

Fulfilment and Fakes: Divine Navigation

Identifying Fulfilment

As an 18-year-old undergraduate at UCL, I was taught by a professor with a very Jewish-sounding name. Eventually my friend and I plucked up our courage and invited him to experience a Friday night dinner at my family home. He loved the singing, the food, the warmth... and we all loved the deep discussions about the intersection between psychology and Torah. One day he emailed me a psychological article describing two types of happiness. He mentioned that they exactly matched a Dvar Torah I'd given at the Shabbat Table!

The Dvar Torah described the differences between Sasson and Simcha. We find these in the well-loved Sheva Brachot:

בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה ה' אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם, אֲשֶׁר בָּרָא שְׂשׂוֹן וְשִׂמְחָה חֵתָן וְכֵלָה

'You, Hashem, our God, king of the universe, are the source of all blessing, Who created 'Sasson' and 'Simcha', groom and bride.'

The ensuing four expressions define 'Sasson':

גִּילָה רִנָּה דִּיצָה וְהִדְוָה

'Glad relief, glad song, dance or physical joy, intellectual burst of joy.'

All four indicate a burst of thrilling, deep, momentary joy. Sasson can therefore be defined as thrill. In Psychology, Sasson correlates with Hedonistic happiness, where the self experiences deep pleasure as a maximal feeling wave. Fabulous, glowing and exquisite.

Tehillim¹ further enlightens us about Sasson:

שֵׁשׁ אֲנֹכִי עַל-אֲמֵרֶתְךָ כְּמוֹצֵא שְׂגֵל רָב

'I was thrilled about Your words, like one who finds great spoil or booty.'

This phrase demonstrates that 'Sas', a parsed form of 'Sasson', is triggered by some kind of discovery. An external prompt. A passive happiness which finds a person and triggers a beautiful wave of thrill. Perhaps this arrives through a haunting piece of music, a new purchase, or a huge achievement.

There are two characteristics of Sasson. Firstly, one can't manufacture its feeling from nothing. It's gifted through something external. Secondly, it fades. Quite quickly.

Let's give an example. Imagine a 22-year-old who had been saving up for 2 years to buy a Model X SUV Tesla (2015). The day finally arrived for purchase, and he couldn't sleep from excitement. He proudly and slowly drove his Tesla home, shimmering with beauty.

A month later, he started noticing the new Model Y XUV Tesla (2020) that had just been released. He admired its sleek lines, its streamlined headlights and its dusky blue tones.

Within a week he was back online, scouting out the Model Y pictures and prices, and it was all he could think about.

Sasson is joyful, but it doesn't last.

Let's return to our Bracha to define 'Simcha', the second type of happiness.

This is indicated by the final four expressions of joy:

אַהֲבָה וְאַחֲוָה וְשְׁלוֹם וְרַעוּת

'Love, comradeship, peace, friendship.'

The Simcha expressions are gentler words, conveying steadier emotions. Simcha can therefore be defined as fulfilment. The words chosen are relational, involving give and take, understanding and effort. In Psychology this kind of happiness is called Eudaimonic- the

¹ Psalms 119

deep glow experienced when one's actions match one's values. This is not a high, ecstatic kind of feeling. This is a sense of inner peace and inner contentment. In fact, Rabbi S.R. Hirsch explains that שמח (fulfilment) and צמח (growth) are such similar words because they are intrinsically linked. Fulfilment stems from experiencing life as a meaningful growth journey.

Pirkei Avot² sheds more light on the characteristics of Simcha:

איזהו עשיר השמח בחלקו

'Who is wealthy? One who is happy with his portion.'

We understand from here that Simcha is achievable independent of circumstance. It is not contingent on an external factor of joy or achievement. Growth and forward movement are reachable irrespective of one's income, surroundings or beauty. For the same reason, unlike Sasson, Simcha doesn't fade, because it's not a reactionary emotion dependent on a trigger. The Mishna continues:

שנאמר (תהלים קכ"ח) יגיע כפידך כי תאכל

'As it says in Psalms, the work of your hands that you eat.'

Fulfilment is brought about by work on our part. Our choices, our actions and most of all, the growth mindset we formulate.

This concept can be demonstrated through Ash Barty, a three-time tennis grand slam champion from Australia. After her retirement she released a book describing her rocky journey to the top. As a talented youngster, she would quickly orchestrate herself into a winning position. But in her final victory game, something would happen. She would freeze and within a blink of the eye, she would lose that game. Minutes later the whole match had slipped away from her. This became a repeating pattern. Until one day, her coach told her that there was no problem between hand and racquet, but something was going on between the eyes! Ash found Ben Crowe, a mindset coach. Ben encouraged Ash to focus on tennis as a growth journey rather than a win or lose pressure. He asked her to recall joyous memories and feelings associated with tennis, and to tap into these sensations during her games. He gave her the exceptionally beautiful phrase: 'Focus on fulfilment, rather than achievement.' And paradoxically upon doing so, Ash began winning.

It now becomes clear why the directives connected to Judaism use Simcha but not Sasson:

עבדו את ה' בשמחה באו לפניו ברננה

'Serve Hashem with *Simcha*, come before him with freshness.'³

'It is a great Mitzva to be constantly in *Simcha*.'⁴

We are not asked to serve Hashem with Sasson. We are not asked to be in Sasson constantly. How can we? Sasson means thrill. It is dependent on circumstance. It is not manufacturable. But we *can* experience Simcha constantly. We can be on a meaningful growth journey with all the ups and downs that entails.

And that is called fulfilment.

It is important to stress that we cherish both Simcha and Sasson. We bless the Chatan and Kalla with both! Yet since Sasson is a transient gift and Simcha is a creatable sense of fulfilment, we will now focus on pathways to fulfilment.

² Avot 4:1

³ Psalms 100:2

⁴ Rabbi Nachman of Breslov

A Pathway to Fulfilment

Abraham Maslow (1908-1970) was a Jewish psychologist. He was the eldest of seven children belonging to impoverished Jewish immigrants in Brooklyn, NY. Growing up in the early days of tenement housing and street gangs, Abraham had a difficult childhood. He spent much of his time in libraries to escape his home life and later became a humanistic psychologist, passionate about making the world a better place.

Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs⁵ provides a theoretical framework for a life of fulfilment.



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Each level advised specific requirements for authentic fulfilment. Physiological needs included basics such as food, warmth and sleep. Security and safety required anchors of stability such as a home, employment, family structure. Love and belonging looked at connection, relationships and intimacy. Self-esteem required a person to feel they were of unique value, and self-actualisation involved the person contributing to the world in a purposeful manner that matched their skillset and passions. Interestingly, I believe there to be significant parallels with the five levels of the soul that Kabbala speaks about.⁶

Maslow posited that each level of the pyramid, beginning from the physiological needs baseline, had to be achieved before a person could focus their energy on the next one. We can appreciate that a person suffering with homelessness and searching for food will not be thinking about love and belonging and even less so about self-actualisation.

⁵ Maslow, A. H. (1943). A theory of human motivation. *Psychological Review*, 50(4), 370 -396.

⁶ Sefer Da'as Hasefiros, Pesicha

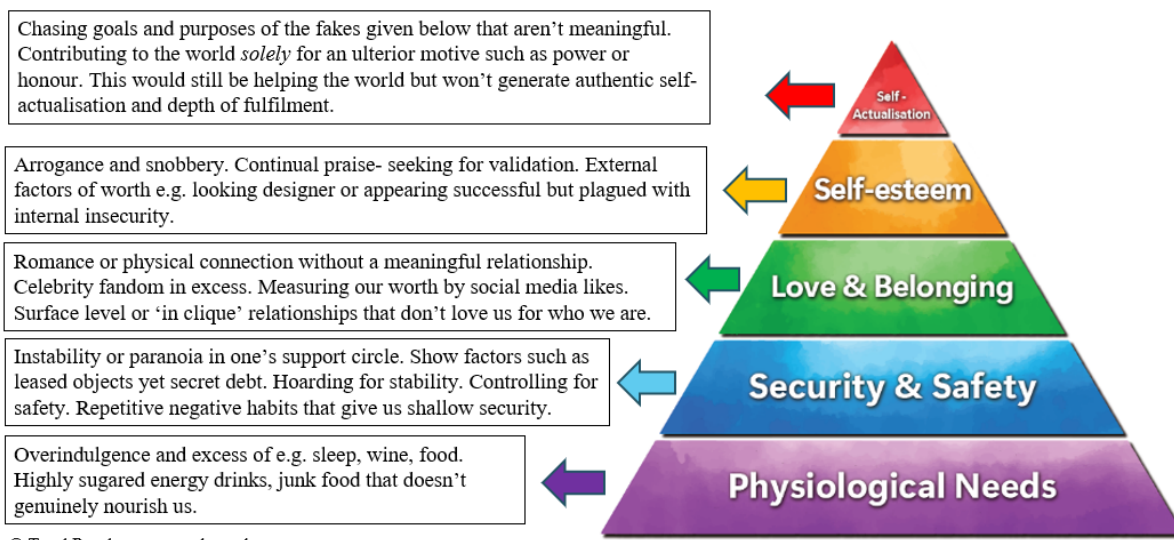
The Fakes of Fulfilment

Let's now explore how the search for fulfilment could all go wrong.

Henry Hill was a famous Mafia king who grew up admiring the local mobsters in East New York, thinking they had it all- money, respect, and no rules. He began working for the Lucchese crime family, experiencing a world where he could make thousands of dollars in a single night from hijacking. At his peak, Hill was living in a luxurious home, ostensibly 'the high life' in every sense. However, Hill lived in a state of constant anxiety. He could never trust anyone completely, including his own crew members, who were notorious for murdering people they worked with. By 1980, Hill was a nervous wreck due to heavy cocaine use and the stress of his illegal activities. In the end he was forced to turn himself in and became a government informant. Staggering about Hill's story is that even after the destruction of his life of luxury, he expressed in interviews that he still yearned for the excitement of the Mafia and would go back to it in a trice if he could.

This seems unbelievable. How could a person suffer all that anxiety, lose everything they'd built up, and still crave the life which led to their downfall! An answer can be found in the writing of the Rav of the Warsaw Ghetto (1889-1943), who wrote that the human soul craves some form of fulfilment and stimulation. If we don't gain this through lasting growth and authentic meaning, we look for a 'quick fix' version. We trick ourselves into thinking we are experiencing fulfilment, when really all we have is a counterfeit version. A fake. Yet these illusory varieties are intoxicating, and that's what could create a Henry Hill kind of yearning. The yearning therefore, is really a marker of a genuine desire for authentic fulfilment.

Let's apply this concept to Maslow's hierarchy.⁷ Below is a diagram demonstrating possible fakes of each level of fulfilment.



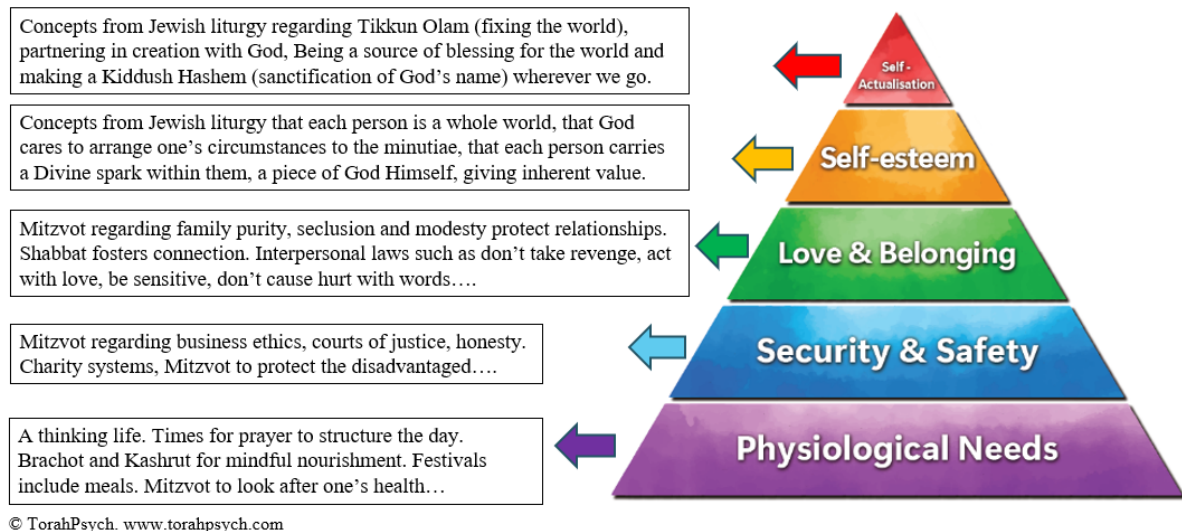
It is important to recognise that as humans we all fall into these traps, because the fake versions of fulfilment are tempting and sometimes present as the meaning we've been searching for. Therefore, getting lost in fake fulfilment sometimes is normal and fine! The important angle is that we start to recognise which version of fulfilment we tend to steer towards. This will help us begin to look in the direction of authentic meaning, as we all deserve, as opposed to chasing after the fake variety which will not ultimately satisfy.

⁷ Concept of fake variations of happiness first heard from R' Noach Weinberg Zt'l

Divine Navigation

The Divine navigation on this matter was brought home to me when I was about to start a Torah class with a friend in New York. She'd just come back from travelling on a business trip in Geneva to meet with clients and she sat down a little harried, and said, 'I can't wait to get a refresh from all the rubbish I've had to talk about! Let's do the real stuff!'

And this really is what I love about Judaism. I believe the Torah is built around a massive formula for genuine fulfilment over fake illusion. The diagram below illustrates some of the Torah's navigating guidance in this regard.



I find it so profound that the Torah offers us a sustaining path to lasting fulfilment as realised by Psychology. Positive mitzvot such as charity and prayer direct us towards fulfilment. Negative Mitzvot such as don't lie and don't commit adultery protect us from the fake varieties. Consequently, the Torah can be a precious Divine navigator for a life of fulfilment instead of fakes!

I will conclude with a short anecdote. I gave a version of this talk to an American outreach programme. At the end, a participant asked, 'Are you saying you can't be happy unless you keep the Torah?' I thought a little, and then explained that I wasn't saying that, because there is much of this search for meaning and fulfilment in the secular world too. But I do believe that whatever is found to generate growth and meaning will have its roots in a Torah value. And the Torah is the best overarching system I have ever seen for comprehensively offering a path to a life of fulfilment over fakes, encompassing every area from business to marriage to internal self-control.

It is my Bracha to us all that we live a life blessed with Sasson moments of exquisite thrill, as well as the constant Simcha of being on a fulfilling journey of growth.