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Letters to the Editor

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Gambling addictions

Regarding your piece on Rabbi Michael Sternfield's gambling problem, the prevalence of gambling addiction has only recently begun to rear its ugly head as at least a dozen stories of crimes committed by clergy, politicians and prominent members of our communities have surfaced in the past year. Gambling addicts suffer even greater stigma than alcoholics and drug abusers, as they are often viewed as having moral failings and criminal tendencies, while substance abusers "just can't help themselves."

Personally, I don't know of any compulsive gambler who chooses this addiction or consciously decides crimes associated with feeding this habit (typically embezzlement and theft) are acceptable.

The case of Sternfield, a prominent rabbi living with the awful, dirty secret of gambling addiction, has a different spin in that he sought help through self-exclusion — the gaming industry's "help" for problem gamblers for which casino operators bear virtually no liability. Self-exclusion involves notifying gambling purveyors of the desire to irrevocably be banned from casinos at the risk of arrest.

At best, this is a half-hearted, unenforceable effort designed by the gaming industry to allegedly protect addicts. In reality no one checks the identity of casino patrons when they enter the premises, lay bets on tables or play slots for hours or even days on end. Casinos admit that procedures for identifying problem gamblers are unenforceable.

Sternfield certainly bears responsibility for violating his own self-exclusion request, and he was aware of the potential consequences. His crimes were trespassing and identity deception — minor offenses in comparison to the millions that have been stolen through embezzlement and fraud by many other such addicts. His greatest crime was asking for help. As a result, he lost his job and his reputation.

But where is the accountability on the part of the casinos? Their obligation seems to only kick in when the self-excluded gambler wins, meaning the casino loses money. Shouldn't they bear greater responsibility to protect their patrons?

Gambling addiction will not go away; in fact, as the media continue to glamorize gambling via movies and televised tournaments, the problem will only become worse and our teens are the next target. Those who push for legalized online gambling insist that they can regulate and minimize use by problem gamblers. If we can't help them in person, can we really believe in foolproof safeguards on line?

— *Susan Rifkin, Skokie*