Harry I. Stern

(19)

1941-1948

Harry I. Stern served as Keneseth Israel’s nineteenth President from 1941 to 1948. At the start of his term, the United States entered World War II. Rabbi Stern entered the Armed Forces as a chaplain, Keneseth Israel formed a committee to sell war bonds, and Keneseth Israel and Rodeph Shalom decided to combine services and religious schools during the war due to strained resources. The congregation also welcomed a group of German refugees who subsequently formed an Orthodox congregation within Keneseth Israel. Meanwhile, Stern became president of the newly formed Philadelphia Council of Reform Congregations, which established the Institute of Jewish Studies, a weekly adult education program held at Keneseth Israel, and helped found a new Reform congregation in Wynnefield, which is now Beth David. As the Zionist movement was gaining steam in the years leading up to the creation of the State of Israel, the Reform Movement continued to be wary of political Zionism, and the Board of Keneseth Israel passed a resolution urging the Union of American Hebrew Congregations to “disassociate itself completely from any controversy pertaining to political Zionism.” At the end of World War II, branch religious schools at Keneseth Israel were eliminated in favor of busing kids to one central location. Keneseth Israel and Rodeph Shalom also formed the School for Jewish Studies for post-Confirmation students. In 1946, Rabbi Klein left Keneseth Israel, and the following year, Stern hired Rabbi Myron Silverman to become the new assistant rabbi. In 1947, Keneseth Israel celebrated its centennial.

Harry Stern was born on October 6, 1900 in St. Louis, Missouri. After graduating from the Wharton School of the University of Pennsylvania, Stern joined the family business in 1922. Stern’s department store, located in Philadelphia at 7th and Market Streets, was a regional department store chain founded by his father that was originally known as Stern Brothers. Outside of the department store, Stern led a busy life. He was active in many professional associations, having served as a director of the United Fund, the Philadelphia Merchants Association, the Trade Relations Council, and as vice president of the National Retail Furniture Association. He was a promoter of fine arts and served as chairman of the board of the Long Beach New Jersey Art Foundation, as well as on the executive committee of the museum design project of the Museum of Modern Art in New York City. Stern was also deeply engaged in Jewish communal life. He was at various points chair of the National Conference of Christians and Jews, president of the Council of Reformed Congregations of Philadelphia, director of the Jewish Hospital, the Federation of Jewish Charities, the Allied Jewish Appeal, the Joint Distribution Committee, the National Farm School, and the Jewish Foster Home, and on the executive committee of the American Hebrew Congregations. Additionally, he was a member of the Locust Club, Penn AC, the Philmont and Rydal Country Clubs, and the Standard Club of Chicago.

Stern and his wife, Jeanette Sundheim Berg Stern, had one daughter, Mrs. Joseph Shani, and a son, Harris I. Stern. They had four grandchildren. The Sterns lived at 1213 Stratford Avenue in Melrose Park. Harry Stern died on May 6, 1956, and was buried at Adath Jeshurun Cemetery.