

Joseph Einstein
President: 1852-1871

In many ways, Joseph Einstein can be considered the Franklin Roosevelt of Rodeph Shalom. His tenure spanned 19 years, from 1852 through 1871, and he navigated the congregation through the Civil War and beyond.

Born in Bavaria in 1815, Einstein came to Philadelphia as a young man and initially worked as a jeweler. He was a leading figure in the Jewish community and was a founding member of a number of charitable organizations which aided the sick and poor. He helped create the Jewish Hospital Association and was one of the founders of the United Hebrew Charities, a predecessor of sorts to today's Jewish Federation.

Einstein is perhaps best known as the president who moved Rodeph Shalom to its home on Broad and Mt. Vernon Streets, in 1870. During his tenure the congregation had significantly grown. Although it owned its synagogue on Juliana Street, the facility was worn and too small, and Einstein had all the leadership skills needed to find a suitable location—and raise the necessary funds to build a synagogue that immediately became a Philadelphia landmark.

But he did more than orchestrate the historic move. In 1866, he was instrumental in recruiting from Europe the social activist and scholar Rabbi Marcus Jastrow, who “modernized” the congregation. Like many other congregants who were raised in a more enlightened 19th century and quickly took to America's new ways, Einstein perceived the need for a “loosening” of the congregation's rituals, and he, with Rabbi Jastrow, led the congregation away from a pure orthodoxy to a point at which it was ready to join the Reform movement.

Although he moved from Philadelphia soon after his tenure ended, Einstein lived long enough, until 1886, to see his vision of a transformed Rodeph Shalom come to life.

Written by Fred Strober