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## ***The Shivah: Kosher Edition. A Review***

Stephen Jacobs

### **Abstract**

Review of the video game *The Shivah: Kosher Edition*.

**Keywords:** *The Shivah*, indie gaming, review, adventure, narrative, mystery, Jewish, gameenvironments

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*The Shivah: Kosher Edition* (2013)<sup>i</sup> is a short point and click adventure game from Wadjet Eye Games, the indie game company founded in 2006 by Dave Gilbert. Playable in just a few hours, it follows Rabbi Russell Stone's turn from a religious leader who has lost his congregation and his faith into a noir-style detective. Rav Stone will search for the meaning of a \$10,000 bequest from a congregant, and perhaps larger meanings as well. The original game, *The Shivah*, was originally released in 2006, and was Wadjet Eye Games' first title. "The Kosher Edition," was released with updated graphics and a new soundtrack.

As told in Andrew MacCormack's review (2006a) Gilbert had released several video games as freeware, and was well known in the circles that played indie adventure games, when he entered the "5<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Monthly Adventure Game Studio Competition." The challenge was to create a game in a month. When Gilbert won the contest with *The Shiva*, and the contest-entry version of the game got 10,000 downloads, he decided to upgrade it and release it as his first commercial game.

It was well received, MacCormack's review in *Adventure Gamer* cites positive mentions from *PC Gamer*, *Manifesto Games* and an interview in the New York City paper *The Jewish Week*. While it didn't give him name recognition per se, Gilbert says he was recognized as the "Rabbi Game Guy" in an interview with MacCormack later that year (MacCormack 2006b). Reviews of the *Kosher Edition* show that the game has stood the test of time, both as a mystery video game exclusive of its unique protagonist and setting and because of it. The podcast, *Game Maker's Toolkit*, gives a nod to "the lovely, teeny, tiny Rabbi Detective Game" for its investigative mechanics as part of a 20 minute long discussion of "What Makes a Good Detective Game?" (Brown 2017). *Rock, Paper, Shotgun* reviewer Cassandra Khaw (2016) finds that the way the game addresses religious conflict resonates with her experience growing up in Malaysia which she says is "still a place where religion can amputate a relationship", citing not only the quality of the game overall, but on its themes of loss of faith, its accessibility to a non-Jewish player and specific points of Judaism it communicates.

*The Shivah's* protagonist, Rabbi Russell Stone, stands amongst a handful of real and fictional peers; Rabbis who grapple with motive and meaning. Rabbi Stone's most prominent fictional peer is Rabbi Small, the part-time detective featured in a series of 11 detective novels. Author Harry Kemelman's "Talmudic Detective" first appeared in the Edgar Award winning "Friday the Rabbi Slept Late" (Rosen 2014). The novels inspired "Lanigan's Rabbi", one of the four rotating properties that were part of the short-lived NBC Sunday Night Movie anthology series (Shirley 1977). Kemelman's interest in creating the Rabbi novels, in part, was to explain and explore Judaism (Jennes 1976). In a nod to Kemelman, Gilbert "placed" his novels on Rabbi Stone's virtual office bookshelf.

One real-life analog of Stone's was Rabbi Edwin H. Friedman. An impactful and polarizing personality in modern reform Judaism, Friedman was a questioning Rabbi and family therapist who founded and led my own family's congregation. His book *Generation to Generation: Family Process in Church and Synagogue* (Friedman 1985) remains a seminal work in pastoral counseling across religious traditions (Friedman 1990). His less clinical book, "Freidman's Fables" (1990) includes "Tradition", my favorite sermon of his in which Moses, Jesus, Marx and Freud chat in Heaven and despair of the ways in which their "salvation systems" have been altered by their followers.

Like the Rabbis mentioned above Stone is also a questioner and a seeker. He'll employ the art of answering a question with another question (the Rabbinical Response offered the player) to engage the other characters in the game and even save lives as he makes his way through the game.

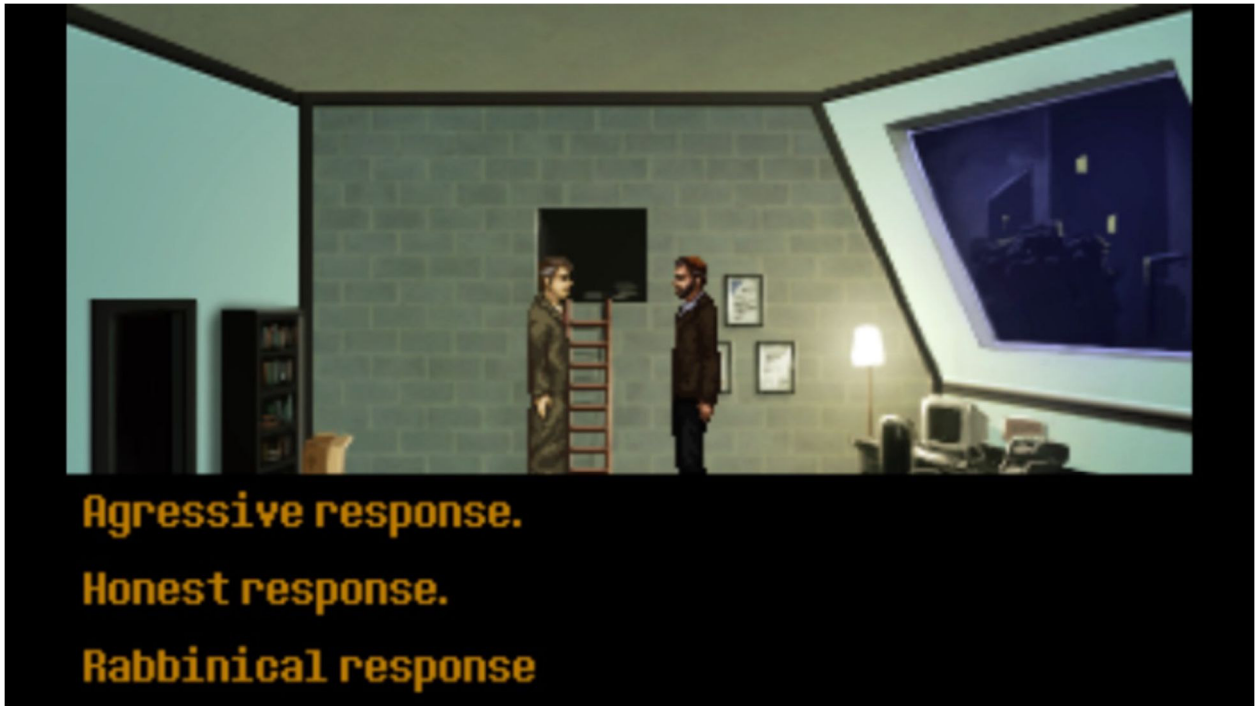


Figure 1. Employing the Rabbinical Response appropriately is key to your success in the game.

Throughout the game Rabbi Stone will navigate the “Ravnet New York: Where Jews Connect” to help find his answers in the email and records in much the same way that all Jews are encouraged to analyze their texts.





Figure 2. Ravnet’s opening screen.

Mirroring the saying “two Jews, three opinions,” Rabbi Stone’s journey can take the player to three possible endings.

As the game opens Rabbi Stone speaks to a Synagogue full of empty seats in the tones of a man who is merely going through the motions, with little hope and little faith. “Why do bad things happen to good people?”, “How could God let this happen?” Stone asks. Unable to complete his sermon, he dismisses his Cantor (a liturgical singer whose acapella musical prayers add to the service) and returns to his office.



Figure 3. Rabbi Stone’s Synagogue is a dark and desolate place.

But the Cantor returns with a police detective, who delivers the news of a murdered ex-congregant, Jack Lauder, and a \$10,000 bequest in Lauder’s will. The two parted eight years earlier, and not on the best of terms (a violation of religious practice divided them). So Stone can’t just revel in his good fortune. He needs to find out why Lauder made the bequest and decides to make a Shiva call to his widow to get some answers.

And so the stage is set for Stone’s journey through lower Manhattan, Ravnet’s search facility and even the computers and Ravnet accounts of the game’s NPCs. He’ll make his way to another Synagogue, a garment business office, a classic dive bar and the apartments of the other characters to get the answers to his questions.



Figure 4. Rabbi Stone visits Rabbi Zelig’s more upscale synagogue.

As in other adventure games, Rabbi Stone will collect items and clues, but just a few of each. The nature of the game (a noir flavored, modern day mystery) and its relative brevity result in a fairly limited collection aspect to the game. There is no crafting or haggling with merchants in *The Shiva*. However, in addition to the direct clues for use in the story, a player will collect some information on Jewish religious practice and some terms in the Yiddish language (a listing of terms and definitions is helpfully provided in the player’s inventory).

Rabbi Stone will need to employ his wits, his Rabbinical Responses and the fisticuffs he picked up in the gym in Yeshiva correctly to solve the mystery and save himself and the damsel in distress. But even this “best of three” ending doesn’t serve up a brand-new day. Rabbi Stone has paid of the Synagogue’s debts, and has returned to his *bimah* (the Synagogue’s podium). But there has been no major news story to pique the interest of new congregants or bring former ones back in the fold. It’s still just the Cantor and a few congregants at services. Nor is Rabbi Stone filled with renewed religious fervor. But at the end he allows as how there may be some meaning in life and the world after all.

Despite the fact that Gilbert has gone on to publish many other video games, he is still known as “The Rabbi Game Guy” because no one else has made another significant mass market entertainment game where a Jewish character’s Judaism and how they live it is core, or even secondary, to the game. It’s true there are a small number of Jewish characters in video games (Oxford 2015). The majority, like Ben Grimm (who had a Bar Mitzvah 13 years after his “rebirth” as The Thing) (Byrne, Wilson and Barta 2006), come into video games from other media. Those few native to video games are what *TV Tropes* describes as “Ambiguously Jewish”. These characters are often stereotypical, have Jewish-sounding last names, use Yiddish



[https://www.youtube.com/watch?time\\_continue=699&v=gwV\\_mA2cv\\_0](https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=699&v=gwV_mA2cv_0), accessed 28 November 2017.

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