

Gambling and Chanukah

Prof. George Nathan Schlesinger



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It used to be a fairly widespread practice among young Jewish people to play cards on Chanukah. The favored game was called "kvitlach," which closely resembles the game of blackjack.

The practice of such games on Chanukah poses some important questions. Is it permissible to play a game, the outcome of which is based primarily on luck, for money? Is gambling in general permissible? Is participating in state lotteries allowed?

According to Rabbinical sources, two prohibitions may be involved in gambling. The first one applies to cases in which a winner, by taking the loser's money may

actually be engaging in a form of robbery. The loser may have convinced himself, as gamblers do, that he was destined to win, thereby failing to accept the possibility that luck wouldn't be in his favor. Therefore, by insisting that he pay up, the winner is in fact forcing the loser to relinquish money he never genuinely conceded to be his opponent's. However, as R. Moshe Isserlis has ruled (in *Shulchan Aruch* 207:13), when each player places the amount ventured openly upon the card table, then the winner may take possession of what he has legitimately acquired.

A second prohibition is implied by our sages who said "Gamblers do not con-

tribute to the common welfare" (Sanhedrin, 24b), and as Maimonides explains: since gamblers engage in idleness, it is not fitting for a man to busy himself with things that do not contribute to the settlement of the world (Hilchot Geneivah 6:8-11). This reference, however, is to professional gamblers, and not to the occasional participant.

Although generally frowned upon by our Sages, the following anecdote indicates that there is a time and place for everything!

One day the Poznaner Rebbe received a moving letter from a woman in distress. She complained that her husband was sick

and incapable of work, and that she had no means to feed her six little children. The Rebbe didn't have the money to help the despondent mother, so he embarked upon a remarkable crusade. He went to his township's merchants' club and asked permission to join the game of cards that was in progress. The request caused considerable astonishment to all those present, but of course it was granted. A few minutes into the game, the Rebbe threw the woman's letter on the table announcing "Hearts are triumphs!" All the players read the letter. Its contents plus the very special atmosphere created by the Rebbe's unprecedented visit and most surprising card

happy" (Psalms, 128:2). Living our lives expecting, even dependent upon, miracles can at times be viewed as a form of arrogance. We, as ordinary people should not pretend to deserve the granting of Divine help in a miraculous or highly improbable way, such as winning the main prize in a lottery where the odds are less than one in a million.

Such was the situation the great Gaon R. Elchonon Wasserman encountered during a trip to Manchester, England in 1937, when he met the well-known philanthropist, Mr. Shaul Rosenberg. Their meeting took place at a time when Mr. Rosenberg was suffering a disastrous finan-

ing consciousness and the use of all his faculties. His recovery created a sensation among the medical experts, one of whom exclaimed, "The chances for Mr. Rosenberg's surviving such a fierce attack were less than one in 1,000,000."

There is no record of what R. Elchonon was thinking when he deliberately gave a different blessing from that which he had been asked. It could have been that he disapproved of participating in lotteries for the reasons alluded to earlier or for reasons of his own. In any case the patient realized that he was after all, a beneficiary of a blessing to win a lottery, namely "the lottery of life" in which he regained health against the tremendous odds stacked against him.

It should be pointed out that there are situations in which, even though the stakes are very high, gambling is not only permissible but actually constitutes a mitzvah. For example, Rabbi Joseph Caro, author of the *Shulchan Aruch* (Code of Jewish Law), explains that one is obliged to risk one's life, that is to enter into a situation in which there is a considerably high probability that one may lose his life, to save someone who otherwise would certainly perish.

Of course the best known example to illustrate that gambling at high risk, with one's life is very commendable, is provided by the story of Chanukah itself. The Maccabees felt duty bound to rebel against their Greek oppressors, who were determined to abolish the practices of Judaism. By initiating an uprising, they certainly embarked on a perilous course of action. A favorable outcome was highly doubtful. It was, as we repeat in our prayers on Chanukah, an uprising of a few against the many and the weak against the mighty. But the Chashmoneans did not let themselves be guided by the practical principles of probabilities. They reasoned, that if they did not act there and then, the teachings of the L-rd and the way of life prescribed by Him were certain to be extinguished. Thus, regardless of the probability for success their path was the only one that had a chance to lead them back to G-d. Hence Mattisyahu proclaimed "All who are for the Lord, follow me."

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playing maneuver resulted in their willingly handing over all the money that had been accumulated on the table.

This story has many morals, but an incidental point to be learnt is: one may take for granted that the Poznaner Rebbe would not have joined a gang of highwaymen to acquire their loot, under any circumstances. However, to join occasional card players for a short while in pursuit of a highly commandable cause, does not amount to becoming an associate of sinners.

Undoubtedly, there is no robbery involved in accepting one's winnings from casinos or state lotteries since the money is willingly handed over. However, is it reasonable to engage in these forms of gambling? No! All wagers conducted by commercial institutions are considerably loaded against the customers, who in the indefinite long run are bound to lose. Moreover, the state should not encourage people to take it easy and indulge in pipe dreams expecting to become millionaires overnight. There is much to be said for making money the old-fashioned way, that is to say, to earn it. We are after all told "When you shall eat the fruit of the labor of your hand shall you be

cial setback, and out of desperation he had bought a lottery ticket hoping to get lucky. Cognizant of the saintly nature of R. Elchonon, Mr. Rosenberg turned to him to ask for a blessing—which he was convinced would be efficacious. R. Elchonon grabbed both the petitioner's hands and pronounced with great emotion, "Reb Shaul, as a reward for the extraordinary charitable deeds you have performed for so many years, may the Al-mighty grant you good health." Mr. Rosenberg was perplexed, but assuming that the Rabbi had misunderstood, he overcame his embarrassment and repeated his request for a blessing in connection with the lottery. He also tried to explain why he felt compelled to gain money in this way. Once more R. Elchonon firmly took hold of the man's hands and repeated his prayer for good health. Mr. Rosenberg was smart enough to realize that the Rabbi said what he said—for whatever reason—quite deliberately, and respectfully changed the subject. Three days later Mr. Rosenberg collapsed in the street, and was taken to the hospital where the doctors told his family that he had suffered a very severe stroke and may live at most a few days. Yet the patient lingered on, eventually regain-