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There's One Pleasant Surprise In 'The Last Of Us Part II': Its Depiction Of Judaism

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By Kaity Kline



Dina, the love interest in *The Last of Us Part II* — is a rare bird in gaming: A relatable Jewish character.

Sony Entertainment/Naughty Dog

Warning: Mild spoilers for The Last of Us Part II

The Last of Us Part II has no shortage of sad moments for players. But the happiest moment I had while playing was one not often mentioned: Finding out that Dina, protagonist Ellie's love interest, is Jewish.

Dina starts dating Ellie at the beginning of the game, right before the tragic event that changes her life forever. Afterwards, she accompanies Ellie on her revenge

mission to Seattle. Early in the game, players are set loose in a post-apocalyptic Seattle, retaken by nature, to find the gasoline needed to open a gate and progress along the storyline.

That search for gasoline takes Ellie and Dina to a food distribution center located in a synagogue, and after climbing through beautiful stained glass windows, Dina gets really excited.

"Hey Ellie," Dina says. "This place is a synagogue."

"How can you tell?" Ellie asks curiously.

"One, there are menorah decorations on the wall. It's a Jewish thing. And two, I didn't burst into flames just now."

"Burst into flames?"

It seemed like a conversation I would have in a world like that.

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I'm Jewish, and at that moment the gears started turning in my head and I realized that I had *never* played a game with a Jewish character I could relate to. There are only a handful of Jewish characters in video games: There's B.J. Blazkowicz, the main character of the Wolfenstein series, who shoots Nazis and fights Mecha-Hitler, and that's pretty much it. Then there's Andrew Ryan, one of the bad guys in *Bioshock*, and Meryl Silverburgh, the heavily made-up fighter from the *Metal Gear Solid* series. None of these characters seem very relatable to me.

But I could relate to someone like Dina, who views religion a lot like I do — as a source of comfort and family connection. Talking about it is only a brief moment in the game, but it meant a lot to me.

The moments in the synagogue really show Ellie and Dina at their best. While Ellie is still consumed by hatred and her desire for revenge and justice, she shows the

same naive curiosity she had in the first game, before trauma changed her forever; moments like this show she isn't all the way gone. She never mocks Judaism — a completely new concept to her — or makes Dina feel bad, she only asks questions.

While exploring the synagogue and looking for supplies, Ellie finds a Hebrew calendar hanging on the wall.

"5774? Are we in the future?" Ellie asks.

"No, doofus, that's a Hebrew calendar," Dina answers.

These conversations aren't hidden away in a part of the game you can easily miss. Going through the synagogue is part of the main objective, and Dina is explaining a few real things about Jewish culture and her beliefs while you run around solving a puzzle.



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"For the new year. My sister used to give me an apple dipped in honey. Ugh, now I'm craving it," she says.



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Like Dina, I love that Judaism gives me a connection to people in my family. I'm a member of the same synagogue my dad, grandfather, and great-grandfather were members of. Even though I never knew my grandfather or great-grandfather, I feel connected to them through Jewish traditions that never change — and the synagogue is a place where I feel welcome, despite avoiding services for years.

Judaism gives me a connection to my past. I'll always think of my grandma when I eat her brisket recipe, which is so good that no restaurant can compare. And I'll always remember celebrating Hanukkah with my family, singing Ma'oz Tzur from a yellowed pamphlet from 1920 that belonged to my great-grandfather, and laughing really hard because the first note is always *very* off.

In *Part II*, the characters are living in a post-apocalyptic world completely cut off from the past. But religion can bridge that gap, connecting us to family and ancestors we have never met. As Dina says in the game, it's cool to come from a long line of survivors. No matter how many things change in the world, Judaism has endured. And that is comforting during scary times — like a global pandemic or a fictional zombie outbreak. In real life, Jews have suffered centuries of discrimination and violence. When life has been altered forever, religion is a way to keep *one* piece of the before times.

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Dina says she wouldn't call herself a believer, and neither would I. She was dragged to temple by her sister, just like I was dragged once a week by my family until I was confirmed at 16 (It's a Reform Judaism thing, too!), when I refused to keep going because I was an atheist.

I'm not an atheist anymore, and I believe in a higher power. Part of the reason I think I believe this is for the same reasons as Dina. For her, belief brings a sense of calm, it helps put things in perspective, it's a way to deal with grief, and it's a way to show respect. It helps her ground herself: She says prayers during pivotal and stressful times in her life, like before leaving for Seattle with Ellie.

Which is not to say that *Part II* shies away from the evils of religion.

One of the enemy factions in the game is an evil cult called the Seraphites, who think if they get rid of all sin, the zombies will go away and society can go back to normal. Their belief, too, gives them a sense of purpose and control in a frightening world. There are a lot of morally grey factions in *Part II*, but this isn't one of them; the Seraphites show how religion can go too far when that is all you rely on in the world.

But even the Seraphite cult has its uses in small doses — another main character, Abby, is terrified of heights, so she uses something she learned from the

Seraphites to get her through the fear: the idea that feeling fear means your body is at its strongest. And that is comforting to her, despite her hatred of the cult.

And if Ellie had taken any advice during the game, it would've been best for her to take the advice of the synagogue's rabbi, who left a letter in a desk about how he'd had to evacuate the synagogue at the start of the outbreak. It's sad to be forced from your home, he wrote, but in the end, it's the living people that matter. Jews throughout history have learned this. *The Last of Us Part II* might have been very different had Ellie learned it too.

Kaity Kline is a columnist for NPR's Join the Game and a producer on 1A. She is a native of New Jersey, a lifelong gamer, and a former gaming YouTuber. She tweets at @kaitykline



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