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Remarks, by Raphael D. Silver, delivered at the Abba Hillel Silver  
Centennial Celebration at The Temple, 1993.

REMARKS BY RAPHAEL D. SILVER  
DELIVERED AT THE ABBA HILLEL CENTENNIAL CELEBRATION  
THE TEMPLE, CLEVELAND, OHIO  
MAY 16, 1993

My father was 37 years old when I was born. I never knew him when he was a young man. He had already been Rabbi at this Temple for 13 years when I was born.

He was already a prominent figure. A brilliant orator and religious scholar. Author. Zionist leader, and more. That is how the world knew him. But of course that isn't what I remember most about him.

I remember Friday evenings at home. Shabbas dinner. While Dad travelled all the time somehow he almost always managed to get back home by Friday in time for vesper services at the Temple and Friday dinner at home with his family. A crystal decanter of red wine sat on the table. Shabbas candles were lit. Dad poured wine into the Shabbas cup and chanted the Kiddush. The chalah was cut. The Mozii recited. Dad would be relaxed by then. He was home. In the bosom of his family. At peace. He always seemed relaxed and happiest at that time. Conversation was about ordinary things.

Saturdays he would prepare his sermon, memorizing as he wrote. Study door closed. He wasn't to be disturbed. When he was

through he would always give my brother Dan and me Hebrew lessons. This too was a tradition. He believed in the continuity of experience. He had learned Hebrew from his Dad - and so on back through the generations. I always hoped Dan would be well prepared. He always had the first lesson and I prayed that his lesson would go well and leave Dad in a good mood by the time it was my turn.

If you weren't well prepared, he didn't hide his disappointment. He would get angry. He could make you tremble. If you weren't trying. If you weren't thorough. Watch out! The anger didn't last long but you remembered it.

Later when I travelled with Dad and observed him in action in the Zionist political arena I watched that same anger erupt for the same reasons. Careless preparation. Wishful thinking. Fuzzy logic. Lack of Resolve. Loss of nerve. I watched that anger hitched to a massive intellect, wither opposition, raise expectations and strengthen wills.

There was something about his presence. I heard many people talk about it over the years. I certainly felt it. He evoked a sense of respect tinged with awe - for me mingled with love - A feeling that you were in the presence of power - of infinite determination - of a massive intellect and an even stronger will.



Dad was an extraordinarily private person. He didn't reveal much about himself. He wasn't casual. He didn't confide much. I only saw him cry once. And it was on this pulpit. He had come home from a trip to Europe toward the end of the war when the full weight of the Holocaust had become known. He talked to the congregation about what was happening to the Jews of Europe and he wept openly and he had to stop for a minute or two to pull himself together.

He made a conscious effort, I think, to control his emotions. He wanted to be able to think clearly about complex problems. To remain objective. Never emotionally detached, but objective. Clear minded, - even about things that affected him in a deeply personal way. There was this rock solid quality about him.

When he died in 1963 we found a massive granite boulder - a remnant of the time when glaciers covered this part of the country - in a forest in Eastern Ohio - and it became his tombstone.

I remember understanding early on that even though he suffered defeats and setbacks from time to time, he was unwilling to compromise his ideals. He would pull away for a while - wait until he was called back because of his unique ability to lead

and to inspire - and come back on his own terms with his goals and his vision intact.

He trusted his instincts and his ability totally. He set goals for himself, and he expected to achieve them. I can remember seeing him angry about failure. Frustrated by setbacks. But never despondent. He tried to pass that life affirming positive attitude on to my brother and to me. He believed that if you persevered you would eventually win out. He was extraordinarily ambitious. He loved a good fight. He wasn't worried about shaking up people if the cause was just. He enjoyed power. he was a consummate risk taker. He had some enemies. He had a lot of friends.

He was a complicated human being. I was aware of all these things as I was growing up, and have become more aware of them as the years have passed. I like to think I understand him a little better now.

He loved to laugh. He loved to hear a good joke. His laughter was infectious. I remember moving a few seats away from him at a Marx Brothers movie because he was laughing so hard and I couldn't hear the film.

He loved to eat. He told me he had been skinny once. I never really believed it, although there was a photo of him as a young



man to prove it. What I do remember is my Mother saying - at meals - "now, Abba", and he would give Mother a wide smile and invariably say "just a little more, Virginia".

He really loved my Mother. He adored her. She was smart, steadfast. They were totally devoted to one another. He knew how fortunate he was to have her. I could feel his love for her. She lived in Wheeling where Dad had his first pulpit - before coming here - and he courted her for years, - driving to Wheeling from Cleveland as often as possible - but too shy and awkward to propose. I was told that he would spend most of every visit talking to my grandfather - until they apparently ran out of things to talk about and he finally got up the nerve to ask my grandfather for my mother's hand.

He enjoyed life. He had come a long way from the lower East Side of New York. I once asked him to show me where he grew up. And as we walked the streets of lower New York, he became strangely silent. There must have been a lot of painful memories connected with growing up on these streets.

He liked creature comforts. A good car. A good cigar before he stopped smoking. A little schnapps before dinner. Conservative well tailored clothes. He was always quite formal. I don't remember seeing him often without a coat, tie and vest. Once in the mid 40's when he was working at the U.N. a friend invited

all of us to the races. Dad showed up wearing a sport coat, grey slacks, an open blue silk shirt and a straw hat. We were all in shock. We had no idea where all these clothes came from. At the track a man actually came over to Dad and asked him what looked good in the third race. Dad loved every second of it.

I often used to think he could have been a great actor, or a brilliant trial lawyer, or a captain of industry. He would have hated each of those careers.

The 40's were tumultuous exciting years for him. Really his decade. He travelled continuously - working with others to patch together the great Zionist coalition - and the domestic political machinery that would eventually lead to the U.S, recognition of Israel. He seemed always leaving to go somewhere. Europe, South America, everywhere in the United States. Always on the move. On the phone. On the telegraph. On trains. On planes. Strategizing - Manoeuvring - Bitter defeats - Small triumphs and ultimately victory.

It was a difficult decade. The family missed him. We were old enough to understand the importance of what he was doing - but we missed him. Part of this congregation spun off in opposition to his political views and that hurt him deeply. Friday nights at home together became less frequent. My mother filled in. I was the youngest. I think I missed him the most. When I was



ten or eleven a teacher asked us in class to talk about our parents and I was told that I replied "My mother is the best parents a boy ever had".

But when Dad was home - He was the same father - unchanged by fame. Still writing sermons. Still giving my brother and me Hebrew lessons. Still pouring Kiddush wine from the crystal decanter on Friday nights.

By 1950 his great work was over. He was home more. He had lived for years in the cauldron of history. He seemed to be willing to slow down and recharge his batteries. He wrote more. Still travelled. Still lectured. Was much honored. Award after award came his way. As brilliant an orator as ever, he could still thrill and move thousands. I think he became more reflective. Dan and I sometimes wondered if he was happy - now more removed from the limelight. He seemed somewhat less communicative. His 60th birthday in 1953 was celebrated widely. He had ambivalent feelings about it. He didn't feel he was growing old - but the celebrations made him aware that he was no longer young.

He and mother talked about moving to Israel. They bought land in Jerusalem. They started to design a home. But he was clearly conflicted. Part of him clearly wanted to begin a new phase of life. Search out new challenges. Be a part of a



society and a country that he had helped bring into existence. Part of him wanted to stay put - in a world he knew. In a City that was his home place, among the friends he cherished, surrounded by familiar things - in a place he felt most secure and most at peace with himself.

And so he continued to write and teach and lecture and work for the new State of Israel. He remained a national and an international figure and he stayed in Cleveland and in some ways, as he moved a bit off the world stage, I think his last years were among his finest.

In November 1963 John Kennedy died. Dad was planning to deliver a eulogy for the young president from this pulpit. He admired Kennedy whose vision had inspired a generation and revived a nations soul. There were many parallels with his own life's work. A few days later on Thanksgiving Day he was stricken at home with a heart attack. We were about to sit down to dinner. The crystal decanter full of red wine was on the table.

At the hospital he fought to live - but there had been irreparable damage and the Doctor took my mother aside and spoke to her and my brother and I watched her as she listened carefully to what the Doctor had to tell her - and then she said simply "Let him go".

The decanter full of red wine is empty now - but its crystal surface still glistens - still reflects the light. And the taste of that wine still lingers in my memory.

