

Tribute to Our Civic Leaders
Devar Torah
Presented by Rabbi Jon-Jay Tilsen
6 May 2007 at BEKI
Honoring Carl Goldfield, Ina Silverman, Susan Voigt



In planning this tribute dinner honoring Carl, Ina and Susie, the Tribute Committee faced a difficult choice: In what order should they list the names of the honorees? There are six possibilities.¹

It turns out that the question of order was debated long ago by our sages. Carl will recognize this text from our Thursday Talmud study group.²

According to the *Mishna* (Sanhedrin 7:1), the second-century law compendium created by Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi based on the *mishna* of Rabbi Meir, student of Rabbi Aqiba:

ארבע מיתות נמסרו לבית דין:
סקילה שרפה הרג וחנק.
רבי שמעון אומר: שרפה סקילה חנק והרג.

There are four means of execution imposed by the Supreme Court:
Stoning, burning, the sword, and strangulation.

Rabbi Shimon says: Burning, stoning, strangulation, and the sword.

Under Jewish law, capital punishment has not been legal since 70 C.E. and was very rarely imposed before that. Nevertheless, the obsolete law is recorded for didactic purposes.

And when our honorees were asked to accept this tribute, some of them sounded as though they had been sentenced to judicial execution. But the Committee appealed to their sense of civic duty, and here we are.

Nevertheless, the text is instructive. The sages state four means of execution. Rabbi Shimon is then quoted, with the *same list*, but in a *different order*. This would seem to imply that the order matters. But does it? If not, then why site Rabbi Shimon's statement?

There is a lengthy discussion in the Talmud about this passage.

Some sages said that the order doesn't matter. But among those who say the order matters, what is the *significance* of the order of the listing of the forms of execution? Does it go from harshest to most gentle, or the other way around, or is there some other meaning?

So my answer to the Tribute Committee's predicament was that the order might not matter; but if it *does* matter, then there are multiple interpretations for any order chosen.

So the Tribute Committee, in consultation with our honorees, came up with the present order.

But what does it mean?

Maybe it was merely alphabetical: Goldfield, Silverman, Voigt. Or alphabetical by first name: Carl [Goldfield], Ina [Silverman], Susan [Voigt].

Maybe it is by order of importance; but if so, which convention is used – is the first most important, or, as the Talmud has it, *aharon aharon haviv*, is the best saved for last?

But where does that leave Ina? Perhaps she is it like a queen traveling with part of her retinue in front and part behind.

There were six possible orders, but 70 possible reasons for the order.

That is why Talmud scholars can't navigate – by the time they have considered all of the possible interpretations of the highway sign, they are long past the exit. Bump Ahead? But *whose* head to bump?

So deciding the order of listing may have been difficult.

But it was *not* difficult to choose whom to honor.

We had another civic leader, Alderman Phil Voigt, of blessed memory, Susie's late husband. Phil was a loyal Catholic, and at the same time, he was the greatest friend of our Congregation and a most admirable leader of New Haven. Phil was part of the BEKI community, and we were proud of his good works and appreciative of his contribution. In my heart, we are honoring Phil tonight, as well.

It is not only *right* that we honor Carl, Ina and Susie for their leadership at BEKI and the civic community; it seems almost *urgent*.

We feel angry at some of our civic leaders – present company excluded – for thievery, deceit, exploitation, warmongering, and incompetence. It is therefore all the more important to honor our leaders who are honest, intelligent, community-minded, self-sacrificial and hard-working people with high ideals and shared values. They are people who are dedicating part of their lives for the common good, to fulfill the mission of the Jewish People of making the world better through the *mitzvot* and values taught by our sages.

As Rabban Gamliel, son of Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi, taught (Avot 2:2):

כל-העוסקים עם הצבור יהיו עוסקים עמהם לשם שמים...

All who serve in behalf of the community, they should serve for the sake of Heaven, for then the accumulated merit of our forebears will aid their efforts and their righteous deeds will have eternal effect. The Almighty will reward them abundantly as if they had done it all themselves.

Susie, Ina, Carl: Thank you for giving us hope in government, for giving us a model to point to for our children, for trying to build a city and society that strives toward basic decency and maybe even our highest ideals.

¹ To list them, using their first initials: CIS, CSI, SIC, SCI, ICS, ISC.

² The Sanhedrin Study Group meets Thursday's at Isaiah Cooper's law office from 12:30p to 1:30p (advertisement).