Throughout its two-thousand-year history in exile, beginning with the destruction of the Second Temple in 70 CE, the Jewish people has created and recreated itself in communities across the globe. From Renaissance Italy to colonial Newport and from medieval Fez to Victorian Bombay, each diaspora community developed its own vibrant, dynamic, and unique expression of the Jewish experience. These communities remain startlingly diverse and different, but all were linked by a shared adherence to the traditional Jewish heritage and by constant communication—in the form of letters, travel, literature, and commentary—between rabbis, merchants, mystics, and thinkers, the outstanding Jewish figures of their day. All also shared in the Jewish people’s remarkable contributions to civilization and society: the core values of justice, morality, law, and peace as well as some of the greatest philosophical, scientific, and artistic works of the human spirit.

Kehilot Yisrael aims to retell the stories of these diaspora communities in order to inspire Jewish pride and to connect contemporary Jews to their own rich heritage. Every Jew living today is part of something much greater, a link in a chain stretching back millennia. By bringing this past to life, Kehilot Yisrael aspires to make every Jew feel at home in his or her own culture and to build a better Jewish future.

The organization’s flagship project is a new museum in the heart of Jerusalem that will lead visitors on a journey of discovery, introducing them to the great rabbis, books, events, and movements that have shaped Jewish life across the world. Using rare manuscripts and archival materials as well as the latest technology, the museum’s permanent exhibit will celebrate central and enduring Jewish themes, such as the Sabbath, the Bible, memory, chosenness, and revelation, refracted through the historical experience of communities past and present.

The museum builds on Kehilot Yisrael’s extensive experience and success in studying the communities of the Jewish diaspora. Originally founded as a research institute by Rabbi Yaakov Hillel over fifty years ago, Kehilot Yisrael today conducts, in partnership with leading rabbis and academic scholars, a broad range of preservation, conservation, and documentation activities. To date, the research center has published over 700 books of Jewish scholarship, and also promotes and funds original research projects related to the history of diaspora communities. These efforts, described in more detail below, are aimed at making the vibrant history of these communities accessible to the general public, and not only available to a limited number of scholars and specialists.

The organization’s Department of Digitization houses one of the world’s leading centers for the photographic preservation of rare books and manuscripts. Using state-of-the-art technology, much of which was designed in-house, the department photographs, catalogues, and preserves material from public and private collections according to the highest international standards of digitization. The department has partnered with The National Library of Israel, the Central Archives for the History of the Jewish People, and other prominent institutions in digitizing over 1.5 million pages so far. The versatile and flexible equipment can be packed in a suitcase and be ready to transport for digitization projects anywhere in world within fifteen minutes.

Kehilot Yisrael has led the field in investing in the restoration and documentation of Jewish cemeteries world-wide. In addition to preserving important Jewish heritage, the cemeteries provide a wealth of information on Jewish genealogy, history, demography, and sociology. With the support of local governments, the organization has painstakingly built a unique photographic database of gravestones from cemeteries in Egypt, Morocco, and Italy, accompanied by research on the lives, writings, and communities of those buried there, as well as detailed maps of the cemeteries themselves. In the future, Kehilot Yisrael plans to expand the project to Azerbaijan, Cuba, India, Tunisia, and elsewhere.

The Department for the Study of Poetry and Liturgy focuses on the richness of the Jewish musical tradition. The department has recorded thousands of songs and poems used to mark life cycle events and religious ceremonies and plans in the future to release special recorded collections of the music of particular communities and genres.

In 2014, the Jerusalem Municipality to allocate one of the city’s monumental historic buildings, the Schneller compound, constructed in 1856, for Kehilot Yisrael’s new museum. The Municipality’s decision is a clear measure of the organization’s proven success in a number of fields and of the significance of its vision of bolstering Jewish identity. As we move forward with the design and construction of the museum, as well as with our numerous other projects, we are confident that Kehilot Yisrael will only continue to grow.