

Has Life Become a Lottery?

Posted December 10, 2013 by Rabbi Judy Abrams. Copyright © 2013 Judith Z. Abrams

BH

The lottery prize is big enough that they are talking about it on the news so it raises the question: does God participate in picking lottery winners? The first thing we must determine is, does Judaism approve of gambling? The sages didn't exactly trust gamblers: they are not allowed to testify or be judges:

These are the people ineligible to be witnesses or judges:
a gambler with dice,
a moneylender [like a payday lender],
pigeon racers [i.e., gamblers on sports events],
those who deal in sabbatical year produce
and slaves.

Rabbi Shimon said: earlier, they listed harvesters of sabbatical year produce but since the increase of oppressors, they returned to list only dealers in sabbatical year produce.

Rabbi Yehudah said: when do these restrictions apply? When he has no profession but those listed. But if he has another profession, he can give testimony and/or be a judge.

(*M. Sanhedrin* 3:6)

Let's go through the mishnah's list so we can be sure we understand it.

The gambler may be desperate for money, so he could be easily bribed.

The payday lender has shown that he has no respect for the Torah, which forbids him to lend money at usurious rates, so we have no reason to believe he would keep to the Torah's rules about giving true testimony.

The pigeon racer is someone who bets on sporting events. (People still race pigeons today. See <http://sportsillustrated.cnn.com/vault/article/magazine/MAG1109189/index.htm>.) Again, the idea is that they will gamble and be desperate for money, making them easy to bribe.

Those who deal in sabbatical year produce have also shown a disregard for the rules. Every seventh year, fields aren't planted and whatever grows of its own accord (e.g., fruit on a tree) is for the poor and may not be bought or sold.

The slave (don't shoot the messenger!) is not considered a person in this system, so their testimony holds no weight.

Then the mishnah gives us an insight into life under the Romans. The Romans want everyone to harvest their produce every year so they can tax it. So the sages amend their original teaching and disqualify only those who buy and sell the produce of a sabbatical year.

Rabbi Yehudah also loosens the restrictions by saying that if one is only an occasional gambler, then one may give testimony and/or act as a judge. The last two sentences of the mishnah show that there is some leniency built into the system.

Discussion Questions

1. So...what would Judaism think of you playing the lottery? Would it make you untrustworthy in the eyes of our sages?
2. Is the lottery itself a form of usury? Should you not play on that account?

3. The stories regarding winners of big lottery jackpots are legendary: many people end up broke and/or unhappy. If you won the lottery, what would you have to do to make sure you didn't end up miserably unhappy?

4. **MOST IMPORTANT QUESTION:** this past weekend I was a scholar-in-residence at a synagogue in Albuquerque. A tenth-grader made a truly insightful comment about my generation and his. He noted that the problem for my generation was breaking through barriers. The problem for his generation is that, to them, life is like a lottery. They may have the skills and the brains but they simply may not have the opportunity to succeed. How can we give this generation a real chance for meaningful work and a fulfilling life? How can we make it more like a race anyone can win and less like a lottery where no one has a realistic hope of winning?

As always, I look forward to your thoughts and insights!