



Abba Hillel Silver Collection Digitization Project

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MS-4787: Abba Hillel Silver Papers, 1902-1989.

Series V: Writings, 1909-1963, undated.

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Spencer D. Irwin, 1960.

Spencer Dunshee Irwin

1901 — 1960



Spencer D. Irwin

FELLOW OF THE ROWFANT CLUB

A tribute by Rabbi Abba Hillel Silver
spoken at the funeral of Spencer Irwin
on January 15, 1960



THE ROWFANT CLUB
CLEVELAND

I HAVE come here to express with you our common sense of loss and to pay a memorial tribute to one whose life and labors meant so much to all of us. The sudden passing of Spencer Irwin has saddened our entire community and has brought sorrow to men and women from all walks of life.

Even those who were not personally acquainted with him, and who knew him only through his writing and his spoken word, never failed to feel the impact of his warm personality and his deep humanity, for genuine goodness is readily communicative.

Spencer Irwin did not belong to my religious persuasion, yet I never felt that our church walls ever separated us. He belonged to that universal brotherhood of men of good will whose faith is to do justly, love mercy and walk humbly with God.

He sought justice all his life, especially for those who needed it most, the denied and the dispossessed of the earth. Those who found themselves disadvantaged by circumstances not of their own making, who were victimized by hereditary status, all oppressed minorities and all who groped for light and freedom found in Spencer Irwin a listening ear, an understanding heart, a man ready to share their burdens, and possessed of a courage to do battle for them. He belonged to those who hunger and thirst after righteousness.

The times in which his active career unfolded itself were very confused and often full of menace. It was an age sore sick with all the maladies of the spirit. His generation encompassed years of global warfare and the unleashed fury of contending ideologies. Nations were in uproar. Class struggle and racial madness stalked the earth. The cherished values of civilization appeared to have been overwhelmed and swallowed up in the welter and chaos of a desperate and disintegrating age. It seemed at times as if all the dread tribulations of the Apocalypse had finally descended upon our world.

Throughout those years of clamor, violence and change, Spencer Irwin maintained a sound and balanced judgment, a firm grip on basic moral principles, as well as a stout heart. His wisdom never dimmed. He was never swayed, nor deterred nor deflected from his convictions. On the wings of faith and love for man and mankind, he rode the storms of his times unafraid. With unclouded eyes he scanned the international scene, and with a keen, logical mind he interpreted the signs of the times. His gifted pen served truth with a rare dedication. He was persuaded, as was an earlier fellow craftsman of his in the art of writing and printing, Benjamin Franklin, that "when truth and error have fair play, the former is always an overmatch for the latter." He found the enkindling word and the precise and penetrating

phrase to express truth as he saw it. His political scholarship and his gift of bringing it to bear on the contemporary scene gave his grateful contemporaries true insights into the problems which confronted them and renewed courage to carry on.

Spencer Irwin's was a life-long battle against every form of intolerance, whether based on ignorance, self-interest, or coveted privilege. His last column which appeared on the editorial page of the Plain Dealer last Sunday was a warning against the frightful havoc which is wrought by bigotry and prejudice and an eloquent plea to all nations to fight against their recrudescence anywhere on earth.

Every just cause appealed to him and both challenged and aroused him. Among the causes which he nobly championed was that of the reestablishment of the State of Israel. Few men, Jew or non-Jew, served that cause more consistently or with greater devotion. We are an ancient people, of long memory. We shall never forget this loving friend who, though neither kin nor of our faith, gave so generously of his heart and mind to the rebirth of our national home. In the wilderness, on the long, hard road to the Promised Land he met us on the way and gave us both guidance and support and his benevolent spirit encouraged us and exhorted us immeasurably. Israel will always remember this friend who was closer than a brother.

Spencer Irwin pursued justice but he also loved mercy. He spoke the truth in love. He always impressed me as a man who had been through some profound and searching personal experience, one who, like Jacob of old, had wrestled alone in the dark of the night with some powerful presence and wrested from his dread trial of strength some increased power, some transforming revelation which thereafter expressed itself in a wider sympathy for all that lives, and suffers and strives, and falls, only to rise again. He came to know the thin line which separates the saint from the sinner, and that without love and forgiveness there is no hope ever or renewal for the children of man. His heart was full of compassion for all men, so that even in his crusades against injustice and evil and evil-doers, there was never any hatred in his heart. His pen was never dipped in bitterness or gall.

He pursued justice, he loved mercy, and he walked humbly with his God. Spencer Irwin was a humble man, forever reverent in the face of the awesome mystery of life. He walked quietly among his fellow men in the integrity of his heart and modestly worked with them and took counsel with them in what ways best to build the good society—the city of the great King.

Spencer Irwin will be greatly missed, but his memory will abide among us like a sweet benediction.

Our sages said that the very memory of a righteous man is a blessing. And so we shall be blessed whenever we recall this just, compassionate and humble man who lived and worked so faithfully among us.

May God comfort his dear ones and all the members of his beloved family, whose personal bereavement is greater than ours. May they too find in the oncoming years great consolation—as I know that they will find nourishing pride in the host of beautiful memories which their dear departed has bequeathed unto them.

