



Year after Year, Amen

The field guide to running a Jewish community organization for twelve months without dropping anything important

A free game · a project of love from Shalom Desk

Shalom Desk · a Notion workspace for Jewish community organizations
Jacob Sager · Brand New Colors · jacobsager.com

A game about the work nobody applauds.

Most management games hand you a crisis a minute. This one hands you a Tuesday. You are on staff at a Jewish community organization — one rabbi, one cantor, one education director, one office manager, and a building older than several of you. The year runs from the quiet after Sukkot to next year's Days of Awe, and your job is to show up: doing the work in front of you, and standing where the community and the leadership team need you next.

It is sacred work. It is also deeply banal. Both of those are true in the same hour, and a game that only shows you the sacred part would be a lie. So the boiler is in here. So are the dues statements, the carpool line, the family that quietly went quiet, and the exact number of lightbulbs the custodian replaced without mentioning it.



Where every year begins. The wheel shows twelve Hebrew months at rest, with Cheshvan marked in gold.

The one-sentence version

Twelve months, four desks, five things to keep in your hands, and one private queue that only you can see — and only you can bring down.

Four beats, every single month.

The rhythm never changes, which is the point. An institution that reinvents its own calendar every month is not an institution; it is a crisis with a mailing list.

- 1

The docket — the desk on the first

Standing business, what is open, what has gone overdue, and one line about what your particular desk noticed this morning. You act on nothing yet. You just look.
- 2

The decision — the one call the month turns on

Three or four real options, each with its effects shown before you commit. Some are dice rolls with the odds printed on the button. Your role may unlock a gold option that nobody else gets.
- 3

The work — where your hours actually go

Between two and five units of attention, spent across seven domains. Spending nothing is a legitimate move; unspent attention comes back as rest.
- 4

The report — the month in the record

What happened, what it cost, what the community gained or lost, and the ordinary work that happened whether or not you were watching.

Then the wheel turns one segment and you do it again. Twelve times. The last one is Tishrei, and everything you built walks through the doors.



REPORT 01 • SCHOOL BEGINS

Beth El Congregation

EST. 1889 • 138TH CONSECUTIVE YEAR • CONSERVATIVE

The header carries the year wheel, the congregation's name, and how many consecutive years it has managed to exist.

What each beat is really asking

BEAT	THE QUESTION UNDERNEATH IT
The docket	What have I been letting slide, and for how long now?
The decision	What kind of congregation are we choosing to be this month?
The work	Where do my actual hours go, given that there are never enough?
The report	What did all of that cost, and what happened anyway?

Four movements, and they are not interchangeable.

Before you pick a desk you build the shul, and the first choice is the movement that shapes your calendar, your kitchen, and your arguments. This is not a cosmetic label. It changes which options appear in a month, which events can befall you, and what the monthly record says about your ordinary week.



Reform
Big tent, band on the bimah, justice work in the DNA.



Conservative
Egalitarian davening, a supervised kitchen, and a Torah reading that takes no shortcuts.



Modern Orthodox
Shabbat-walkable, halachically serious, kiddush cholent that could end wars.



Reconstructionist
Values-first, fiercely participatory, the siddur has marginalia and so does everyone.

Step one of four. Each movement plays differently, in ways a member of that movement would recognize.

MOVEMENT	WHAT CHANGES AT THE TABLE
Reform	Interfaith-family programming, a social-action coalition that wants you to convene rather than attend, confirmation classes that revolt productively, and a Biennial delegation returning with eleven ideas.
Conservative	A supervised kitchen with a blowtorch brigade before Pesach, Ramah scholarships that are always oversubscribed, USY regionals that survive the lounge but not the microwave, and the driving question resurfacing gently.
Modern Orthodox	An eruv checked every Friday, two minyanim a day, a women's megillah reading, a Mimouna the night Pesach ends, and a shailah that goes to a posek and comes back satisfying nobody entirely.
Reconstructionist	A values process that takes six weeks and is better for it, lay-led services nobody notices a drop from, members writing prayer supplements, and a havurah quietly spinning off in the north end.

Geography is destiny, especially for parking.

Place sets your entire economy: how many households you start with, what dues run, what payroll costs, how far you can fall before the board steps in, and whether the congregation is quietly growing or quietly shrinking underneath you.



Northeast • urban
A 1927 building, no parking, five kosher options, everyone's cousin is a member somewhere.



Sun Belt • boomtown
Transplants arriving monthly, a leased space with great AC, everything getting invented from scratch.



Midwest • legacy
A grand old congregation, a modest endowment, and pews that remember everyone's grandparents.



Small town • only shul for miles
Forty-two households, one building, and a hundred-mile radius that calls when it needs a rabbi.

Step two. A forty-two household congregation and a hundred-and-sixty-eight household congregation are different games, not different difficulties.

PLACE	HOUSEHOLDS	THE TEXTURE OF IT
Northeast, urban	168	A 1927 building, no parking, radiators that knock through every service, and a landmark commission with opinions.
Sun Belt, boomtown	96	Transplants arriving monthly, everything being invented from scratch, superb air conditioning, and a lease that renews at nine percent.
Midwest, legacy	142	A grand old building, a modest endowment, pews that remember everyone's grandparents, and Barb — who has run the office for 22 years, is Lutheran, and corrects everyone's Yiddish.
Small town, only shul for miles	42	One building, a hundred-mile radius, a hospital sixty miles out that calls because there is nobody else, and a president who also plows the lot.

Comfortably familiar, or blessedly unforgettable.



A normal year

The ordinary miracle: dues, carpools, holidays, casseroles. Realism on hard mode.



A different year

One big storyline changes the map — this year, the struggling congregation across town wants to talk.



A weird year

Everything real, nothing normal. Genizah discoveries, escaped livestock, and honey with a backstory.

Step three: the reality dial.

- **the ordinary miracle.** Dues, carpools, holidays, casseroles. The events that find you are the ones that find real congregations — a bequest, a burst pipe, a teacher poached by the day school, an anonymous check with 'for whatever you need' on the memo line. Realism on hard mode. — A normal year
- **one storyline changes the map.** Beth Or, the shrinking congregation across town, wants a quiet meeting about possibilities. That thread runs from Tevet through Elul and ends in a merger, an alliance, a failed vote, or a lapse — and how you handled it matters more than which one you got. — A different year
- **everything real, nothing normal.** A sealed genizah behind the sanctuary wall since 1931. Roof bees that become forty jars labeled ROOF HONEY 5787. A camel named Gerald arriving as a vendor's 'small substitution question.' The high school asking to borrow a Torah for Fiddler, and the correct, kind answer to that. — A weird year

Nothing in the weird year is impossible

Improbable, yes. Impossible, no. Congregations really do find genizahs during HVAC work, really do get famous for one member's babka, and really do vote 9-4 to leave a misspelled highway sign exactly as it is.

Your role is not a difficulty setting.

Four people hold the place together and they do genuinely different jobs. A rabbi does not file grant applications; an office manager does not do hospital rounds. Changing desks changes which work exists on your screen, what you are merely adequate at, and which private queue is quietly filling behind you.



The Rabbi
Rabbi Aliza Morgenstern. Care, teaching, the board, the words. Private queue: the **pastoral backlog**. Vendors and billing belong to someone else — you can ask, not fix.
Strength: Heart work lands deeper — trust gains +25%, pastoral moments cost less of you.



The Cantor
Hazzan Ezra Katz. Liturgy, music, lifecycle, the sound of the room. Private queue: **unrehearsed liturgy**. Budgets and buildings are not yours to touch.
Strength: Anything musical soars, and every service you build raises the room's draw — attendance climbs on its own.



The Education Director
Morah Shira Ben-David. The school — teachers, curriculum, enrollment, families. Private queue: **classroom instability**. Worship and finance belong to others.
Strength: The school thrives — enrollment moves faster and feeds community trust.



The Office Admin
Barb Kowalski, Office Manager. Records, dues, vendors, calendar, building. Private queue: the **paper backlog**. You are not clergy; pastoral work costs you more.
Strength: Tight operations — costs run 15% lighter, disasters hit softer.

Step four. Each desk states its actual job and its private queue before you commit.

DESK	YOURS ALONE	YOUR QUEUE
The Rabbi	Parsha class, a d'var worth remembering, open counseling hours, a conversion student, mediating the conflict everyone is avoiding, coffee with the board president off the record	Pastoral backlog
The Cantor	Reworking the tired middle of the service, coaching Torah readers, Selichot built from scratch, recording nusach for people learning at home, teaching the room one new melody properly	Unrehearsed liturgy
The Education Director	Observing and coaching a struggling teacher, rewriting a grade's curriculum, parent-education nights, training madrichim, fixing the dismissal disaster	Classroom instability
The Office Manager	Reconciling the books, chasing dues kindly, renegotiating vendors, rebuilding the calendar, clearing the mountain of forms nobody will ever thank you for	Paper backlog

Excellent at your work, adequate at everyone else's.

Each desk carries a strength and a matching weakness. The rabbi's heart work lands 25% deeper and pastoral moments cost less of them. The cantor's liturgy work raises the room's draw, so attendance climbs on its own. The education director moves enrollment faster. The office manager runs 18% leaner on costs and 35% better on operational income.

Outside your lane you produce roughly 60 to 70 percent. That is not a punishment; it is the reason colleagues exist. Which is why you also get delegation moves.

INSTEAD OF DOING IT BADLY	YOU CAN ASK
A rabbi facing vendor contracts	Ask the office manager to bid out the vendors — by name, with real results and no relief to your own queue
An office manager facing a family in crisis	Ask the rabbi to make the call you cannot. You are not clergy, and knowing the difference is its own competence
An education director facing a flat service	Ask the cantor to lift one service this month
Anyone facing a wobbly grade	Ask the education director to shore it up

The four strengths, precisely

DESK	WHAT YOU ARE UNUSUALLY GOOD AT
Rabbi	Trust gains land 25% deeper, and pastoral work costs one less unit of energy than it costs anyone else
Cantor	Music work lands 60% harder, and every service you build permanently raises the room's draw — attendance climbs without touching trust
Education Director	Enrollment moves 35% faster, and school work carries an extra point of trust with it
Office Manager	Costs run 18% lighter, operational income 35% heavier, and bad events hit 30% softer

Delegation is a real move, not a consolation prize

It works, at reduced effect, and it costs you a unit of attention. What it does not do is bring your own queue down. Nobody else can do that for you.

Between two and five units, and rest is a move.

Attention is the core economy. A rested leader gets more done — five units at full energy, four in the normal middle, three when you are dragging, and two when you are burnt out. Energy therefore governs everything else, which is exactly how the job works.

CHESHVAN · YOUR MONTH, YOUR ATTENTION

Where does your attention go?

The big decision is made. Bounce house, bagels, a shofar demo that terrifies a toddler into lifelong Judaism. New families sign up on the spot.

-\$1,800 budget +9 trust +3 students -1 energy

Pastoral backlog: 3/10

Families waiting to be seen. It rises every month on its own; only pastoral care work brings it down.

Attention remaining:

Pastoral care · your lane

Hospital & homebound rounds

♦+3

Call the elders — just to talk

♦+2

Train a bikkur cholim visiting team *once a year*

♦+2

Hold open counseling hours

♦+2

Teach the weekly parsha class

♦+2

Write a d'var Torah worth remembering

♦+3

Meet with a conversion student

♦+2

Your queue sits at the top with its own explanation, attention pips show what remains, and domains are flagged as either your lane or overdue for a visit.

- **pastoral care, liturgy and music, the school, development, building and operations, community, and yourself. Which ones show work depends entirely on your desk.** — Seven domains
- **the second action in one domain in one month returns 60%, the third 30%. The button says so, and the effect preview already has the reduction baked in. What you are shown is what you get.** — Diminishing returns are honest about themselves
- **up to two points. Closing a month early is a deliberate strategy for the run-up to Elul, not an admission of defeat.** — Unspent attention becomes energy

The pile only you can see.

Every desk carries a queue nobody else knows about. It rises every month on its own, and faster in a month where you did nothing in your own lane at all. Only work in your own lane brings it down. Delegation does not touch it.

DESK	THE QUEUE	WHAT IT COSTS AT SEVEN
Rabbi	Pastoral backlog	Two families mention, gently, that nobody called. Word of that travels further than any sermon.
Cantor	Unrehearsed liturgy	Nothing was wrong, exactly. The nusach was right and the singing was thin, and everyone felt it and nobody said it.
Education Director	Classroom instability	A substitute reads from a binder she has never seen. One family starts looking at the JCC program.
Office Manager	Paper backlog	A late fee, a double-booked social hall, eleven households never billed, and a family charged twice who is being very nice about it.

Tested across hundreds of simulated years, tending your own lane rather than neglecting it is worth between fifteen and seventy points by Tishrei. It is the single largest thing your desk controls.

Reading the number

- **current. You are on top of it, and nobody has any idea how much effort that took.** — Zero through three
- **the ordinary state of a working professional. Fine. Watch it.** — Four and five
- **the game flags it in red and tells you plainly that it is about to cost you. This is your last comfortable warning.** — Six
- **it collects. The penalty fires, the queue drops back to four, and you get to read a short paragraph about exactly who noticed.** — Seven and above

One lane action pulls it down by two. The month pushes it up by one, or by two if you spent every unit of attention somewhere other than your own work. The arithmetic is deliberately simple, because the decision it forces is not.

Every congregation opens the year with a short list.

The boiler is 41 years old. The front entrance is steps only. The records live in four places. Third grade has no teacher and a parent is covering Sundays. None of it is urgent, all of it is real, and every item is quietly costing you something until it is closed.

 **Standing docket**

NEW

Boiler & HVAC
 Original unit, servicing overdue

NEW

Front entrance
 Steps only — no ramp, no rail

NEW

Office records
 Membership, giving, and sign-ups in four places

NEW

Third-grade teacher
 Unfilled; a parent is covering Sundays

Month one. Everything is 'new' and nothing has begun to hurt yet.

 **Standing docket**

OVERDUE

Boiler & HVAC
 Original unit, servicing overdue

OVERDUE

Front entrance
 Steps only — no ramp, no rail

OVERDUE

Office records
 Membership, giving, and sign-ups in four places

OVERDUE

Third-grade teacher
 Unfilled; a parent is covering Sundays

Seven months later, on a year where the docket was left alone. Items age from open to overdue, and overdue items start generating events of their own.

Items close in one of two ways. Some have a direct fix that belongs to a specific desk. The rest accept pushes from anyone — the button tells you how many you have banked and how many close it. Every role has a genuine path to every item, which was not true of the first version of this game and is worth saying out loud.

Five things stay in your hands.

THE STANDING ACCOUNT	NOW	Δ
Cash on hand	\$30,000	—
Households	142	—
Students enrolled	30	—
Typical Shabbat attendance	52	—
Community trust	62 / 100	—
Your energy	8 / 10	—
Pastoral backlog	3 / 10	—

The standing account, with the month-over-month direction of each line. The last row is the queue only your desk carries.

- **dues plus tuition plus whatever you raised, against payroll and the building. Fall past your congregation's floor and the board steps in.** — Cash on hand
- **your two revenue drivers, and the two numbers a board actually reads.** — Households and students
- **never invented. It is households multiplied by an engagement rate that community trust drives, plus a share of your students. Trust up, more people in the room, always reconcilable.** — Typical Shabbat attendance
- **standing, on a hundred-point scale, and deliberately asymptotic. The first ten points are ordinary competence; the last ten are a decade. Above eighty the upkeep grows, because a well-regarded institution has more to maintain.** — Community trust
- **which sets your attention, and therefore everything. The busy months take it; the quiet months give some back.** — Your energy

The chain, worked through

These are not five independent dials. Trust drives the engagement rate, which multiplies households into attendance. Trust crossing 72 gains you a household in a month; crossing 86 gains two. Households multiply into dues. Dues meet payroll. And a well-attended room is the reason the next family stays.

IF TRUST SITS AT	ROUGHLY THIS SHARE ATTENDS	AT 142 HOUSEHOLDS
50 — shaken	28%	about 45 in the room
62 — the ordinary start	33%	about 52
78 — genuinely well regarded	40%	about 62
90 — a decade of earned standing	45%	about 69

A real income statement, every month.

Dues are not collected from everyone, because they never are. Roughly 88% pay in a given month at ordinary standing, rising with trust and rising further if somebody in the office does the unglamorous work of chasing them kindly. The record and the ledger read from a single billing snapshot, so they cannot contradict each other.

CHESHVAN • THE MONTH IN MONEY	AMOUNT
Dues collected — 127 of 142 households (90%)	+18,796
Tuition — 33 students	+2,574
Programs, repairs & everything else	−1,800
Payroll & building	−21,500
Change in cash this month	−\$1,930

Every dollar appears, including gifts and grants — which an earlier draft of this game quietly hid, producing a month that showed a small loss while a \$4,000 bequest sat invisible.

What moves the collection rate

LEVER	EFFECT
Community trust	Every point of standing above fifty adds a fraction. People pay institutions they believe in.
Chasing dues kindly	A permanent five-point improvement for the rest of the year. Nineteen calls that begin 'no pressure at all.'
One connected system	Two points, because gifts stop being applied to the wrong account in March.

Below the money sits a second panel for everything that is not money: what the season did to your energy, what standing cost in upkeep, whether households moved and why, and where attendance now stands.

The part of the report that is the whole point.

Every month ends with a panel nobody in the game asked for and nothing in the scoring rewards. It reports what happened regardless of any decision you made.

THE ORDINARY WORK · CHESHVAN

- The bulletin went out on the first, as it has since 1897.
- A conversion student is on month 4 and is ahead of the syllabus.
- The historical society asked about the archives again. Barb has a folder ready.
- The social hall hosted 5 events, at least one for people who are not members.

Two people argued about the announcements. Both apologized by Tuesday.

Four lines drawn from the universal machinery, from what is true of your movement, of your town, and of your own desk — plus one quiet closing line.

Four Shabbatot held. Morning minyan made ten on nineteen of twenty-six days. The bulletin went out on the first, as it has since 1935. Three yahrzeits observed, names read aloud, every one. The custodian replaced eleven bulbs and said nothing about it. One anonymous check arrived; the memo line read 'for whatever you need.'

It is different at every shul

Four lines are drawn each month from four different pools, so no two months read alike and no two congregations read alike at all:

- **the eruv was checked every Friday; it went down once and forty people knew by noon. The cholent held temperature from Friday to Shabbat lunch, which is engineering.** — At a Modern Orthodox shul
- **the kitchen ran under supervision all month, with one very close call involving a caterer. USY ran a lounge night; the lounge survived and the microwave did not.** — At a Conservative one
- **the social action committee logged thirty volunteer hours and posted about none of it. NFTY regionals took eleven teens; nine came back changed and one came back with mono.** — At a Reform congregation
- **two decisions went through the values process, slower and better. The havurah in the north end met without asking permission, which is the entire idea.** — At a Reconstructionist one

This is the thesis of the game stated as a mechanic. The dramatic months land harder because they arrive against a backbone that never stops. A congregation is not the year it had a camel. A congregation is the fact that somebody unlocked the door every single morning for a hundred and thirty-eight years.

An annual report, then a story.

Tishrei arrives and the gates close. You get a scorecard comparing where the congregation opened to where it closed — households, enrollment, attendance, trust, cash, collection rate, and how much of the docket you actually worked down.

- ✦ At Yizkor, the youngest Roth stands for Miriam and then, unprompted, walks over and stands beside you.
- ✦ On Yom Kippur afternoon — the hour that breaks every un-air-conditioned congregation — your sanctuary is cool, and Gus the contractor attends Neilah as an honored guest.
- ✦ Gerald the camel's portrait hangs in the social hall, unexplained, delighting newcomers and confusing plumbers.
- ✦ Open doors held: strangers came, and the community learned its own generosity was solvent all along.
- ✦ The board president calls you first now, before the meeting instead of after. That is worth more than any motion.
- ✦ The bikkur cholim team you trained makes forty-one visits this year. You know because they keep a little log, unasked.

The epilogue is composed from your specific year. Every line traces to something you chose.

ENDING	WHAT IT MEANS
Mensch of the Year	Full seats, warm rooms, healthy books, a docket worked down to nothing, and a community that knows it is loved. Rare, and earnable.
A Sweet Year	Real growth, real warmth, a few bruises worn honestly.
You Kept the Lights On	Not every year is a vintage year. The doors opened every day they were supposed to. Do not undersell that.
A Rebuilding Year	This one taught through friction. What survived is the foundation.
The Board Steps In	The reserve ran dry. Communities survive this. Next year opens with an interim administrator and a very long meeting.
A Community Adrift	Programs ran and the heart went quiet. The rebuilding starts with listening.

Advice from someone who has lost several.

These are the levers that actually moved the numbers across a few thousand simulated years. None of them are secrets the game keeps from you; all of them are things it is easy to notice too late.

- **those months hand energy back. Arriving at Elul with eight energy means five units of attention through the hardest stretch of the year; arriving with two means you get two.** — Rest in Shevat, Tammuz, and Av
- **even once. The queue rises by one when you tend it and by two when you ignore it entirely, and the penalty at seven is worse than anything you avoided.** — Touch your own lane every month
- **an item closed in Kislev stops costing you for ten months. The same item closed in Elul saved you nothing and cost the same attention.** — Close docket items early
- **the second action in one domain returns 60%, the third 30%. Four domains touched once beats one domain hammered four times, every time.** — Spread across domains
- **or run preventive maintenance, which drops the failure odds from 50% to 18% and softens the bill by more than half when it does go.** — Fix the boiler before Tammuz
- **a 70% appeal is a good bet. The game never hides a probability from you, which means every gamble you take is one you chose with open eyes.** — Take the risky option when the odds are printed
- **below it your signature move locks, and your desk's best option is the one that carries the year. Losing it for two months costs more than any single decision on the board.** — Guard your energy above four
- **declining by inaction is a real outcome and the game will let you have it. Taking the meeting costs one unit of energy and opens a thread worth six points and a Torah.** — In a different year, take the Tevet meeting
- **asking a colleague costs one attention and produces real results. Pride is the most expensive thing on the board and it is not even listed.** — Let the delegation moves work
- **nothing in it is scored. It is the only place the game tells you what your congregation actually is, and it is the reason to play a second year.** — Read the ordinary work

And one piece of advice that is not about the numbers

You will have a month where the boiler goes, the queue collects, and a random event takes eight hundred dollars you did not have, and the report will still tell you that the bulletin went out on the first and the minyan made ten on nineteen mornings. That line is not consolation. It is the actual measure. Congregations are not judged by their best year, and they do not fail in their worst one. They persist, or they do not, on the strength of whether somebody kept unlocking the door.

Play the small-town congregation at least once. Forty-two households, a hundred-mile radius, and a hospital sixty miles out that calls because there is nobody else. Every number is smaller and every single decision matters more, which is a reasonably good description of most of Jewish communal life outside a handful of zip codes.

Because it is the same argument.

Shalom Desk builds Notion workspaces for Jewish community organizations — thirty connected databases across membership, finance, events, education, communications, worship, personnel, and facilities. It exists because the information a congregation runs on is usually scattered across an inbox, a spreadsheet, a clipboard, and somebody's memory, and because the fourth one keeps taking other jobs.

This game is that problem, rendered playable. The standing docket is what happens when nothing tracks the unglamorous open items. The private queue is what happens when the work only one person can see is only in that person's head. The month where a gift went unacknowledged because it was in the other spreadsheet is not a joke we invented; it is the single most common story we hear.

There is a small easter egg in Tevet. At the board meeting, one option is to adopt a single connected workspace for the office, for \$149. It permanently softens bad events, saves a little every month, and quietly reduces the odds that something falls through a crack. We did not make it overpowered. We made it accurate.

The game is free, and it always will be

No account, no email, no analytics, no upsell inside it. One HTML file that works offline. It is a project of love, and if it makes one office manager feel seen on a Thursday afternoon, it has paid for itself.

If the boiler and the docket felt familiar

Shalom Desk is a complete Notion workspace, verified on the Notion Marketplace, at \$149 for the template. Guided onboarding is available for organizations that would rather have somebody sit with them while the first area goes live, and custom builds start from there. Everything is built by Jacob Sager of Brand New Colors, who does knowledge management and AI builds for real people in the real world, and who wrote this guide, this game, and every line of the ordinary work panel.

Play it, then look at your own desk

The game asks you to hold five numbers, one docket, and one private queue for twelve months. Your actual job asks more. It is worth having somewhere to put it all. Find the workspace and the game at [YOUR-SITE-URL].