Conservative Judaism was founded because of a unique commitment to Jewish peoplehood and it retains that commitment today. In 1845, when Rabbi Zacharias Frankel called for a set of changes meant to conserve Jewish tradition in the new conditions of modernity, he insisted that synagogue worship should continue to be conducted largely in Hebrew and that traditional prayers for the messianic return to Zion should be retained. Frankel believed that the work of covenant to which Jews are called requires a people—spanning the generations and the continents—that knows itself to be different from all others; in his view this was all the more true in the modern period as Jews began to take full advantage of greater engagement with the societies and cultures of which we were a part. The language of the Jewish people and the collective hope of the Jewish people were crucial to finding the right balance between being a part of—and apart from—the nations among whom Jews dwelled. Both were essential to the “positive-historical Judaism” that Frankel envisioned and have remained so.

Unlike other modern Jewish streams, Conservative Judaism for much of its history did not regard itself as a “movement” in the normal sense of the word. It has not aimed to distinguish its adherents from other Jews on the basis of religious practice or belief so much as to safeguard—and creatively carry forward—the life of the Jewish people as a religious civilization. A strong bond to Jews of every generation, past and future, has gone hand in hand with a sense of connection to all Jews alive today, regardless of ideological commitment or level of observance. Pluralism has been and remains basic to this vision of Judaism in a way it is not to any other. The leaders and teachers of Conservative Judaism have recognized that there is more than one way for serious Jews to join engagement with the Jewish past to engagement with the societies and cultures of which we are a part, even while believing that Conservative Judaism was the best way of doing so. Jews have always differed in our understandings of Torah and likely always will. The unity of kelal Yisra’el despite those differences, we believe, is essential to the fulfillment of Covenant.

The position of Conservative Jews at the center of the Jewish spectrum has long played a part in nurturing this commitment. We tend to feel comfortable among Reform Jews and in Reform synagogues in a way Orthodox Jews do not—and vice versa. As a result of that comfort level, perhaps, and in keeping with Conservative commitment to kelal Yisra’el, Conservative Jews are heavily overrepresented in the ranks of Jewish communal leaders, lay and professional. The movement’s “loss” of leadership has for generations been the broader community’s gain. I am proud of the outsized role played by Conservative Jews
in the life of the Jewish people and trust that we can maintain this contribution even while attracting the leadership needed to ensure the vitality of the Conservative vision of Torah.

It is also no coincidence that the Conservative Movement, with its stress upon \textit{kelal Yisra’el}, Hebrew, and Jewish history, has placed unique emphasis since its inception (and still does) upon \textit{connection to the people, Land, and State of Israel}. Conservative Jews’ enthusiasm for Zionism and Israel is bound up in our guiding conviction that the Torah is meant to be lived fully by the Jewish people in the radically new circumstances of modernity—and no change is more radical, or demands more creative conservation and adaptation of inherited tradition, than renewed Jewish sovereignty in the Land of Israel. The State offers unparalleled scope for the teaching and practice of Torah in the public sphere, encompassing areas from education and environmental policy to health care, treatment of the poor, justice for minority communities, and issues of war and peace.

Conservative Judaism has a vital contribution to make to Israel: a way of studying Judaism and applying its teachings to new conditions that is arguably unique. (This makes continuing discrimination against non-Orthodox Jews in Israel all the more tragic.) Israel for its part is not only essential to the survival and thriving of Jews of every sort and every country—including America—but is an essential part of life’s meaning for many Jews throughout the world, including me. The growing gap between young American Jews and the State poses a threat to both communities that must be addressed urgently on both sides of the divide. Conservative Jews can do so first of all through closer partnership with the growing number of Israeli Masorti communities. Give our commitment to \textit{kelal Yisra’el}, we should also reach out to a wider swath including Israelis of all streams—“religious” or “secular”—who could use our help and benefit from our distinctive voice. Conservative/Masorti Judaism in the 21st century should never be seen as the province of the United States and Canada alone.

North American Jews in 2011 are uniquely blessed. We have the privilege of living in the finest Diaspora community that Jews have ever known in the long history of our people, and as if that were not blessing enough, we live alongside a reborn State of Israel, about which our ancestors could only dream. What does one do in the face of such blessing? Engage it with all the resources at our command. Assume responsibilities for the Jewish people and for Judaism that previous generations were not able to undertake. Build communities of Torah that until very recently could not even have been conceived.