

Fourteenth Greater Sin: Gambling

Gambling is the fourteenth Greater Sin. The following statements support this view. The Holy Qur'an states in Surah al-Baqarah:

“They ask you about intoxicants and games of chances. Say: in both of them there is a great sin...”(Surah al-Baqarah 2:219)

“Ithm al-kabir” means a very great sin. The Holy Qur'an has used this phrase only for drinking and gambling.”

The tradition related by Fazl Ibn Shaz^{an} from Imam 'Ali ar-Ri^{za} (a.s.) also included gambling among the Greater sins. Similarly, gambling is clearly mentioned as a Greater Sin in the tradition related by Amash from Imam Ja'far as-Sadiq (a.s.).

Imam Ja'far as-Sadiq (a.s.), is reported to have told Abu Basir:

“It is Har^{am} to sell chess. It is Har^{am} to spend the income of this sale. To keep chess (board and pieces) in ones possession is tantamount to kufr (disbelief). To play chess is equal to ascribing partners to Allah. It is a sin even to salute one who plays chess. One who touches it in order to play it, it is, as if he has contaminated his hands by touching pork.”¹

The same tradition is recorded in the book *Man La Yahzarul Faqih* with the addition inter alia that:

“To teach chess to others is also a kind of destructive sin.”

It is related from Imam Ja'far as-Sadiq (a.s.):

“Allah pardons all the sinners in the month of Ramadhan except Three kinds of people; those who drink wine, those who gamble and those who harbour enmity and avarice towards a Muslim.”

Another proof is the following verse of Qur'an, which shows that gambling, is a Greater Sin:

“O you who believe! Intoxicants and (Maesir) games of chance and divining (azlam) by arrows

are only an uncleanness, the Shaitan's work; shun it therefore that you may be successful.

(Surah al-M'ida 5:90)

What do 'Maesir' and 'Azlam' Denote?

Games of chances that are mentioned in this Qur'anic verse include all types of gambling. The Arabic equivalent to this is "*Maesir*" which is derived from the root word "*yusur*" which means 'ease'. Since a gambler does not perform a laborious work and is able to easily grab the money belonging to others, gambling is called "*Maesir*".

"*Azlam*" is a game of chance that is played with dice. Actually, there used to be special pieces of wood which were used in gambling. *Azlam* is also known as "*aqḷam*". The gamblers used to purchase a camel and divide the meat of the slaughtered camel into twenty-eight parts. Ten pieces of arrow-shaped wood were kept at the venue of gambling. Each piece had a specific name. The names of seven of those pieces were *faz*, *tawḳm*, *raqḳb*, *halas*, *nafis*, *masbal* and *mualla*. Specific portion of meat was allotted to each of the arrows.

For example *faz* was equal to one portion and *mualla* had seven portions. The meat that had been divided into twenty-eight pieces was distributed only to these ten pieces of wood. Some of the arrows were such that no meat was allotted to them and in fact those who got them had to reimburse the cost of camel in full. The total of participants in this game was ten, and the Three unlucky ones were expelled. The Three unlucky arrows were named "*manaj*, *safih* and *raghad*".

'*Azḳm*' is a kind of a wager whereas '*Maesir*' includes all forms of gambling. *Azḳm* is mentioned specifically because it was popular before the advent of Islam. Other methods of *azḳm* are also recorded but irrespective of the method, all types of wagers are *Harḳm*. Wine, gambling, idol worship and *azḳm* are all satanic works. Involving oneself in these would deprive the person of salvation and success in the hereafter. It is therefore commanded not to even go near wine and gambling.

Gambling and Wine Cause Avarice and Enmity

"The Shaitan only desires to cause enmity and hatred to spring in your midst by means of intoxicants and games of chance..." (Surah al-M'ida 5:91)

It is common knowledge that a man loses his senses under the influence of alcohol and in this condition behaves in a most indiscreet manner. He is therefore bound to create enemies due to his shoddy behaviour. Drunkards are also known to murder their own family members and friends.

As far as gambling is concerned, enmity between the participants is the most natural outcome in a game of chance. The person who loses his money to his opponent is bound to resent him and have a feeling of vengeance and there is bound to be a winner and a loser. The dominating influence on the gamblers

is that of hatred and enmity.

Gambling Causes Voluptuousness and Sensuality

A person who wins in gambling makes a lot of easy money. Obviously, he looks for ways and means for self-indulgence to splurge his ill-gotten wealth. In fact, profit from *Harām* means paves the way towards further unlawful evils. Avarice is the characteristic of all gamblers. The gambler who wins is so obsessed that he wagers more around larger profits. The loser is equally obsessed to win back what he has lost.

Such compulsive obsessions have disastrous consequences. The book "*Balaha al-ijtemai*" page 231 contains an incident where an inhabitant of an Iranian town stabbed his opponent thrice and killed him. The accused gave the following statement: "The victim has grabbed a lot of my money through gambling. He was not prepared to lay another bet despite my persuasion and ran away. I followed and killed him."

On page 325 of the same book, the following is quoted from the magazine "*Roshan Fikr*". "In the town of Monte Carlo, Argentina, a gambler lost around forty hundred thousand *tumans* in a game that lasted for sixteen hours. When the casino closed, he drove his car to the forest and shot himself in the head."

Incidents of suicide are common in the woods surrounding Monte Carlo. Most often, those who arrive in this city to gamble lose all their money. Sometimes, they cannot even pay for their return journey. Such people go into the woods and commit suicide. One of the casinos has decided to loan the return fare to those who lose all their money.

The weekly magazine of 'Ittelat Daily' No. 1060 contains the following item.

"Suicides due to gambling are on the increase according to the available statistics. More suicides were committed in this year (1361 solar) compared to the number in previous years. The casino owners have, as a result named this as the 'unlucky year'. In the previous year, 120 people committed suicide after losing in Paris. The statisticians of America state that the cause of thirty percent of all crimes is gambling."²

It is noticed that most of the criminals like robbers, pickpockets and murderers commit crimes after leaving their gambling dens.

Forgetting Allah (S.w.T.)

Alcohol and gambling are vices leading to spiritual bankruptcy. These offenders are oblivious of Allah (S.w.T.) and of their duties towards their Creator. Living in a state of forgetfulness of Allah (S.w.T.) is the worst tragedy that befalls the unfortunate victims of these vices.

"...And to keep you off from the remembrance of Allah and from prayer..." (Surah al-M'ida 5:91)

An alcoholic in a state of intoxication is in no condition to remember Allah (S.w.T.) and he abandons even an obligation like *Salaṭ*. In the same way, the craze of a gambler to obtain wealth or make up for his losses is all consuming and he loses awareness of all obligatory acts including prayers. In order to stress this point, Allah (S.w.T.) continues in the same verse:

“Will you then desist?” (Surah al-Mʿida 5:91)

It means that even after being informed of the demerits of these vices, will you still not reform?

The next verse continues the emphasis:

“And obey Allah and obey the apostle and be cautious. But if you turn back, then know that only a clear deliverance of the message is (incumbent) on your apostle.” (Surah al-Mʿida 5:92)

In this way, the argument is completed. Now, you cannot say that you have not been warned.

Now, we shall describe some forms of gambling.

Objects of Gambling and Laying of Bets

There is a universal agreement among the Mujtahids that articles normally used in gambling should not be played with, even if one is not gambling. The tradition mentioned previously which states that one who touches chess is like one who smears his hand in pork; continues,

“The prayers of chess-players are not valid till they wash their hands after the game. And to watch a game of chess is like looking at the genitals of one’s own mother.”³

Imam Ja’far as-Sadiq (a.s.) on being inquired concerning chess replied:

“Leave the preoccupations of the fire-worshippers to them.”

That is, Muslims should not even go near chess.

In another tradition, Imam (a.s.) says:

“Do not even approach chess.”

The tradition from the book, *Tohafful Uqūl* distinctly states that the articles employed in gambling cannot be used for any purpose whatsoever and it is *Harām* to do so.

“All the tools and actions of gambling are *Harām*.”

Hazrat Imam Muhammad al-Baqir (a.s.) has said:

“All kinds of games of betting are gambling and the sale, the purchase and the use of all the tools of

gambling are *Harām*. It is only an act that Shaitan instigates you to do.”⁴

Chess and cards should not be indulged in even when played only for intellectual stimulation games with no intent to gamble. These games have an inherent power to obsess the player till he becomes oblivious of his responsibilities towards his family and even his livelihood. Such all-consuming activities lead to the disruption of an otherwise happy family life. Shaitan also will not lose the opportunity to incite the players to play for stakes. Very soon, the game started as an intellectual exercise will slip into a game for making money. The only effective way to eradicate gambling from society is to stay clear of such games as commanded by our Imam (a.s.). Hence, Islam has declared that to manufacture the tools of gambling is *Harām*; to buy or sell them is *Harām* and to spend from the profits of these transactions is *Harām*. It is *Harām* even to have the tools of gambling in one's possession. It is obligatory to destroy them.

Ishaq Ibn Ammar asked Imam Ja'far as-Sadiq (a.s.) that children play with eggs and cashew nuts in the same way as gambling? Imam (a.s.) told him:

“Do not even eat these things!”

The following verse of the Divine Book ordains the income of gambling to be *Harām* and makes it obligatory upon the person who wins to restore the amount back to the person who lost it.

“O you who believe! Do not devour your property among yourselves falsely...?” (Surah an-Nisā’ 4:29)

Playing Games of Chance Without Betting

We know from the above discussion that to play with articles used in gambling even without betting is *Harām*.

To sit and watch the game is also *Harām*. The practice of *Nahy anil Munkar* makes it obligatory on us to leave the place where people are gambling. It is recommended (*mustahab*) that if perchance our eyes fall upon an article of gambling, we should remember Imam Husain (a.s.) and curse Yazid (l.a.).

Fazl Ibn Shazān reports from Imam ‘Ali ar-Riḡā (a.s.), “At the time the blessed head of Husain Ibn ‘Ali (a.s.) was carried into Shām, Yazid (l.a.) started to dine and drink barley wine (similar to modern day ‘beer’) with his associates. After the meal, Yazid (l.a.) ordered the blessed head to be kept in a salver and placed at the foot of his throne. A chessboard was spread out and the accursed Yazid sat down to play chess. During the game, he ridiculed Imam Husain (a.s.), his father (a.s.) and grandfather (S). Whenever he won a game, he used to take hold of the barley wine and drink Three goblets. Then he used to pour the remaining wine in the salver upon the head of Imam Husain (a.s.).”

Hazrat Imam ‘Ali ar-Riḡā (a.s.) then continues, “Whoever is our Shia must abstain from barley wine and

chess. One who sees barley wine or chess must remember Imam Husain (a.s.) and invoke curse upon Yazid and the progeny of Yazid. If a Shia does this, Allah the Almighty will forgive all his sins even if they are more numerous than the stars.”⁵

Betting With Articles Not Normally Used For Gambling

To lay bets with articles not usually employed in gambling is also *Harām*. Archery and horse racing are exceptions to the extent that it is permissible only for those who participate in the sports to bet amongst themselves. Apart from these two games it is *Harām* to bet in any other competition. For example, yatching, weightlifting, lancing etc. The income of the participant who wins is *Harām*. He must return it to his opponent.

Horse racing and Archery

It is undoubtedly permissible for participants (and not for spectators) in horse racing and archery to bet among themselves. The winner can rightfully own the amount he wins. Islam has permitted these two competitions because such sports contribute to the overall capabilities of a warrior, and a Muslim well versed in these is better equipped to challenge his adversaries. The details could be pursued in the books of legal rulings.

Shahīd Thani in his book “*Masalik*” quotes the unanimous verdict of the Mujtahids. Three traditions are recorded in the book “*Al-Wafi*” from Imam Ja’far as-Sadiq (a.s.) which state that except for horse racing and archery whenever a game is played for stakes, the angels are infuriated and curse the people who lay the bet.

It is recorded that the Holy Prophet (S) said:

“Angles are present when a competition of horse and camel racing or archery is held. Except for these Three, every competition is gambling and (also) *Harām*.”⁶

In another tradition, the Holy Prophet (S) has prohibited all types of competitions except these Three.

“Except for horse racing, camel racing and archery, no contest is proper.”⁷

An authentic tradition by Muhammad Ibn Qays related from Imam Muhammad al-Baqir (a.s.) says:

“Amir ul-Mu’minīn ‘Ali (a.s.) issued a verdict against a man who had wagered with his friends on the maximum consumption of sheep’s meat. Issuing the judgement Imam (a.s.) said, ‘If you have already eaten the sheep, it is yours. But if you have only laid a bet and have not commenced eating, then you have to pay a penalty. This penalty is equal for all the participants and has no connection with who ate more or less. However, he refrained the loser to bear any loss (of money etc.). The one who ate the least and lost the bet will not incur any loss because the bet is invalid.’”

Imam Muhammad al-Baqir (a.s.) concludes that Amir ul-Mu'minīn (a.s.) has decreed such a deal to be *Harām*.⁸

Hazrat Jabir (r.a.) narrates from the report of Imam Muhammad al-Baqir (a.s.) who has quoted from the Holy Prophet (S):

“Every competition is gambling where the loser has to pay a certain amount. Even if it consist of a cashew–nut or wager dung.”

To employ any article for the purpose of taking a bet is gambling even if such an article is not generally associated with gambling.

Game Without Wager

There is some difference of opinion among the Mujtahids regarding the games of competition that neither use tools of gambling nor are played with stakes. Most of the jurists consider such competitions to be *Harām*.

Allama Hilli (r.a.) in his book “*Tazkerah*” writes, “Yatching competition is not permitted even if the loser may not have to pay anything. This is the unanimous verdict of the scholars.”

Allama Hilli (r.a.) also states, “Competition of throwing stones with ones bare hands is not allowed. In the same way, racing any beast except horse and camel, yatching or racing of birds is not permitted even if a monetary bet is not involved. Cockfights and goat fights are also prohibited. In short, all those contests are prohibited that do not contribute usefully in the field of *Jihad*. For example, standing on foot for a long time, guessing games or number games, staying under water for a long time. In conclusion, except for horse racing and archery, no competition is permitted. Whether it involves a bet or not.”

Certain Jurists like Shahīd Thani do not consider such games *Harām* where the tools of gambling are not used and where a bet is not involved. He is inclined to permit such competitions. This opinion appears to be valid especially for a contest where the *Harām* aspects of our religion are not compromised in any way or for a contest which has a specific aim like competition of calligraphy, reading, sewing, building, farming, etc. Athletics and boating can also be in the same category. But since most of the Mujtahids have prohibited all competitions except horse racing and archery, it is better to refrain from contests as a precautionary measure.

However even contests that can be considered permissible are prohibited if they involve a risk. For example, hazardous car–racing competition or gluttony and the dangerous methods of yatching are all *Harām* for they involve risks.

Purchase of lottery tickets in the name of charity, where the money is not refundable and only a few people win money without any effort, is *Harām*. It is gambling and a very great sin.

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1. Wasa'il ul-Shia. Chapter on Business Transactions
 2. Balahae al- Ijtemai page 329.
 3. Wasa'il ul-Shia. Chapter of Business Transactions
 4. Tafsir al-Qummi
 5. Uyūn al-Akhabār ar-Ri'āa
 6. Al-Wafi
 7. Al-Wafi
 8. Makasib, quoted from al-Kāfi and Tehzīb

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