

When the Stakes Are High: Gambling in the Orthodox World

By Abraham J. Twerski

I sometimes feel that it is my destiny to alert the Jewish community to things it does not want to know. First, that alcoholism is a problem in our community, then that drugs are prevalent amongst our young people, then spousal abuse, then molestation. Now I'm coming with the news that the incidence of compulsive gambling in the Orthodox world is alarming. When the voice at the other end of the receiver says, "*Gevalt!* Please help me!" I know the call is about a gambling problem.

A call today: "I don't think I can handle it anymore. We're penniless, and my three children and I are going to be evicted from our apartment. I'm tired of shlepping [my husband] to doctors. They don't do any good."

Another call, from a rabbi. To avoid a *chillul Hashem*, he paid off thousands of dollars of his son's gambling-induced debts. Now his son says that if he doesn't pay \$40,000, the mob will break his legs. I referred the father to Gamblers Anonymous and Gam-Anon Family Groups, organizations with professionals who, as graduates of

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the cruel University of Experience, know what to do and what not to do. Unfortunately, the rabbi did not listen, mortgaged his home and gave his son the money. The next call was from the gambler's sister. Now he must have \$60,000, or else. The father is broke. What should they do?

I told her that she could sell her jewelry, empty the children's savings accounts and mortgage the house so that her brother could continue gambling at the racetrack or casino and come back with a desperate demand for \$100,000.

A compulsive gambler cannot help himself. He may be in deep remorse, cry profusely, protest that he loves his family (which he really does) and make promises that he cannot keep. Psychiatrists and psychologists cannot help him (unless they have expertise in addictive gambling). Medication is ineffective. To prevent his self-destruction and the ruination of the entire family, the gambler must be guided by people with proven competence in the field.

One woman felt that she had the answer. She transferred the title of her and her husband's home to her name, as well as their bank accounts and CDs. That should take care of it, shouldn't it? Well, her husband took her ID, paid a woman \$100 to impersonate her, withdrew the money from their savings account and cashed in their CDs. Home remedies don't work.

The only thing that may bring a

compulsive gambler to his senses is hitting "rock-bottom," that is, the pain resulting from the gambling becomes great enough that the gambler is willing to do whatever it takes to overcome the addiction. When family members try to "help" by paying off the gambler's debts (believing his worthless promises that he will never gamble again) or by getting him a lawyer to extricate him from legal problems or from going to jail for credit-card fraud or check forgery, *they are removing the very things that might finally lead him to accept help.*

In the same vein that a sober alcoholic may not have even a single drink, an addictive gambler may not buy a one-dollar lottery ticket. If he does, he may be off to the races, literally.

There are residential treatment centers for compulsive gamblers, but they are quite costly, and the person must be willing to go.

If you are concerned about a family member who may have a gambling problem, *promptly* call Gam-Anon Family Groups at 877-664-2469. A volunteer who knows the ropes will refer you to the proper sources for help. Well-intended advice from family, friends and rabbis may be misleading.

Is there hope for recovery? Yes. I know recovered gamblers who, for more than thirty years, have not gambled a cent. The families of these individuals are intact and happy. They and their families adhered to professional advice and resisted the temptation to follow impulse. 