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This rich, thoughtful, and ambitious document builds upon what may be called a “tradition of change.” It identifies resources, assets, and capabilities in the past and present of JTS, discerns the critical emerging challenges and opportunities, and charts a sound course for change that is compelling—at times breathtaking—in its audacity.

As a student of contemporary American Jewry, I was most drawn to the image of the constituency the JTS of the future seeks to serve, shape, and sustain. Historically, JTS has served the Conservative Movement and trained its spiritual, intellectual, and educational leadership. The new directions charted by this Strategic Plan retain the historic commitment to strengthening the Conservative Movement. At the same time, the JTS of the future recognizes the emergence of the new contours in the ideological terrain of North American Jewish life: a vital religious center, one that embraces Conservative Judaism but extends beyond its current parameters.

Indeed, in almost every instance where the document mentions Conservative Judaism, it speaks of this center as well. Perhaps the clearest articulation of this new vision and insight comes in these words: “In short, we shall reaffirm JTS’s role as the primary religious, spiritual, and leadership center of *Conservative Judaism and the vital religious center* [emphasis added] of North American Jewry and one of its primary sites for cutting-edge conversation about Judaism and the Jewish community more generally” (page 15).

What constitutes the “vital religious center”? In part, the answer is evolving. But, in part, the rough outlines of the center are already quite apparent. Certainly it includes the half-million or so Jews who populate the major institutions of Conservative Judaism—the congregations, Schechter schools, Ramah camps, and numerous other clearly Conservative endeavors.

But the center extends beyond today’s boundaries of Conservative Judaism. The center also includes the thousands of people who have been trained, shaped, and inspired by Conservative Judaism. Many are engaged in independent minyanim, innovative learning endeavors, social justice causes, cultural creativity, and new Jewish life in and around the new media of the Internet and beyond. The rise of the “Innovative Ecosystem” owes much to the successful performance of twentieth-century Conservative Jewish institutions and ought to be viewed as testimony to the value and vision of Conservative Judaism.

A third component of this vital center comprises what our teacher Charles Liebman (z”l) referred to as “secular Jewish maximalists.” Like their counterparts in Conservative Judaism and Innovative Ecosystem, these secular Jewish maximalists share deep affinities for Israel, Hebrew, Zionism, communal engagement, Jewish culture, tzedakah, Torah learning, social action, politics, egalitarianism, pluralism, and other related

features. In their modernity and postmodernity, they are set off from the Orthodox. In the intensity of their Jewish learning and social engagement, they are functionally distinguished from Reform and other worthy alternatives in Jewish life.

JTS is positioning itself to catalyze, mobilize, and energize the current and nascent leadership of the vital Jewish center. It's a bold and pioneering aspiration—and one whose success is critical not only to the institutional mission of JTS in the twenty-first century. It is critical to the vitality of Judaism in North America in the coming years.
