batra 12) says: "after prophecy had been taken from the prophets, it was not taken... from children." Rav Sorotzkin, in Oznayim LaTorah, refers to this fact when he comments about the K'RUVIM on the KAPORET of the ARON. Why, davka, the image of children? Gd was to communicate with Moshe (and thus, the people) from between the cherubs. He continues: Prophecy continues from between the Cherubs. Through the learning of the children, based upon Torah, we achieve a relationship with HaShem.

Pay attention to what our little children are telling us, through their special form of 'prophecy', about Torah. There is more hidden in it than we realize.
TZADIK HASHEM...

Gd is just in all His ways and full of loving-kindness in all His works. (T'hilim 145:17)

We are told in various places by Chazal that the Beit HaMikdash was destroyed for any of a few reasons: sin'at chinam (baseless hatred) - probably being the most well-known one, murder, improper sexual behavior, and idol worship. But there are others cited as well: because they didn't make the blessing over learning Torah (referring to the learning as a mere intellectual exercise - N'darim 81:1); because they kept the letter of the law (Bava Metzia 30:2); because of the actions of Zecharia ben Avkulos who advised against offering up the imperfect animal sent by the emperor of Rome (Gittin 56:6); et al.

One element though appears more often than not among the many explanations and that is, the shortcomings in areas of bein adam l'chaveiro - matters between man and man. The list is clear: Sin'at chinam; keeping the letter of the law; bringing each other to court over matters worth a mere p'ruta instead of being able to overlook it and go beyond the letter of the law; and following the letter of the law regarding the sacrifice of the imperfect animal rather than take into account the horrendous ramifications of that act which led to dire consequences.

I think we have all been told at one time or another that there are times when we need to place the bein adam l'chaveiro before the bein adam l'Makom. This is not to suggest, Gd forbid, that one may defy the Halacha, but getting some priorities straight is essential. For instance, I could choose to refuse to assist another person in their davening because in so doing, I might be sacrificing my own proper kavvana. But that would probably be the improper choice. My guess is that if there were no other option, Gd would prefer I help that person at the expense of my own kavvana.

Given this basic idea, I think we can even attribute this behavior - this kind of prioritizing - to Gd Himself. We are told TZADIK HASHEM B'CHOL D'RACHAV V'CHASID B'CHOL MA'ASAV - Gd is just in all His ways (He is Tzadik; He embodies midat hadin). And yet He is Chasid, the essence of kindness in His actions. So even though, in principle, He runs the world by tzedek, He is known to us mostly by His deeds of lovingkindness - His ma'asav. Similarly, OHEV TZ'DAKA U'MISHPAT - this is what Gd loves: righteousness, justice. True enough, and yet, CHESSED HASHEM MAL'A HAARETZ (T'hilim 33:5) - what is it that "fills the world"? His lovingkindness.
Perhaps, that is the message to us, that when we have to weigh choices and our behavior in these two areas, we should opt for the one which Gd also opts for and in so doing, imitate Him by letting everyone see our deeds of loving-kindness.
At the end of the Sh'moneh Esrei, as well as in various other places, we recite the above request for the speedy rebuilding of the Beit HaMikdash. According to the Rama (123:1), we recite this after the Sh'moneh Esrei since prayer takes the place of our service in the Beit HaMikdash, and we are hoping to return to the original form of Avoda (service) in order to serve Gd properly, as in bygone days.

We then insert a seemingly intrusive statement about learning Torah (V'ТЕIN CHELKEINU B'TORATECHA) before we return to the theme of the Beit HaMikdash. The Vilna Gaon (Avot 5) explains that the placement of this request here is because since the destruction of the Beit HaMikdash, "there is no Torah" as it says in Eicha (2:9), "...her king and princes are [exiled] among the heathens, [and] there is no more teaching (TORAH)..." We want the rebuilding of the Beit HaMikdash, so that we will finally be able to understand the deep meanings of the Torah and grasp them properly. We follow this request with the hope that our future service of Gd in the Beit HaMikdash will be proper, so that it will be pleasing to Him.

Given that we know that Chazal didn't write prayers in random fashion, we can suppose a possible sequence here: we want to witness the speedy rebuilding of the Beit HaMikdash, but we already know that we had two of them and they were destroyed because of us - it was our fault. Why should the next time be any different? Answer: because now we ask that Gd will (V')ТЕIN CHELKEINU B'TORATECHA - that, given our new understanding of it, our lives should be influenced, informed, shaped by Torah and directed by it. Then, as a result, V'SHAM NAAVODCHA B'YIR'A - we will serve Gd with proper fear and awe. And if we do, then certainly "the offerings of our people will be sweet to Him as in the days of Moshe and Shlomo."
Afterthoughts
by Yocheved Bienenfeld

MARBIN B'SIMCHA - HOW?

I have already written my thoughts about Purim and the requirement of MARBIN B'SIMCHA where I tried to understand this law. But something I have been reading has added another dimension to the conclusion at which I arrived then.

Rav Moshe Shapiro zt"l, as is his wont, understands the directive of MISHENICHNAS ADAR MARBIN B'SIMCHA in a deeper way. Given that Haman's decree against the Jews was never erased, this decree to destroy Jews still exists. Adar contains within it a "death sentence" as Jewish history over the ages has shown. "Adar is an ominous month. Its essence is a 'reversed' month (V'NAHAFOCH HU), and reversed, by definition does not alter the nature of a thing" (Reflections and Introspection: Chanuka and Purim; Chapter: Renewal of Life, p.370). This was the month in which Moshe died - Moshe, who is completely linked to the Torah - and so, the natural state of this month is actually the departing of the Torah. According to the opinion that Nissan was the month in which the world was created, (Rav Yehoshua), Adar is the month that ends what began in Nissan.

Nissan is the month in which the Jews started on their path to our covenant with the Torah at Har Sinai. In order to 'deserve' the new beginning of the year with Nissan, we have to still be partners in that covenant. But, since, after the destruction of the Beit HaMikdash and the subsequent exile, we lost all the elements of the covenant: prophecy, the Beit HaMikdash, the land of Israel, and the Torah (... her king and officers are among the nations there is no Torah; her prophets as well didn't find any visions from Gd - Eicha 2:9), the Jewish people argued that the covenant at Sinai was severed and the "giving of the Torah ended" (p.367).

To merit the beginning, a new Nissan, the covenant has to be re-accepted. Adar needs to be devoted to that acceptance. We are already familiar with the Chazal that teaches that on Purim the Jews, indeed, re-established this covenant: KIYMI V'KIBLU - KIYMU MA SHEKIBLU K'VAR - they confirmed and undertook that which they had already received.

Given this understanding that our involvement in Torah is so critical to "protect" us during Adar, I would like to suggest another meaning of the dictum of MISHENICHNAS ADAR MARBIN B'SIMCHA. There are no descriptions of how to increase this SIMCHA in Adar, as opposed to Av, when we are told to do the opposite and minimize joy, and are directed by the Shulchan Aruch to limit certain activities. Therefore, I would like to define SIMCHA as Torah - the learning of Torah. Upon what is this based? SAS ANOCHI AL IMRATECHA
K'MOTZEI SHALAL RAV - I rejoice in Your Words like one who finds great spoil (T'hilim 119:162) - the joy we derive from learning Torah. But, more specifically, mourners are told they are not allowed to learn Torah during shiv'a, as we are also told on Tish'a B'Av. Why? Because it brings joy and happiness: PIKUDEI HASHEM Y'SHARIM, MISAM'CHEI LEIV - The mandates of Gd are upright, rejoicing the heart (T'hilim 19:9).

If the Torah brings simcha, then maybe the best way to guarantee an Adar that will bring in its wake the rebirth of Nissan, the renewal of the covenant and the promise of redemption, is to increase simcha - our study of Torah.
Afterthoughts
by Yocheved Bienenfeld

LIV'SUMEI B'PURYA

One of my pet peeves - and I believe a justified one - has always been the practice of the requirement of LIV'SUMEI B'PURYA AD D'LO YADA BEIN ARUR HAMAN L'VARUCH MORDECHAI - to imbibe intoxicating drink until one can't tell the difference between 'cursed be Haman' and 'blessed be Mordechai' - as drinking more than usual on this holiday LIV'SUMEI B'PURYA (Shulchan Aruch 695:2).

If I look at the Rama on these words, he clearly says it's not necessary to become drunk but to merely drink more than one is usually accustomed to and then fall asleep, thus fulfilling the requirement of not knowing the difference between the above phrases. The Mishna B'rura adds to this: V'CHEIN RA'U'I LA'ASOS - and it is fitting to do thusly. In the Sha'arei Teshuva's comment, he adds "and one who has a weak nature, who acts foolishly so that it is possible for him to behave improperly through this drinking, should not drink too much." The Bi'ur Halacha, in explaining the reason for this requirement, adds: "nevertheless, this is to be for a mitzva and not as an impediment", implying moderation.

Given that the reason for LIV'SUMEI B'PURYA is to commemorate the fact that the salvation (or miracle) of Purim came about through wine (with all the various 'wine parties' that were involved along the way), I have always found it difficult to understand why this mitzva is too often fulfilled by getting "stinking drunk" with liquor. That's not wine, and more likely, commemorates one's desire to simply get drunk rather than perform a mitzva. I prefer to understand the definition of the word LIV'SUMEI as related to its root, which doesn't mean drunk. It means to 'perfume' oneself (b'samim) so that you have the air, the fragrance of wine. To me, this is a far cry from becoming drunk.

Unfortunately, in my personal experience, I've known more people who threw up on their host's furniture, behaved badly, etc. than not. I was fortunate enough to have one beautiful experience where this mitzva was done, in my opinion, to perfection. We were sitting down to our se'uda when two Rebbes from the local cheder came in dancing and singing. They sat down at the table and said to my husband (in their obviously tipsy state) "Rebbe, give us a d'var Torah." That's what should result from the right measure of LIV'SUMEI.

In one of the books by Rabbi Dr. Abraham Twersky zt"l, I found the following, which expresses some of my confusion:

"Have you ever wondered why it is that the beginning of a secular new year is so widely celebrated with revelry and intoxication? Reflect for a moment.
Everyone is shouting "Happy New Year!"
If they are really happy about this great
moment, why would they want to be
intoxicated and, therefore, unaware of
that sensation of happiness? After all,
alcohol is technically an emotional
anesthetic, and it is absurd to kill a
pleasant feeling of accomplishment. If
one were truly happy, he would wish to
savor happiness and preserve it rather
than abolish it with a chemical." (I'd Like
to Call for Help... But I Don't Know the
Number p.128.)

Do these Purim 'revelers' even realize
it's Purim in their state of intoxication?
Those who do it properly, L'SHEIM
MITZVA, probably do. But the rest of
them may realize it only inasmuch as
that's their excuse for getting drunk.

The Midrash Shmuel on Avot 4:26
explains the metaphor of YAYIN
YASHAN (old wine) mentioned in that
Mishna as referring to the secrets and
mysteries of the Torah. Indeed, wine has
the ability to do this: NICHNAS YAYIN,
YATZA SOD - wine leads to revealing
that which is secret (Eiruvin 65a).
The numerical equivalent of YAYIN is 70, as
is SOD = 70; SHIV'IM PANIM LATORAH -
the Torah can be explained in (at least)
70 ways. With this read, we can certainly
understand V'YAYIN YISAMCH L'AVENOSH -
Wine gladdens the heart of man (T'hilim 104:15) just as Torah does.

It would be so nice if I could, somehow,
equate YAYIN with TORAH more
directly, just as we know that water,
light, truth, etc. are also metaphors for
Torah. Then the 'fragrance' coming from
us would be that of Torah and not of
alcohol. But then we would have the
problem of how does this lead to AD
D'LO YADA?

Oh, well...

Editor's note: Although Yocheved Bienenfeld's
Afterthought discusses a serious issue
concerning Purim (with which I totally
concur), allow me to add a flippant comment
in the spirit (pun intended) of Purim Torah. It
is so, that wine is The Drink for Purim, as
stated above, yet, there is one other beverage
mentioned repeatedly in the Megila. And that
is beer - specifically SHUSHAN HABIRA,
mentioned 10 times in the Megila.

And on the mathematical side -

ARUR HAMAN = 1+200+6+200 (407) + 5+40+50
(95) = 502.

BARUCH MORDECHAI = 2+200+6+20 (228) +
40+200+4+20+10 (274) = 502.

Hey, with regular gimatriya, there is no
difference between ARUR HAMAN and
BARUCH MORDECHI.

So let us apply the Adar-Purim concept of
V'NAHAFOCH HU - turn it upside down.

AT-BASH is a reverse gimatriya, with TAV = 1
and ALEF=400, SHIN=2 and BET=300, and so
on. With AT-BASH, ARUR HAMAN = 400+3+80
+3 (486) + 90+10+9 (109) = 595.

BARUCH MORDECHAI = 300+3+80+30 (413) +
10+3+100+30+40 (183) = 596. Very close. If you
can't do this arithmetic in your head while a
bit tipsy on Purim, you got to AD D'LO YADA.
It is recorded in kabbalist literature (Tola'as Ya'akov in the name of Or Zarua) that Baruch She'amar was established by the Men of the Great Assembly when PISKA SHENAFAL MIN HASHAMAYIM - a note fell from Above upon which this prayer was written. For this reason, we are to recite it while standing (Mishna Brura 51; s"k 1).

The more I paid attention to this prayer, the more I found within it what might explain its importance to the extent that it "came from Above". It doesn't simply extol the virtues and powers of Gd, it includes certain fundamentals of our religion.

When He decided to create the world, Gd's intention was to do so with MIDAT HADIN, the attribute of pure justice, as we can see by the exclusive usage of the word ELOKIM (connoting the attribute of justice) throughout the Creation narrative. Gd realized that the world couldn't survive this way and He tempered it with RACHAMIM - the attribute of mercy. One of the first things BARUCH SHE'AMAR tells us is that, indeed, Gd did not follow through on His original intention. The Acharis L'shalom brings out the verse in T'hilim (89:3) to further this idea: KI AMARTI OLAM CHESSED YIBANEH - I have said the world is built on kindness - 'the fact that I used the language of 'saying' during Creation indicates My intention that the world should be built upon mercy and kindness.' We praise Him for creating our universe with kindness.

By the way, if this is, indeed, how to understand this verse, then the previous one would verify it: CHASDEI HASHEM OLAM ASHIRA, L'DOR VADOR OD'A EMUNAT'CHA B'FI - I will sing of the lovingkindness of Gd forever; generation after generation I will make known Your faithfulness with my mouth. It would basically be thanking Gd for creating the world this way.

BARUCH SHE'AMAR V'HAYA HA-OLAM; BARUCH HU. BARUCH OSEH V'REISHIT - We praise Gd as the Creator par excellence and not only of our world.

BARUCH OMER V'OSEH - in order to make worlds come into being, Gd merely needs to "speak" to "say" something and then it happens.
BARUCH GOZER UMKAYEIM - and if the worlds do not conform with His desire, He decrees to have them destroyed, as we have learned: this world of B'reishit is not the first one. And by destroying those worlds, He enables the new world to exist.

BARUCH MERACHEM AL HA'ARETZ - But in order to keep this from happening again and again, Gd created this world, not with the attribute of justice, but with mercy.

BARUCH M'RACHEM AL HAB'RI-OT - Similarly, He created Man also with this attribute of mercy so that we could survive more than a moment. Additionally, in His mercy, He blessed us with HASHGACHA P'RATIT - personal supervision.

BARUCH M'SHALEIM SACHAR TOV LI-REI-AV - Another key ingredient in ensuring the survival of the world which has been placed into the hands of Man is to lay down the ground rules. Every action has a consequence. There is reward and there is punishment. We are accountable for our behavior. And the sum total of our actions will affect the survival of the world.

BARUCH CHAI LA'AD V'KAYAM LA'NETZACH - Given the eternal nature of Gd, we know He can always deliver on either side of the scale, and He will.

BARUCH PODEH U'MATZIL - We have learned that the world exists through the adherence to Torah, through the Jewish people's commitment to it. When Gd "forced" us to receive the Torah by holding Mt. Sinai over us, it was because if we would not accept it, the world would cease to exist, for this was why the world was created. 'The Holy One, Blessed be He, made a condition with the work of B'reishit: if Israel accepts the Torah, you will continue to exist. And if not, I will return you to TOHU VAVOHU - chaos' (B'reishit Rabba). But given our history in exile, we are occasionally in danger of not being around to follow the Torah. Therefore, we need Gd to be PODEH U'MATZIL - we need Gd's intervention as our Redeemer. He ensures our continuity.

BARUCH SH'MO - But when all is said and done, as much as we "know" and "understand" about Gd through His actions and 'character traits' (as enumerated in BARUCH SHE-AMAR), He is, ultimately, unknowable. And so, we can only bless His Name.
Afterthoughts
by Yocheved Bienenfeld

V'AHAVTA...

EIT HASHEM ELOKECHA B'CHOL L'VAV'CHA...

As usual, something which should have occurred to me a long time ago, only hit me recently. We say in Sh'ma, V'AHAVTA EIT HASHEM ELOKECHA B'CHOL L'VAV'CHA UVCHOL NAFSH'CHA UVCHOL M'ODECHA. And we've been taught over and over again how these three descriptions refer to the ways in which we are to serve HaShem:

B'CHOL L'VAV'CHA - as its simple meaning - with our hearts, emotionally;

UVCHOL NAFSH'CHA - even with our souls, if (Gd forbid) we are required to sacrifice our lives for Him;

UVCHOL M'ODECHA - with all our "means" - financial and material; and/or B'CHOL MIDA UMIDA... (B'rachot 54a) - no matter what mida (trait, positive or negative) with which Gd treats us, to be grateful.

Suddenly, the fact that these requirements are three in number struck me. My first thought was the three Forefathers. And with that, the three character traits that are attributed to them: GADOL, GIBOR, NORA - this is how each of them related to Gd.

What if these three B'CHOLs are meant to coincide - or even if not meant to, do - with these three attributes:

B'CHOL L'VAV'CHA - would imply unconditional love which, to my way of thinking, would be a natural and easy way to respond to a Gd Who is seen as a Gd of chessed, as Avraham did.

UVCHOL NAFSH'CHA - sacrificing our lives - which would require the trait of GEVURA (which is identified with Yitzchak) when Gd treats us with the attribute of justice and by holding back from us.

UVCHOL M'ODECHA - this would require our serving Him regardless of what He metes out to us: chessed or gevura or both, as is defined in nora, as depicted by Yaakov in his very complicated life.

Quite an interesting coincidence, or a message to us that by emulating the avot, we can learn the proper way to serve HaShem.
Thoughts on the Moon

As the Jewish people, we are acutely aware of the changing of the months. They don't just slip one into the other without notice. As one lunar month ebbs and the other comes to life, we greet it with much fanfare. The waxing and waning of the moon are noticed and celebrated with special prayers for the day and with Kiddush L'vana - the blessing of the Moon.

I've always felt that the Moon was given "short shrift" by tradition in being maligned for presenting the truth about two kings not being able to share the same crown (Rashi, B'reishit 1:16). After all, in the blessing for Kiddush L'vana, it says SASIM USMEICHIM LA'ASOT R'TZON KONAM - They are joyous and glad to perform the will of their Owner. Not only does this refer to the Sun - like a bridegroom coming out of his chamber rejoicing like a mighty man running along a path, but also to the Moon who, when told by HaShem to minimize himself, did so happily to satisfy Gd's will.

What made me feel this way was the name for the Moon - YAREI'ACH - which would imply an entity above the putative pettiness attributed to the Moon. YAREI'ACH is a word related to the spiritual: REI'ACH (smell), RU'ACH (spirit) - things that have no material essence. This seemed in direct contrast to the word for the Sun, SHEMESH, which, in my opinion, implies the material: L'SHAMEISH (to serve), hinting to MAMASH - something tangible. Even the alternate words for these orbs project a similar distinction: L'VANA (white) vs. CHAMA (hot or heat).

In addition, Rashi in Bamidbar 28:15, on the words describing the offering for Rosh Chodesh - and one he-goat for a sin offering to HaShem, says that Gd is asking us to bring a sin-offering "for Him, on His behalf" to atone for His having reduced the size of the Moon, which certainly puts the Moon on a different level and implies that Gd might 'think' (so to speak) that the Moon was correct.

Part of the Shabbat davening, I think, affirms my understanding. In Shacharit, we say HAKOL YODUCHA... - all things will thank You and all will praise You, and within that paragraph, it says: Who brings out the Sun from its place and Moon from its dwelling. The MAKOM of the sun is a set place. But the MACHON L'SHIVT'CHA of the Moon gives the impression that this is a temporary dwelling place, not its real MAKOM.

When I read in Rav Schwab on Chumash (p.481) his comments on Parshat Pinchas, it seemed to support my impression about the Moon. Rav Schwab talks about this whole idea of HaShem having reduced the size of the Moon. Among other things, he refers to a
Chazal that teaches that the Moon was originally the carrier of Or HaSh'china, the spiritual light of Creation. When the Moon "complained" that the Earth should be illuminated either by the physical light of the Sun or, if it deserved it, by Or HaSh'china, Gd removed the spiritual light from the Moon and set it aside for the future world for the tzadikim to enjoy. If, indeed, the Moon was the original "container" of this spiritual light, then my impression that there was something spiritual about the Moon is validated.

Something else that would seem to imply the spiritual nature of the Moon is the fact that the Mikdash itself is described as being in "m'chon shivta". In Az Yashir, towards the end, it says - You will bring them and plant them in the mountain of Your inheritance a place (shrine) for You to dwell. The place of the Mikdash is called machon l'shivtecha (similar to the words describing the location of the Moon). Could this imply a temporary place? Is this related to the fact that in Parshat R'ei, the place of the Mikdash is referred to 15 times and never as a Mikdash but rather as a MAKOM ASHER BACHAR HASHEM - a place that HaShem has chosen? That the place Gd decides to choose as the place for His Mikdash is not necessarily one specific spot. After all, wasn't the Mishkan in various places for different periods of time before the actual Temple was built? Maybe this is hinted to in the same verse in AZ YASHIR. First, it was in a place temporarily, a MACHON L'SHIVTECHA; and only afterward was it MIKDASH - where it emphasizes KONENU YADECHA - Your Hands established it there.

And so, it appears that not only is the Moon, indeed, of a spiritual nature but that its tenure as a mere reflection of the sun is a limited one. And Gd will return Or HaSh'china to it and we will then benefit from Two kings who will use one crown.

N.B. I humbly admit that the Kabbalistic view of the Moon isn't as forgiving or as generous as mine and explains its 'sin' very differently.
Afterthoughts by Yocheved Bienenfeld

HAMA'ALCHA MEI'ERETZ MITZRAYIM

In Parshat Sh'mini, we are told, "For I am HaShem who is bringing you up from the land of Egypt to be your Gd; and you shall be holy because I am Holy" (11:45), immediately after being informed of all the unkosher animals, etc. which we are not allowed to eat. And this verse tells us clearly that this is for the purpose of our being holy, as Gd is Holy.

Usually, when referring to the Exodus from Egypt, the Torah says HAMOTZI'ACHA or ASHER HOTZEITI - Who took you out. Rarely does it use the verb of V'HA'ALEITI or HAMA'ALEH ETCHEM - Who brought you up - as it does here. Even Rashi comments on this and says: "In all others, it writes 'and I took you out' and here it is written 'Who is bringing you up'. He references the Tanna d'vei Yishma'el who explains that had the Exodus from Egypt been for no other reason than to elevate them (VIH-YITEM K'DOSHIM) by having them distance themselves from the impurity of eating 'swarming things' - something mentioned immediately preceding this verse - it would have been sufficient.

When I searched for this phrase elsewhere, I was only able to find two other places in Tanach where it was used. One in Amos 2:10: "and I brought you up from the land of Egypt because I am HaShem" - and one in T'hilim 81:11 - "I am HaShem your Gd who brought you up from the land of Egypt; open your mouth and I will fill it."

Coincidentally, or not so coincidentally, the parsha immediately following Sh'mini is Tazria, which deals primarily with TZARAAT. As is well known, TZARAAT is linked to the sin of LASHON HARA, serving as a "supernatural" manifestation of Gd's reaction (punishment) to one who indulges in it.

As "luck" would have it, I was learning from R. Moshe Shapiro's MIMA'AMAKIM on that parsha and, as would be expected, he deals with LASHON HARA. He points out that the Egyptian exile traces its roots back to this sin, the misuse of the power of speech. When Yosef spoke LASHON HARA about his brothers to his father, it brought about the hatred of his brothers towards him, leading to his sale to Egypt. And the rest is history.

The Chida relates each of the simanim of the seder (Kadesh, urchatz, karpas...) to the length of time the Jews spent in Egypt. He says that the 10 brothers who sold Yosef for 20 pieces of silver account for 10×20=200 years and 10 more years are attributed to Yosef for having spoken lashon hara to begin with, equaling the 210 years of servitude. This is hinted to in the siman of 'matza' - a word which is related to matzusa which means machlokes - controversy.
The enslavement in Egypt, in general, is related to matters of speech. R. Shapiro points out how speech was misused when Par'o spoke about HaShem: MI HASHEM ASHER ESHMA B'KOLO? - Who is HaShem that I should listen to Him? In Par'o's name we see PEH RA (This works with Hebrew letters which we are not using because of the plain text file.) We also know that the Jews were guilty of this in Egypt. When Datan and Aviram reveal to Par'o that Moshe killed the Egyptian, Moshe concludes that this must have been the reason the Jews deserved this enslavement. Rav Shapiro explains that a fundamental point in the essence of GEULA is hinted at in the very name of this holiday: Pesach = PEH SACH - the mouth that speaks; that from now on, the mouth will be able to speak about all the wonders of HaShem, which is exactly what we are commanded to do at the Seder, showing that the PEH was no longer enslaved. And, as if to "prove" this theory, the Sfas Emes says "And every day, we need to be aided in remembering the Exodus from Egypt in order to merit the opening of the mouth. And this is seen in the juxtaposition of redemption (geula) to t'fila (shmoneh esrei).

The end of Sh'mini tells of HaShem bringing us "up" from Egypt, while the parsha following tells us of the consequences of lashon hara. The verse in T'hilim cited above, which also refers to Gd's 'bringing us up' from Egypt, is traditionally understood as HaShem telling the Jewish people that they should have learned from His taking them out of Egypt that He has the ability to satisfy their desires. Therefore, HARCHEV Picha - open your mouth and make your requests VAAMALEIHU, and I will fill them.

But given all of the above, I would like to suggest the following. Maybe the pasuk is saying: I elevated you from Egypt; therefore, when you open your mouth (learn the lesson from the enslavement) - let Me be the One Who fills it - let what you're saying reflect My Essence.

BARUCH ATA HASHEM, GA'AL YISRAEL HASHEM SEFATAI TIFTACH.
Afterthoughts
- Yocheved Bienenfeld

MATAN TORAH

In parashat Va'etchanan, after recounting the Aseret HaDibrot and the Mt. Sinai experience, the text says ET HAD'VARIM HA'ELEH DIBEIR HASHEM... MITOCH HA'EISH... KOL GADOL V'LO YASAF - HaShem spoke these words... from amidst the fire... a great voice that didn't cease. Targum Onkelos translates YASAF as PASAK - the voice did not stop. When the people approach Moshe afterwards to request that he be the go-between lest they die from hearing the voice of HaShem, they say LAMA NAMUT... IM YOSFIM ANACHNU LISHMO'A ET KOL HASHEM ELOKEINU OD VAMAT'NU - why should we die... if we continue to hear the voice of HaShem, our Gd anymore, we will die.

The p'shat, simple understanding is clearly that YOSFIM here means 'to continue'. But this word has been used in other contexts of the Torah where this meaning is not so clear. In parashat Vayeishev (32:26), the Torah tells us that after Yehuda realizes that he is the one who impregnated Tamar, V'LO YASAF OD L'DA'ATAH. Rashi tells us this can be understood in two different ways: 'there are those who say that he didn't continue (being intimate) and there are those who say that he didn't stop. In addition, we find this same split in parashat B'ha'alot'cha (11:25) when the Torah talks of the 70 elders who received the spirit of prophecy from Moshe. It says: VAYITNAB'U V'LO YASFU. Onkelos and Targum Yonatan both translate this as LO PASKU - they didn't stop prophesying.

If this is so, perhaps we can use this option to understand the sentence in Va'etchanan. Instead of it meaning "if we continue to hear His voice, we will die", we can hear a warning here: "If we POSKIM - stop - listening to HaShem, then we will die"!

Indeed.
T'SHUVA

ATA GIBOR L'OLAM...

Either when it is the time to do t'shuva officially, as from Elul through the Yamim Nora'im, or simply when I'm more aware of my need to do t'shuva and of my failure in achieving what needs to be done, I tend to see the above phrase in the Sh'moneh Esrei in a different light.

If I understand Gd's g'vura (ATA GIBOR) as described in Pirkei Avot as meaning: EIZEHU GIBOR? HAKOVEISH ET YITZRO - His MIDAT HARACHAMIM, attribute of mercy, overcoming His MIDAT HADIN, the attribute of judgement, this would address my frustration in not succeeding in doing t'shuva.

I am grateful that Gd is a GIBOR now, so that He waits for me to succeed in t'shuva and doesn't judge me for my failures. And in so doing, He is M'CHAYEI MEITIM, He is keeping alive those of us who might, otherwise, be judged severely and who would be lost. He is therefore, RAV L'HOSHIA, abundantly able to save. He saves our souls.