

Dear Chavraya,

The most controversial sermon I have ever given was not about the Middle East, nor about war and peace and my opposition to militarism, nor was it about gender and sexuality, nor any number of other issues likely to challenge popular beliefs and mores. It was about bingo, as in B-I-N-G-O, that game of chance that can be an innocent children's game with pictures of animals and fruits to be matched on cards, or, in a very different context, of numbers and money and cigarette smoke, a lucrative communal fundraiser. Bingo had been proposed as a fundraiser for the Jewish community of Victoria, British Columbia. Deeply disturbed by the prospect of gambling as a means of fund-raising, as the High Holy Days approached I weighed whether to speak to the challenge. I decided not to, that it was just too controversial to touch during such holy days, days of people coming together, all as one.

During the week before Yom Kippur that year, a financial scandal broke, one of insider trading that involved a number of prominent Jewish philanthropists. In an article in the Jewish press, the writer asked, "where are the rabbis?" Suddenly, I realized that I had to speak to the moral and ethical concerns raised by bingo, that this is what the Days of Awe require of us, to do *cheshbon h'nefesh*, an accounting of the soul. It was indeed about accounting, looking hard at the question of money, of fundraising in an ethical context. It was not about whether people enjoyed small time gambling among friends, not meant to be judgmental on a personal level, but to explore questions of communal responsibility in relation to our selves and others. What are the values we want to convey and represent, to our children, to the world around us? I struggled with the prospect of giving this sermon, with how I would frame it. Drawing from an exhortation that appears above the Holy Ark in many synagogues, I called the sermon, "Know Before Whom You Stand." I delivered the sermon on Kol Nidre night, in fear and trembling. Working carefully toward the immediate issue, I explored what it means to sanctify God's name in all that we do, in the market place and in the thoroughfares of life. I spoke of the financial scandals that had shamed us all. I asked what it meant to pursue truth and justice, to live lives of meaning as Jews and human beings. And then I arrived at the matter closest to home. As it became clear where I was going, a large contingent of people rose noisily to their feet and stormed out of the synagogue. I was horrified, a gasp going up from around the sanctuary. I waited quietly until a semblance of order returned, and then I continued.

As I continued to the end, tearful and pleading, I urged that we be the best of who we are meant to be, that we embody the highest values of Jewish tradition, that we know before Whom we stand. I challenged rationalizations and justifications that suggest we are providing a pleasurable outlet or social connection. I wrote then: "The goal of a bingo game, based on the lure of winning, is to get people to spend their money on our behalf with little in return, money which very often they would be better off holding onto.... I do not want my community to encourage others to gamble for our gain, a community whose teachings are based on concern for others and on truth.... I want the best that we are to shine forth, that it be said of us, "How goodly are your tents, O, Jacob, your dwelling places, O, Israel."

As the mid-term elections approach and the various ballot questions, I have thought about that sermon this week in relation to controversy around ballot question 3. A "yes" vote is for repeal of the casino law in Massachusetts. For more information on opposition rooted in faith, you can go to [www.faithforrepeal.com](http://www.faithforrepeal.com). The impact of Casinos on individual lives and on the social fabric is far greater than a synagogue bingo game. While the state of Massachusetts is not a religious community, as a Commonwealth it is indeed about how we weave lives together and support the common good without bringing harm to any in the process. It is about the values and the tone and the tenor of the society in which we live, about the values of money and ways of living that we convey to our children. I also think of this issue in relation to a challenge offered in this week's Torah portion, *Parashat Lech L'cha*. Avram and Sarai are told to go forth. Taking the first steps on their journey, God tells them, *ve'h'yeh b'racha/be a blessing!* Whether as members of a religious community or as members of a commonwealth of citizens, we are challenged to bring the best of who we are to fruition, to be a blessing. Drawing from later in the Torah, as the way of blessing becomes concretized in law, I expressed this recently as part of a press release for "Faith for Repeal:"

"The Torah commands, "do not place a stumbling block before the blind," (Leviticus 19:14), a commandment through whose "far-reaching import," Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch (19th cent. Germany) "cautions against any act... that could in any manner endanger the material or moral welfare of another." Casinos are a stumbling block that endanger the wellbeing of many, for whom we are all responsible. For people of faith, life is not a game of chance, but a cooperative effort to bring out the best in each other for the sake of the common good."

Toward creating a society that expresses the finest ways of human connection and concern in all that we do, seeking consistency between financial means and ends, as in all realms of life, so may we be a blessing.

Shabbat shalom,  
Rabbi Victor