



## Rail deaths spur CTA safety bid

Never go after that fallen cellphone, don't trespass — and beware the 3rd rail

Almost every day somebody climbs or falls onto the CTA tracks, which has led to seven deaths so far in 2013 and more than 50 fatalities in recent years, according to an analysis the transit agency is set to release Monday as part of a redoubled rail-safety campaign.

The deaths stem from both bad decisions and simple mistakes, such as going after a dropped



**JON HILKEVITCH**  
Getting Around

electronic device, standing too close to platform edges, intoxication and horsing around in the

shadow of powerful trains and the electrified third rail, the analysis found.

Warnings posted throughout the CTA system to keep away from the tracks may seem awfully obvious, but the message isn't getting through to some CTA riders, according to transit officials, who on Monday will launch the campaign aboard CTA trains and at rail stations.

In fact, the safety effort comes as the number of reported right-of-way incidents has increased each year since 2010, CTA re-

cords show.

Most of the people killed on the rail right of way during roughly the past 5 1/2 years died from being hit by trains or from falls, while about 20 percent were electrocuted when they came in contact with the 600-volt third rail, a breakdown of incidents revealed.

In addition to the personal tragedies that can result, trespassing often inconveniences thousands of commuters because each time an incident is reported, the CTA control center orders the

electricity temporarily shut off while transit authority investigators and the Chicago Fire Department do their work, officials said.

The problem of intentional and accidental trespassers on the CTA right of way is as old as rail transit in Chicago, which dates to the late 1800s. The difference is that 115 years ago no commuter was leaping onto the tracks to retrieve a mobile phone.

Last year, 349 incidents involving individuals on the right of

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**BEARS 31, VIKINGS 30**



JOSÉ M. OSORIO/TRIBUNE PHOTO

Tackle Jordan Mills, from left, quarterback Jay Cutler and tackle Jermon Bushrod celebrate Martellus Bennett's game-winning touchdown catch Sunday at Soldier Field.

## CLOCK TICKING? NO PROBLEM

Another 4th-quarter rally puts Bears on top in turnover-filled game

It might not have been pretty, but it certainly was entertaining. The Vikings leaped to the lead, running the opening kickoff back for a touchdown. Devin Hester answered, returning the ensuing kickoff 76 yards, on his way to a single-game franchise record. Quarterback Jay Cutler had two interceptions and a fumble, but with three minutes left and the game on the line, he drove the Bears down the field and connected with tight end Martellus Bennett for the game-winner with seconds to spare. **Chicago Sports**

### Summers takes name off table as Fed candidate

Former Treasury secretary out of the running to lead central bank.

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### Rain delays final round of BMW golf tournament

Play resumes Monday at Conway Farms in Lake Forest. Jim Furyk leads by one shot. **Chicago Sports**

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MOHAMED ABULLAH/REUTERS PHOTO

A member of a rebel brigade affiliated with the Free Syrian Army prepares Sunday to fire a mortar in Jobar, at the edge of Damascus, Syria's capital.

## Syria violence rages on despite U.S.-Russia deal

By **PATRICK J. McDONNELL**  
Tribune Newspapers

BEIRUT — Clashes flared across Syria on Sunday, and mortar shells fell on Damascus, highlighting a violent and intractable reality. The nation's bloody civil war is no closer to resolution, despite a landmark U.S.-Russia deal designed to rid Syria of chemical armaments.

Various officials, including Secretary of State John Kerry, acknowl-

edged that the chemical accord, while significant, will likely do little in the short term to stop the killings. The fighting on the ground and the much-heralded chemical weapons accord appear to be advancing on different tracks.

Opposition leaders and human rights advocates have tried to shift the focus back to the war and the ongoing carnage. Meanwhile, U.S.

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## Rabbi deals with addiction, loss of pulpit

Esteemed clergyman's secret is revealed after arrest at Indiana casino

By **MANYA BRACHEAR PASHMAN**  
Tribune reporter

Rabbi Michael Sternfeld had just started pushing buttons at an Indiana casino on a June day in 2011 when he watched the icons flash across the screen: ace, king, queen, jack and 10, all of the same suit.

Bells rang, lights flashed and casino staff descended upon the spiritual leader of one of Chicago's most prominent Reform synagogues to congratulate him on his video poker royal flush and \$10,000 jackpot.

But the big payoff proved to be unlucky. Sternfeld, who six years earlier had asked to be banished from the casino because of a longtime but secret gambling problem, was charged with trespassing and identity deception. He said the incident and his initial denial when leaders of Chicago Sinai Congregation asked about it led them to demand that he quietly resign last

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**Killing's forecast:** High 68 Low 51  
Weather page on back of A+E section

\$1.50 city and suburbs, \$1.99 elsewhere  
166th year No. 259 © Chicago Tribune





For nearly two decades, Chicago Sinai Congregation had been presided over by Rabbi Michael Sternfeld. He was forced to resign last month after gambling problems surfaced.

# Rabbi dealing with addiction, loss of pulpit

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month rather than explain himself to his congregation.

"If I've learned anything from these years of struggling, I've learned how terribly painful addictions of all kinds are and how incredibly difficult many are to get rid of," Sternfeld said in a recent interview with the Tribune. "This is a chapter of my life that I regret so very deeply and which is painful for those close to me."

Temple President Michael Mannis called Sternfeld's departure a big loss for Chicago Sinai but otherwise declined to discuss what he called a confidential matter.

But Sternfeld's abrupt exit after nearly two decades at Chicago Sinai, and an explanation in a letter that it was simply time to retire, left some in the congregation suspicious, particularly because it happened just a month before the busy Jewish season of repentance that includes Rosh Hashana and the just-ended Yom Kippur.

"No one retires right before the High Holy Days. I found that excuse absurd," said Rick Fzdale, 74, who has been part of the congregation for decades. "We feel slightly less of a gravitational pull toward the synagogue because he's not there."

For the first time in his 44 years as a rabbi, Sternfeld said he spent the High Holy Days alone in his home, praying, reflecting and wondering what he will do next.

To better understand events that led to his gambling problem and departure from the pulpit at Chicago Sinai, it helps to revisit what happened after his exit from another. In spring 1993, Sternfeld confessed to a brief affair with a younger rabbi while at a prominent synagogue in San Diego.

"I am here to confess to the worst sin I ever committed in my life," Sternfeld told the congregation at a board meeting, according to a news story at the time in the Los Angeles Times. "This, for me, is Yom Kippur," the Jewish Day of Atonement.

With the congregation divided over whether it should fire him, Sternfeld tendered his resignation, according to the Times. After an ethics investigation, the Central Conference of American Rabbis, which represents about 1,600 rabbis in North America, temporarily suspended him from working in the U.S.

"They did the responsible thing," Sternfeld told the Tribune. "They wanted to make sure before I served another congregation I had worked through personal issues. ... The best opportunity I had was to serve a foreign congregation."

Separated from his soon-to-be ex-wife, he took a job in 1994, leading a synagogue in Durban, South Africa, on the brink of that

nation's historic election of Nelson Mandela as president.

But the shame of what he had done, the exile from family and friends and the question of whether he would ever return to the U.S. left him feeling lonely and isolated, he said. In search of an escape, he wandered into a Durban casino and planted himself in front of a video poker machine. He developed a habit of returning a few times a week.

Later that year, Sternfeld said he got a call from an old acquaintance who was then-Gov. Pete Wilson's chief of staff, offering him a political appointment. Sternfeld returned to California as the chief deputy director of the state's conservation corps, an agency dedicated to developing youth skills and protecting the environment.

He also reconnected with a cantor named Deborah Bard, whom he had auditioned and hired at the San Diego temple. By then the rabbinical suspension had been lifted and he had landed a position at Chicago Sinai, a bastion of American Reform Judaism since the mid-19th century.

He joined a long line of esteemed spiritual leaders there, including Rabbi Emil Hirsch, Roebuck & Co. President Julius Rosenwald and former Illinois Gov. Henry Horner, sat in Sinai's pews.

Sternfeld carried on the classical Reform tradition but also distinguished himself as an innovator, arriving shortly after the synagogue moved from the Hyde Park neighborhood to its current location, at Delaware Place and State Street, on the Near North Side.

He led the development of the Sinai edition of the Union Prayer Book, the standard Reform Jewish prayer book, which has been adopted by other Reform congregations. In addition, he became an outspoken supporter of and officiant for interfaith weddings. The congregation grew from 200 to 900 members under his leadership. Some members made a point of attending Friday night worship services just to hear what he had to say.

"He had a way of expressing, particularly in sermons, a very modern approach to day-to-day life," said Carolyn Neuman, 52, a member since 1998. At an interfaith service after the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks, "nothing put me at peace more than hearing Michael's words."

But not long after he arrived in Chicago, Sternfeld discovered the riverboat casinos within easy driving distance. Again drawn to video poker, he returned frequently, sometimes playing for hours at a time. Every year, he asked the



Rabbi Michael Sternfeld, seen at his condo building, said of his gambling addiction: "This is a chapter of my life that I regret so very deeply."

casinos to provide financial reports for tax purposes. Every year, he saw his losses far exceed his wins.

"I never looked at it as a social activity," he said. "I could sit there for 8 to 10 hours just pushing the buttons. I didn't want anything to drink. I didn't want to eat anything. Somebody would sit down next to me, and I'd get upset," because they were encroaching on his emotional bubble.

By 2005, Sternfeld said even though he didn't like what he was doing, he couldn't stop it. And so he sought therapy. He wrote a letter to casinos in Illinois, Indiana and Wisconsin, asking them to bar him from their premises and placed himself on statewide self-eviction lists in Indiana and Illinois.

"With this letter, I am permanently self-excluding from your casino," Sternfeld wrote to Blue Chip Casino in Michigan City in May 2005. "Please do not me permit (sic) to engage in any activities in your facility. ... I realize that this request is irrevocable."

Two days later he signed a "self-eviction request" acknowledging that if he entered the Blue Chip property, he could be arrested and charged with trespassing.

Shortly after sending letters to the casinos, he was indeed arrested, he said. Playing the machines at a Horseshoe Casino in Hammond, he won \$1,200. When he told the staff his name, they denied him the money and police took him into custody. But the casino didn't press charges, he said.

Six years later, at the Blue Chip Casino, came the \$10,000 jackpot.

As the staff congratulated him on his apparent good luck, they also asked for his name. There were too many cameras for him to walk away, he said.

"I simply panicked," Sternfeld said. "I made a serious and very unwise decision on the spur of the moment. I made up a fictitious name."

Court documents allege that Sternfeld also presented a bank card with the name Michael Feinstein, but Sternfeld insists that he only scribbled an imaginary name and the staff took him at his word, "which I, of course, very much regret."

Blue Chip Casino chose to press charges of trespassing and identity deception. Sternfeld hired a lawyer, who advised the rabbi to turn himself in, he said. He drove to the courthouse in Michigan City, Ind., where his mug shot was taken. Sternfeld met criteria established by prosecutors to get his charges dismissed in January of this year. What remained of the \$10,000 prize after taxes covered his legal fees.

Shortly thereafter, Sternfeld said, someone in the Chicago Sinai congregation spotted the mug shot posted on a website called justmugshots.com. When a temple leader first confronted Sternfeld about the photo, he said, he made up a story involving an altercation.

He logged onto the site and paid its asking price of \$199.99 to have the photo removed.

After more temple leaders came to him less than a week later, he said, he eventually told them the whole story.

"This is the nature of addiction. You can't admit out loud that you have this problem," he said. "It

was unbearable for me to admit."

Within a few months, he said, the temple's executive committee told Sternfeld he was leaving. He insists that the reasons for his dismissal didn't extend beyond gambling and his dishonesty about it. He said he offered several drafts of a resignation letter, one of them explaining his addiction to the congregation.

"I had that letter ready to go," he said, "and I was not permitted to send it."

Some members of the congregation say they would like to have heard a more candid explanation.

"I think he should've been given an opportunity to tell his story about what happened and allow the congregation to decide what they wanted," said Crystal Van Der Linden, 32, when the Tribune told her Sternfeld's explanation of what had occurred. "We were not given a choice. Still there are so many people that just don't know. There are just wretched rumors."

Neuman said if anyone could deliver a graceful public confession, it's Sternfeld.

"Knowing Michael, it would have been great sermon material to be out with it," she said.

Rabbi Michael Balinsky, an Orthodox rabbi who serves as the executive vice president of the Chicago Board of Rabbis, said knowing where to draw the line when a spiritual leader goes astray can be a complex decision for a congregation to make.

"The question is, 'Are there certain red lines that people accept about the humanity of clergy and other cases where it becomes more problematic?'" he said, adding that he had no knowledge of the situation at Chicago Sinai.

Mannis, the temple president, said many congregants feel a profound sense of loss after Sternfeld's departure, since Sternfeld is the only rabbi many of them have ever known.

"I've had questions and discussions on where we've been and where we're going from here," he said. "From the very beginning our aim at Sinai has been to respect Rabbi Sternfeld. He helped a lot of others in a lot of ways."

Sternfeld said setting the record straight, which he did only when approached by the Tribune, heightened his High Holy Days experience. Rabbis often spend the entire year preparing their sermons for Yom Kippur, the holiest day on the Jewish calendar.

For 44 years, I've conducted High Holy Day services delivering sermons that would be meaningful and would inspire and motivate," Sternfeld said. "That was always my objective. For the first time, I didn't have to worry about the public presentation. I had to focus on my inner life and my relationships with people most important to me."

On Saturday, Sinai's turnout for Yom Kippur services soared, as usual. Congregants sat inside the synagogue's sanctuary as well as at nearby Fourth Presbyterian Church, reciting prayers and confessions as a community — a ritual intended to signify each Jew's responsibility for one another.

Sternfeld spent the day in his high-rise condominium fasting and praying alone.

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