Julius Stern

Founding President

(1,4,6)

1847 - 1848

1852 - 1854

1855 - 1856

Julius Stern was the first President of Keneseth Israel and served two additional, discontinuous terms as the chief executive officer of the congregation. On March 2, 1847, forty-eight men met at Stern’s Second Street home to discuss the formation of a new German congregation in Philadelphia. There, they unanimously agreed to found the congregation and pledged funds to support its operation. On March 21, they gathered again and adopted the name “Keneseth Israel.” Soon after, they elected officers, purchased a cemetery, and engaged a Reader, Reverend B.H. Gotthelf. The new congregation rented a space at 528 North Second Street for services where seats were raffled off rather than sold. During Stern’s second term, the first ever sermon was delivered at Keneseth Israel services, marking one of the first steps towards Reform. Stern was instrumental in transforming the synagogue from its original traditional German Jewish minhag (religious practice) to Reform Judaism.

Stern was born on December 4, 1804 in Miltonberg, Bavaria. In addition to his activities as a publisher, Stern was also a “wholesale dealer in fancy dress trimmings and millinery goods” and a manufacturer of “fancy silk bonnets.” In 1855, his place of business was at 145 North Third Street, Philadelphia, near the “Eagle Hotel.” Stern was involved in Jewish life in Philadelphia in multiple capacities. In April 1843, approximately four years before he founded Keneseth Israel, Stern wrote a letter to Isaac Leeser, the religious leader of Philadelphia’s Sephardic synagogue, Mikveh Israel, and publisher of the United States’ first successful Jewish periodical, the *Occident*, advocating the purchase of a “vast tract of land” in the American West for Jewish agricultural development. Ultimately, he believed, a Jewish autonomous district would emerge in which the practice of Judaism would be freely observed and widespread among the inhabitants of the region. Leeser endorsed Stern’s idea and although it never came to be, it served as a precedent for Mormon settlement in the American West and was one of many proposals for a nineteenth century Jewish agricultural colony. He was also a charter member of Philadelphia’s Hebrew Education Society. Stern was married to Henrietta Stern and had six children. At the end of his life, he lived at 872 North 8th Street in Philadelphia. Stern died in Philadelphia on November 3, 1870 and is buried at Mount Sinai Cemetery.