

Rings of Jerusalem

Chainsaw Aardvark

A 24 hour RPG written for
YYY, 19:00 4/6/07-19:00 4/7/07
(Technically started at 19:31,
and finished at 18:15) based on
the theme of espionage. My
apologies to all physics offended
in the creation of this document.

Materials Needed for play:

A few d6s.
Pen and paper

An open mind helps – the
default occupation of the
players is secret agents
protecting Jews on Saturn
from the perils of the
militarization that lead up to
world war one. While an
assortment of Hebraic terms
are used, anyone can play.
Footnotes have been
provided., and a glossary
included if time permits.

We are the Sabbath Ghosts. Devout Jews preform no work
from sundown Friday until Saturday night¹. No switches are
flipped, no coin changes hands, no creature harmed. But our
enemies do not rest on holy days.

Thus the Rabbis of of our colony have made dispensation.
Each member of our group is officially dead and symbolically
buried. Upon rising from the shallow crypts, we are spirits, exempt
from the laws that bind men. Neither the grace of the sabbath bride
nor the nor the commandment “Thou shall not murder” prevents us
from doing whatever is necessary to safeguard the children of
Israel.

Shema Yisrael! If you come to Saturn, spirits protect you.

Leaving Mother Russia

The year 5669² was the year of the greatest exodus since
Egypt. Life in Northern Asia had never been particularly good, but
now the Cossacks and the Tzar's Militysia (police) had redoubled
their efforts to make the Jews miserable. Europe is still seething
after the Franco-Prussian war, and the working class is beginning
to become dissatisfied with the status quo – leading to much
antisemitism in the guise of “quieting Bolsheviks.”

But the Jews were hopeful people, and so they looked up.
Whole villages worked together, scrimping and saving, until they
could send their best and brightest to the new world. Those who
got there would collect their money, and send it back so that more
could book passage.

Ellis Island may have been closed, but the rest of the solar
system was still full of opportunities. Saturn, colonized not long
after the American Civil War, was was chosen to be the new
Palestine.

1 Jews use a lunar calender, with days beginning at sunset

2 1909 by the Gregorian calender's reckoning

Life on Saturn

A balloon full of hot air rises as it is less dense than the surrounding atmosphere. The immense gravity of the gas giants compresses the clouds with pressures greater than the depths of the Atlantic. Thus all things float far above the surface of the sixth planet.

Cites are giant spherical islands. Even the smallest is two dozen miles across, the largest three times that. Their outer shells are two feet of steel to maintain integrity under both pressure and the fierce winds of the planet. Thick spires just out along the horizontal axis to serve as docks for the streams of metal zeppelins that stretch like a gilded chain amongst pearls in the sky.

Within the globes life is full of the most wondrous technology of the age. Electric motor-cars replace horses, incandescent lights illuminate the streets, and messages move by wireless telegraph rather than post man. Potters make sculpture, and silversmiths jewelry, as the little things of life are all made on assembly lines directed by punch boxes – mechanical engines “programed” by index cards marked with holes.

There is no solid ground to mine, so there are no coaling stations for ships. Nor are there rivers and forests for power. Everything runs on electricity pulled from the constant hurricane strength storms of the planet via windmills attached to the outer surface. Metals and water are shipped from the moons and rings of the planet. This also means that items like clothes and wooden furniture are exceedingly expensive. Most houses are furnished almost entirely with chairs and tables made of metal or Bakelite. (A new material, sometimes called “plastic”)

Each interior level is about two or three hundred feet tall – and indeed, there are cities within the habitat with 50 story tall glass and steel buildings. - but much is laid out more like a small town, or even filled with imported soil and farmed.

The upper section of these levels is a blue paint artificial sky, replete with spotlights on a moving tram-way to replicate the movement of the sun throughout the day. There are small lakes, and streams, but no real rivers, and the ocean is but a mural on the far wall.

However, while all seems as though it is a city of the future, the old politics still follow. Austria Hungary and the United Kingdom still show the flag, French, North American and Russian battle ships patrol the skies as well. Rumors have spread about special boats that can dive into the deeper cloud layers and stalk their prey.

Sky Ships

Given that an entire city can float, it is little wonder that ships can as well. However, this does not mean that a solid chunk of granite may maintain buoyancy. Ships still must float, though they are capable of far more variation in depth than a city. Indeed, the largest battleships are so heavy that they need tugs to bring them on level with the cites for docking.

Blimps and Zeppelins on the other hand, have great freedom of movement – though they are notably more fragile. They are huge cigar shaped metals, made of corrugated metal for strength and lightness, aided by helium or hydrogen refined from the surrounding atmosphere by machinery found at every city.

Travel is fairly quick and quiet though given the distances involved on the huge gas giant, cruises can be several days or more. Typically they are set out as one would expect of a cruise ship, with first class passengers receiving private rooms and an exclusive dining hall replete with a 5 piece band, while the cheaper accommodation are bunk rooms of 20 (male and female segregated) seeking a communal mess.

Given the lack of coal on Saturn – boilers and bunkers have given way to massive banks of capacitors and wet cells. Most need to stop at a city every few weeks to recharge.

Leaving the Old Country

At the Battle of Hampton Rhodes, a union and confederate iron-clad clashed. Only two other nations had could challenge these titans in 1862 - Britain's Warrior, and Le Glorie of France. However all these vessels left much to be desired. The CSS Alabama drew 22 feet of water, while while the USS Monitor was so un-seaworthy that it sank in a storm a few months after its famous battle.

Thus John Erickson (creator of the Northern Vessel) was joined an Irish Inventor named John Holland Of making better steel ships. Eventually, the two would develop the J&J engines – pumps really – that pushed gravity about. Huge, heavy, and hungry for power, improved ship-building technique passed them by on Earth. However, since they could escape the constant downward pull, they could go elsewhere.

Missions of the Sabbath Ghosts

Sadly, the Israelites are viewed by many as nothing more than playing pieces in an international game of chess. The sovereignty of our cites is questioned, and any of the great powers would be quick to try and cease them as strategic points should hostilities begin.

Still we are strangers in a foreign land, and there are those who plot against us personally. Few courts will hold up an accusation or arrest made by a Jewish law officer against a goyim – even if others witness the act, a reprimand may well be on its way. The cities are huge – miles across and split into levels 200 feet high – yet still we are in ghettos in the worst parts where the J&J pumps constantly rattle the china in our cabinets.

Against this – we have almost nothing. Outside our cities, battleships feint with each other. Our fleet is nothing more than a few cargo vessels with stolen field guns. Contingents of marines are kept in the cites to put down unrest, but local ordinances prevent Jews from having pistols or and butchers need special permits to have large knives and cleavers!

Thus it falls upon secret agents to do what can not be done militarily. Arms and munitions must be secreted away to arm our Zahal. Crimes that the courts refuse to solve must be dealt with.

We are dancing on a knives edge. Each of the great powers must not gain an advantage over the other. If one were to appear stronger, then it would either attack the others, yet if it were to appear weaker, then that would invite the others to attack it! Hence, the most important mission of all is to sabotage each in turn to prevent an all out conflict.

Creating an Agent:

To be considered for a position as the elite agents of the Torah, the applicant must be highly rated in five categories³:

Mitzvah (Deeds)

To their families, the ghosts are dead, non persons. Nor do they ever expect to see their friends again after saying that final Shema. Instead, they must concentrate on good deeds for the community as a whole to sustain them. Mitzvah is a catch-all category for handiwork and helping.

Masada (Resilience)

Judaism is a religion with far more emphasis on life and freedom than sacrifice. But the martyrs at Masada in the year 3830(70 AD) are an example of how far a ghost will go to protect those in his trust. For an agent, this embodies endurance and strength.

Chutzpah (Determination)

Any ten men may make for a minyan, but only men (and women) of action can become ghosts. Leaping a chasm or braving a raging fire to rescue a child takes chutzpah.

Tanakh (Wisdom)

Jews are often called the children of the book – the ve'hafta prayer commands them to learn. Some would call ghosts insane, but none would call them dumb, and this is the measurement of their intelligence.

Ishkibibble (Wit)

Everyone needs a little nonsense now and then to shake things up and show they aren't some unfeeling golem. While some would question the need for nonsense in the serious world of espionage, sometimes a good joke can disarm a sentry as well as stiletto between the ribs.

A player rolls 1d6+4 to determine how many points they have to distribute amongst their abilities. At least one point must be assigned to each. Optionally, the player may forgo the random roll and simply take a score of six. The maximum for any given attribute is four.

The final step is to breath some life into the character. Begin with a name then go for a back story. Are they

Unfortunately, Ghosts of Shabbat are not a well funded international agency like Mi-5, the Pinkerton Detectives, or the Okhrana.⁴ (Though they may run into counter-agents working for these services.) Starting equipment is often nothing more than a few small knives and an electric torch. Cameras and disguises are available as well (indeed being a tailor for officers is an excellent cover!) There are a few pistols available, but one must all but beg for them, and the agent is expected to bring it back, preferably with others stolen at some point.

Players have the option of making the attempt to gain extra equipment by giving their character's unusual descriptions, like being very tall or notable scars. If the game master approves then the agent will gain additional resources to start off with – though being distinct does have notable disadvantages for a spy as well!

³ For those non-Jews, the ratings would work out to be: Empathy, Sacrifice, Cajones, Wisdom, and Nonsense

⁴ British, US, and Tsarist intelligence respectively. The CIA won't exist for another 40 years, nor will the KGB

Preforming Tasks

Achieving something in game is as simple as describing what you want to do, rolling a d6, and adding the appropriate quality – in an attempt to beat a difficulty set by the Game Master. Standard difficulty is 5, but may be adjusted by the Game master. A three is easy even for a normal person, while a 7 is the limit for a normal human. (Some ghosts can actually exceed this limit, but it is unlikely.)

Some tasks may take a while. As such they require a series of rolls. In this case, the Game Master determines how many rolls are required, and how long each roll will require. Dice are then rolled one at a time, each counting towards the total time, and each success towards completion.

Each attribute may also be spent. A point used in this way allows for a near superhuman expression of the embodied ideal. However these points do not return until the agent has had a day of rest and prayer – something quite unlikely during a mission.

- Mitzvah grants a helping hand to another. The Recipient gains a +3 bonus, which they may spend on one, two, or three rolls (as three uses of +1, +1 and +2 or the whole bonus at once) as they see fit.
- Masada exemplifies never, ever giving up, and as such, can be spent to negate a crippling or life threatening injury.
- Chutzpah is going all out, and taking risks – as such, it allows the character to make three rolls at once. If this is towards an extended task, then each success counts at once (ie 3 success = exceptional progress in the time normally allotted for one)
- Tanakh allows for unusual expressions of intelligence and improvising. Jury-rigging a zeppelin to fly with half its flight deck missing for example.
- Ishkibibble can allow a non-violent escape as the target is tricked or improbably sweet-talked out of their original intention.

The Game master is free to veto the spending of an attribute if they deem it inappropriate. While Tanakh may allow for the creation of unusual devices, but the the characters are stripped naked and thrown in a jail cell, they're not going to “Rube Goldberg” their way out. A bit of Ishkibibble to trick the guards into thinking their gone, and then escaping when the cell is searched would work though.

Isaac has stopped by the house of fellow agent Jacob to lend a hand. Apparently the electric car is not working again and his friend was never quite the one for technical work.

The GM determines that its no great mystery to fix, but will take a while. It is a difficulty of 5, but will take 3 rolls,each requiring 30 minutes of work. Three dice are rolled, and added to Isaac's Mitzvah score of 2, with the end results of 8, 5, and 3. Only one success (the target number must be exceeded) An hour and a half has passed, and he is only a third of the way through.

However, it is getting late, and while agents might conduct operations on Shabbat, fixing a car is not worthy of such devotion. So, Isaac decides to go all out, and spends a point of Chutzpah - allowing him to make three rolls, in the time needed for only one. This time the rolls are 4, 4, and 5 - so the machine is repaired, but only one more half hour of time has passed.

Game Masters have the option of penalizing players who don't describe in detail how they are preforming a task by increasing the difficulty by one or two.

Combat

It is said “That saving a single life is as saving the whole world.” The ghosts are not murderers and assassins – but sometimes violence is necessary.

Order of Action

To begin, an order is established – each participant (or small group of enemies to speed up the process) rolls a d6 and adds their Chutzpah attribute. The lowest roller declares their action first, then the next lowest and so on – this allows the faster reacting characters to know and counter the intentions of the slower ones. (Yes, Mitzvah and Chutzpah can be spent at this time to influence the order or actions) In case of tied scores, the Ghost will go first – otherwise the actions are simultaneous

Rounds are a malleable amount of time, but 12 seconds – five to a minute – is a good benchmark. A character can run a dozen paces and still shoot in this time, or perhaps three times farther if they forgo offensive action. Moving or ducking behind cover can make it more difficult for an enemy to hit.

Attacking

Once the order and actions have been declared, they are resolved. As usual, a d6 is rolled and added to the appropriate attribute. Generally, Mitzvah is used for ranged combat, Chutzpah when using fists and knives, and Tanakh to figure out the finer points of explosives and artillery. Usually, the difficulty is set at five.

Each success is one injury. Most people will be able to take only one hit before they are unconscious, and two will kill them. Ghosts have been subjected to intense training and physical conditioning – so they may survive two injuries before unconsciousness. Furthermore, at the end of a round, they may

If a character is injured before they have a chance to act – they lose their turn for that round.

Armament

Weapons grant either a bonus or additional dice to attacks. Each success is a wound, meaning that multiple dice inflict more damage, while a bonus simply makes harming someone more likely.

Example Weapons

	Bonus	Range
Club	+1	Personal
Knife	+2	Personal
Sword	1d6	Personal
Pistol	--	20-30 meters
Revolver	+1	25-45 m
Rifle (Scope)	1d6 1d6 & +1	300-1000m, if you can see it!
Shotgun	1d6	15-30 m
Maxim Gun	2d6	250-450 m

One should keep in mind, that submachine guns and flamethrowers do not exist quite yet, nor do self-loading rifles. Maxim guns do exist, but are present as exceedingly heavy water cooled crew served weapons. Plastic explosives, nerve gas and a number of other gadgets attributed to spies don't exist yet either.

Groups

It is possible to simulate groups in combat by running them as a collective effort that can take an aggregate number of wounds. A group has one action per five members, and can take two injuries per action. Thus a squad of ten soldiers doesn't take 10 actions, but rather two, and takes 4 injuries to scatter.

Ghosts always act as individuals. This does mean that 4 ghosts get as many actions as 20 men in platoons. While they await orders and try to coordinate, agents act!

Stealth in combat

As you might note, there is no sneaking skill. Acting covertly isn't just a matter of rolling a die and hoping for the best. Instead it is taking a cautious approach and leaving nothing to chance.

As such, sneaking relies on the player's attention to detail and description of the moment.

If the players are smart and can set up an ambush or sneak up behind an unwary sentry, they make an attack as usual – but with a difficulty of only 4. A success means that the target is instantly neutralized as they see fit.

Isaac and Jacob are attempting to break into a safe to steal documents about the deployment of the new raiding cruiser Emden.

Unfortunately, the break-in wasn't as discreet as they would have liked, and now there are soldiers arriving: two officers and a group of five soldiers. Ever the proponents of Prussian efficiency, they immediately open fire, without taking time for questions.

Initiative Roll

- The group of soldiers gets 5 (roll of 4 +1)
- The first officer rolls 1 for a total of 3, while the second gets a 5, for a total of 7
- Isaac spends a point of mitzvah to give a bonus to Jacob, and then rolls a 3 -5 total..
- Jacob uses 2 points of his bonus, and then roll a 6 for a total of 10! (2 chutzpah, 2 bonus.)

Declarations of Intent

1. An Officer declares that he will draw his sword and attack Isaac
2. While Isaac and the soldiers have the same initiative, the ghost declares after them, and acts before them
 - a) The soldiers will draw their pistols and fire
 - b) Isaac will attempt to shoot the soldiers with his revolver
3. The other officer will also attempt to cut down Isaac with his saber.
4. Jacob will attack one of officers to prevent them from harming his partner.

Actions

1. Jacob draws his knife, runs up to the first officer, and jams it up through the bottom of the targets chin. A roll of 1d6 +4 (2 for the knife and 2 for chutzpah results in an 8, a definite hit. Since there is nothing special about this officer, he can only take one wound before dropping unconscious and thus out of combat.
2. Initiative jumps to Isaac, he rolls a 2, not enough to hit, and the bullets fly over the opponents heads.
3. The soldiers return fire. As a group of 5, they have 2 actions. Luck continues to frown on Isaac, as both dice come up 5s.. He choses to spend a point of Masada, and thus avoids taking the wounds, the player describing how he drops to the ground at the last second.
4. Finally, the second officer attacks Jacob with his saber. The GM says it will be difficultly six since Jacob ran across the room earlier. However, he gets two dice because of the sword, and rolls a 1 and a six. One wound. Jacob choses not to spend any points of Masada in case they're needed later.

Begin again

Note that Jacob still has one point of bonus remaining. It remains until used, or the person who spent the attribute point heals the ability through rest.

Experience

Each time agents successfully complete an assignment, they gain XP – three for perfect and covert completion, only one if there was excessive violence. These points can be spent to increase attributes – the cost of increase is equal to twice the current level. Hence, it takes 4 points to increase Tanakh 2 to Tanakh 3.

Lucy in the Spy with Diamonds?

Unfortunately, no.

This game can be played for the fantastic, and it is a fanciful setting indeed.

However, that would run counter to both the real world work of spies, and the seriousness of the situation. It is the brink of world war one, and the Jewish population of Saturn is caught in between. With no open fields, the towns themselves will be the site of battles, and the constant stream of supply vessels will surly be blockaded once hostilities begin.

Furthermore, one must mind the date - circa 1912. Airplanes can barely get off the ground, and motion picture cameras are large, hand cranked, and capture no sound. Most cameras rely on glass plates rather than film, and weigh a considerable amount. Miniaturized transmitters and listening devices are decades away. If you want to hear a conversation, you must find some way to be present.

Perhaps instead, one could take an example from Robert Baden-Powell. While best known as the founder of the Boy Scouts – he was also a spy. In the 1890s he posed as an entomologist in the Balkans – but the markings on the butterflies he drew were actually maps of enemy trenches!

It will be quick thinking and a bit of planning, not miniaturized gadgets and expensive props that will protect the players.

Sample Adventure

It is bad enough that the navy's posture battleships and cruisers about our homes. But now Austria-Hungary has brought in a new Commerce Raider – the Emden. Torpedoes and quick firing guns to take out merchants quickly, enough speed to outrun what it can't fight, and a built in dynamo so it can recharge its batteries without returning to port. An escalation like this can only lead closer to war.

Two of our best agents have retrieved schematics and an itinerary of the vessels current voyage. Unfortunately they were injured in their escape so you will need to complete the mission for us. We will provide you with tickets to the city it is stopping at next (not first class I'm afraid) and then you must sabotage it. We are not quite sure how, but we do know it must look like an accident – an intentional sinking will only increase tensions further!

Normally I would say to find Abraham Bernstein upon arrival there – but our main agent has stopped reporting after his last transmission about Tsarist forces. If you can find him, he may be able to lend a hand.

Glossary

- Shema: Prayer expressing the central tenant of Judaism – respect for a monotheistic god.
- Rabbi: Leader of religious services, and often a learned teacher in the community
- Mitzvah: Good deeds.
- Chutzpah: Gall
- Zahal: The Israeli defense force (the army of the real world's Israel)
- Tanakh: First five books of the Torah, the Old Testament to Christians
- Iskvibble: Nonsense, in Yiddish – a dialect of Hebrew and German
- Shabbat: The 7th day of the week, when God rested after creating the world. Orthodox Jews do not work on this day.