Early in our marriage, my husband and I would sometimes attend events hosted by the Young Leadership division of our local United Jewish Appeal. Every holiday, there would be some sort of event. One Purim, the activity was a gambling night with games like poker or a crown and anchor wheel that had been rented for the occasion. Every attendee received a pile of Monopoly money with which to bet, and, at the end of the night, people could bid on various items in an auction using the ‘money’ we had won (or that we had left, depending on our luck that evening). In retrospect, it is somewhat disquieting to think of how engaged with it some people were, yelling and waving their ‘money’ above their heads. It was that event that kept coming to mind as I read Annette B. Dunlap’s book *The Gambler’s Daughter: A Personal and Social History*, since it fits squarely into the history of the American Jewish community and its relationship to gambling that she traces.

Dunlap grew up as the daughter of a compulsive gambler and this very personal and honest memoir grew out of a desire to find responses to the three basic questions theologians say people want answered: ‘Where did I come from? Who am I? Where am I going?’ (3) However, she soon comes to the conclusion that her story cannot be understood without relating it to the wider social history of Jews and gambling. The result is an exploration not only of her family’s history with gambling and the pernicious effects it had on them, but also an eye-opening study of how the Jewish community has dealt with gambling.

Dunlap opens her book with a chronicle of her early years, starting in 1967 when she is twelve. She grows up in Pittsburgh’s Squirrel Hill district, one of the two areas in the city where Jews are concentrated. Her father’s inability to refrain from gambling overshadows her summer, though at the time she does not know this is the problem. When bookies pursue her father, he uses her as a shield, ordering her to answer the phone and tell anyone who asks that he is not home. He sends her weekly to pick up the mail at a postal box he has rented without his wife’s
knowledge with the admonition, “Don’t show anything to your mother”. (8) Dunlap’s parents have an acrimonious relationship, constantly fighting over money. A long summer of deception and fighting over her father’s gambling comes to a head when a sheriff’s deputy turns up on their doorstep looking to repossess the family’s furniture. After somehow preventing the deputy from taking their furniture, her mother matter-of-factly tells her that her father is a compulsive gambler. Dunlap learns that this is why there is never any money for extras even though both parents work full-time and her father usually has an additional part-time job.

The rest of her adolescence and young adulthood are spent trying to come to terms with her father’s gambling and its impact on her life. Recognising that she is emotionally broken, she speaks to counsellors and after finding Judaism lacking, tries to find a spiritual home that speaks to her, even turning for a while to a Protestant church that seems to offer her what she needs. None of them help her overcome her depression and a childhood spent with a compulsive gambler. Only in 1985, at the age of thirty, is she finally able to start working through her past after she finds a book describing the habits of a compulsive gambler and recognizes the life she lived and its continuing effects.

Two major themes run through *The Gambler’s Daughter*. The first is the lifelong impact that a compulsive gambler can have on his family. Reminiscing about her father’s life and gambling habits with her mother after his death, she is surprised to learn that her maternal grandfather was also involved in gambling as a numbers runner and a bookie. The difference, as her mother explains it, is that her grandfather saw gambling as a job and used his income from his activities to provide a high standard of living for his family, while her husband’s compulsive gambling put his family in constant jeopardy. Ironically, Dunlap’s grandfather comes to use the money he earns from his own gambling activities to pay off her father’s gambling debts. Dunlap wonders if her mother subconsciously looked for someone like her father, only to find a man who was unable to control his compulsion.

The other major theme of Dunlap’s book is the invisibility of gambling addiction. Unlike other addictions such as drugs and alcohol, there is no physical manifestation of the problem. There is no slurring of speech, or the behaviors that come with being high or drunk. A compulsive gambler can be thousands of dollars in debt, and have just placed yet another bet.
with their bookie, but walk in the door with a smile and no one will be the wiser. This invisibility not only leaves the families of problem gamblers in the dark, but also makes it more difficult for an addict to admit a problem.

As Dunlap argues, this hiddenness has slowed gambling’s acceptance as a mental health issue, leading to lags in diagnosis and treatment. Dunlap cites the fact that the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual used by doctors only began listing compulsive gambling as a disorder in the third edition produced in 1980. Since then, the definition has gone through many revisions, switching from an impulse control disorder to a mental illness to being classified as a maladaptive behavior (149). This inability to define problem gambling clearly, Dunlap points out, has resulted in it not normally being included in studies on addiction, leaving health practitioners little research to rely on when trying to treat the problem.

Just as the medical community has struggled to address problem gambling so too have Jewish leaders. The second chapter of is an absorbing history of the relationship between Jews and gambling, going from Adam and Eve and the risk they took by eating the apple to Talmudic injunctions against gambling to the inability of both medieval Jewish rabbis and modern Jewish mental health organizations to understand and deal with gambling addiction. It is a history that highlights the ambivalence with which gambling has been regarded by the Jewish community.

Dunlap is troubled by this complicated history. On the one hand, she argues, Jewish leaders have tried to ignore problem gambling, doing little to address it within community mental health programs. On the other hand, and as my own story demonstrates, gambling has long been tacitly endorsed by Jewish leaders and organizations as a fundraising strategy, whether through gambling evenings such as my husband and I experienced, or through Monte Carlo nights or even events such as raffles.

*The Gambler’s Daughter* is a fascinating read, but there are a couple of criticisms, one minor and one fairly major. The minor criticism is that the book would have benefited from the inclusion of pictures and particularly street maps. As she traces her family’s history through the early 20th century in America, she talks about a variety of places where her family lived and gambled – New York’s Lower East Side, Coney Island, Pittsburgh – and detailed street maps would have helped to personalize the story. As for pictures, there is a single photograph of her
parents at the very beginning of the book, but I would have liked to put faces to the names of at least some of the people she discusses.

The major issue is Dunlap’s assertion near the end of the book that, “Gambling appears to be a peculiarly Jewish addiction. The per capita incidence of problem gambling within the Jewish community is greater than its occurrence in the general population.” (163) She cites Rabbi Dr. Abraham Twerski, who says that in Florida, a place with a high Jewish retiree population, Gamblers’ Anonymous meetings are usually 90% Jewish. (163) However, this is her only proof. The invisibility of compulsive gambling and its absence from studies on addiction, points that Dunlap makes herself, mean that statistics on gambling that include demographic information such as ethnicity or religion are difficult to come by. This lack of hard data makes difficult these sorts of blanket statements; at this point, we simply have no way of knowing if gambling is more prevalent among the Jewish population than in other groups.

These two concerns aside, Annette Dunlap’s *The Gambler’s Daughter: A Personal and Social History* is an intriguing and highly personal trip through her family history with a hidden disease, and a revealing walk through the social history of Jews and gambling. The raw honesty with which she portrays her family history, her childhood and her relationships with her parents leaves nothing to the imagination.

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1 In her footnotes, Dunlap states that she intentionally uses ‘compulsive gambler’ instead of the term ‘pathological gambler’, which is the preferred term of the mental health community today. She does this for two reasons: first because that is the term that was used until relatively recently, and second, because she doesn’t have a formal diagnosis for her father, making her reluctant to use that term. I have followed her lead in this review.