

ABSTRACT

The Memory of Sin

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While public worry about state-sponsored lotteries has increased modestly in recent years, most Americans have long since ceased to regard gambling as morally wrong, let alone a sin. A poll by the Barna group of attitudes toward ten morally questionable practices found that 61 percent of respondents regarded gambling as morally acceptable—higher than for any other behavior surveyed. Of the major religious categories, only evangelical Christians were solidly opposed. And the same Pew study that found signs of rising public concern nonetheless reports that 71 percent continue to support state lotteries, and a majority still favors casinos. “Over the past 50 years,” writes one commentator, “gambling has gone from sin to vice to guilty pleasure and has come, finally, to be simply another point of interest on the entertainment map.”

More than a decade ago I published an essay questioning, on moral grounds, the propriety of state-sponsored gambling. It had no effect, and public opinion is the reason why. In this essay I will undertake an entirely different task—namely, trying to reconstruct the all-but-vanished outlook within which it was natural and proper to regard gambling as a vice, and perhaps even a sin. While it is easy to array core texts from many religious traditions (including Buddhism and Hinduism as well as the Abrahamic faiths) that point toward this outlook, I will focus on the tradition I know best—rabbinic Judaism. During the Talmudic period and afterward, Judaism developed a remarkably subtle analysis of the negative consequences of gambling—for individual character, interpersonal relations, and the welfare of society. Taking classic texts as my point of departure, I will restate this analysis in contemporary terms and explore its significance for future conversations within our culture.