

How Will YOU Vote?

Slots Referendum

On Election Day, a referendum will ask Maryland voters to amend our state's constitution to allow slot-machine gambling. Supporters of slot machines claim that bringing this form of gambling to our state will generate \$660 million revenue, though not for three more years, and given the current state of the economy, perhaps not nearly so soon. Any short-term monetary gain from the introduction of slot-machine gambling in Maryland will be far overshadowed by the long-term social costs to our communities. We appreciate the pressing need to raise revenue and balance the budget, but slot machines will not produce short-term revenue and will do more harm than good in the long run. It is socially and religiously irresponsible to consider only the short-term fiscal crisis but not the long-term social ramifications.

Judaism teaches us that social responsibility involves the constructive development of the world, and the support of civic institutions maintained by funds raised in appropriate ways. Gambling, in contrast with this principle, brings well-attested and deeply troubling social problems in its wake, including bankruptcy, family violence, theft, alcoholism, and divorce.

Scientific research documents the insidiously addictive nature of video slots that provide a “rapid, continuous, and repetitive” means to gamble. Moreover, video slot machines are purposefully designed with addictive qualities. Virtual reel mapping creates the illusion of the “near miss” that draws the gambler deeper into the illusion that a win is imminent.¹ The addictive nature of gambling violates Torah's precept, *lifnei iver lo titein mikhsbol* “do not place a stumbling block before the blind”² which our law expands and retitles *shelo l'hakhsil tam baderekh* “do not trip up an unsuspecting victim in the normal course.”³

Our tradition unambiguously condemns gambling, characterizing habitual gamblers as “thieves.” Moses Maimonides⁴ believed gambling to be a form of theft because the winner “takes another's money for free.” His reason follows the argument found in Talmud Sanhedrin⁵: when one gambles, one expects to win; otherwise he would not enter the game. In this way gambling is distinguished from a sales transaction, in which one party fully expects to surrender a certain amount of money in exchange for a service or object.

Gambling causes a disproportionate flow of dollars away from those who can least afford the loss: low-income people.⁶ It stokes the addiction of those who can least resist it. Slot machines will contribute nothing of value other than a questionable short-term boost to state coffers, at great cost to the fabric of families and communities. There are more constructive and appropriate ways to accomplish.

As former Attorney General J. Joseph Curran, Jr. concluded in his report *The House Never Loses and Maryland Cannot Win*, “the enormous costs of slot machine gambling would, in the long run, outweigh the benefits to the State. As tempting as the short-term infusion of cash would be at a time of budget constraints, I urge Maryland politicians to resist solving immediate fiscal problems by creating far greater difficulties over the long term. Expanding gambling would saddle future generations with the wide-ranging social harms and economic costs that would flow inevitably from this addictive activity. We can and must find better ways to address the needs of our citizens.”

¹R. B. Breen, “Rapid Onset of Pathological Gambling in Machine Gamblers: A Replication,” *International Journal of Mental Health & Addiction*, vol. 2, No. 1, pp. 44-49.

²Deuteronomy 19:14.

³*Sefer HaChinnukh, mitzvah*, further instructs that we are to exert a positive influence on people and lend them constructive advice in order to improve the world.

⁴Rambam, *Mishneh Torah*, “Laws of Theft and Loss,” chapter 6, and “Laws of Testimony,” chapter 10, point out that our Sages forbade gambling, often considering it tantamount to theft because the money surrendered (even willingly) was taken without payment on a gamble. Even as entertainment, Rambam notes, the Sages forbade gambling as a waste of human time and talent.

⁵Talmud B. Sanhedrin 24b: A dice-player (i.e. gambler) may not serve as either a witness or judge. Two reasons are given. Rami bar Hama disqualifies the gambler because the agreement is an *asmakhta* wherein each player consents to the terms of the game only because he expects to win. Rav Sheishet did not consider the gambler a thief, but disqualifies him because he is not a constructive member of society.

⁶Prof. Melissa Kearney, “State Lotteries and Consumer Behavior” (2002) demonstrates that state-sponsored gambling leads to a substantial increase in gambling. Moreover, poor people spend as much, on average, as those who are more affluent; however, their spending on gambling represents a larger share of income, including family funds needed for food and housing. We are concerned that what is true for lottery gambling will prove true for slot machines as well.

⁷J. Joseph Curran, Jr., *The House Never Loses and Maryland Cannot Win: Why Casino Gaming is a Bad Idea*, presented to the Joint Executive-Legislative Task Force to Study Commercial Gaming Activities in Maryland (October 16, 1995).

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