

**“I Believe”**  
**Rabbi Ariel Rackovsky**  
**Shaare Tefilla Pesach 5777**

It is the musical climax, the signature number in one of the most popular musicals of recent memory. Elder Price, the protagonist of the Broadway smash hit “Book of Mormon,” is sent on his mission to Uganda, where his starry eyed idealism is quickly dampened by the dire poverty and the tragic lives of the natives he is trying to convert. Of pressing urgency is the terror they routinely experience at the hands of a sadistic general whose name, like much else about the musical, is unrepeatable anywhere, especially a synagogue setting. Coming face to face with his evil adversary, Elder Price begins to have a crisis of faith. Putting himself together, he launches into a soaring and hilarious number in which he reaffirms his Mormon faith:

*You cannot just believe part-way, you have to believe in it all*

*My problem was doubting the Lord's will, instead of standing tall*

*I can't allow myself to have any doubt, it's time to set my worries free*

*Time to show the world what Elder Price is about, and share the power inside of me!*

The song is so popular not just because it is the apex of the musical, but because the principles Elder Price reaffirms include some of the most outlandish aspects of Mormonism. Dozens of articles have been written about how theologically accurate the song is, or is not- by Mormons and others. But after we laugh, I think it’s important to listen, *lehavdil*, especially for the Jews.

The **שירת הים** that we read this morning and recite every morning concludes with a triumphal phrase that is so important, it is repeated twice. It is the capstone to the soaring song of

redemption sung by the Jewish people on the sea, as they witnessed unprecedented miracles on their road out of bondage. Four words that contain a world of faith: ה' ימלך לעולם ועד. Would you believe, then, that this phrase might bespeak a lack of belief? Rabbi Yosei HaGlili, quoted by the Midrashic work *Mechilta deRabbi Yishmael*, makes a startling assertion:

**מכילתא דרבי ישמעאל בשלח - מס' דשירה פרשה :**

ר' יוסי הגלילי אומר אלו אמרו ישראל על הים ה' מלך לעולם ועד לא היתה אומה ולשון שולטת בהן לעולם אלא אמרו ה' ימלוך לעולם ועד לעתיד לבא

Had the Jewish people said ה' מלך לעולם ועד, God *is* the eternal King, no nation in the world could touch them forever. Instead, they said ה' ימלך לעולם ועד, God *will be* the eternal king, indicating that his true dominion will only manifest itself in the future. Really, though? The Jewish people are being denied redemption because of a grammatical error? After all the miracles they witnessed, they cannot have doubted God's dominion in the world. The Torah says it explicitly: ויאמינו בה' ובמשה עבדו - they believed in God, and in the mission of Moshe, his faithful servant. What was so terrible about what they said, that led it to be a squandered opportunity for the true and lasting redemption?

Perhaps we can suggest that the Jewish people were taken to task not for their faith itself, but for their reticence in expressing it. Even at the moment when they experienced the most glorious and incomparable miracles, they could not bring themselves to *say* that God is *now* the Eternal King, even if they felt it deeply. Had they been able to give voice to their deepest religious feelings, the redemption would have happened immediately.

I think this is an important lesson for us Jews. It was during my brief Dental school experience that I had my first encounter with evangelical Christians, in the form of a classmate named

Kevin. Kevin was not “in your face” about his Christianity, but it seems that in me he saw a fellow religious traveler (and possibly a target for missionary efforts). One day, we were in gross anatomy lab and had to identify a number of embryological structures. The gross anatomy lab, reeking of formaldehyde and surrounded by the last physical remains of a life now dedicated to science, may seem like an unlikely place for an epiphany, but not for Kevin. “Ariel,” he said, “when I look at these I think of the verse in Jeremiah 1:5, ‘Before I formed thee in the belly I knew thee.’” Fortunately, I knew this verse, or else I would have been profoundly embarrassed- an experience I was to have much later on- several months ago, in fact, when I met with Pastor Todd Wagner of the Watermark Church. I was quoting a verse to him which I said was in Isaiah 59, and his associate pastor said “Actually, it’s Isaiah 58.” He was right...In any case, I must admit that my initial reaction to Kevin’s biblical quotation was to think that he was a little too religious for my taste- and *I* was the one wearing a Yarmulke in the room, the only one in our class, in fact, with any kind of outward religious trappings. We Lone Stars of David here in Texas don’t need songs by fictitious Mormons in hilarious and profane musicals, because we are surrounded by Kevins who are unafraid to declare their undying faith in song and otherwise. Perhaps as a corrective, or to differentiate ourselves from our evangelical neighbors, we are reticent to publicly declare God’s dominion, to talk about the nature of our faith and to engage in full throated religious declarations. The truth is that it is not only our evangelical neighbors that we are reacting to. It is our Chareidi brethren as well, who we hear constantly talking about *emunah* and *bitachon* and extolling the virtues of pure, unflinching and unshaken faith. Our Modern Orthodox community reacts to this by retreating from these discussions. Sure, we may attend classes about Jewish philosophy, and may be familiar with various streams of Jewish

thought, but we really don't talk about *emunah* at all, and certainly not as often as we should. It's understandable; many other religions express great certitude about ideas that we struggle with, don't know much about or are afraid to discuss, like the Messiah (even though they disagree with us vehemently, and sometimes violently, about his identity), Jewish chosenness, divine providence and even the spiritual significance of the Land (and State) of Israel as the God-given home of the Jewish people. Even if we do have thought out ideas about each of these, our belief is often nuanced and complex, too difficult to convey in unequivocal statements.

*Lehavdil*, unlike Elder Price, a Jew does not "just believe." The challenge of *Hashem yimloch le'olam va'ed* is the challenge not to delay or avoid these important discussions of faith, and not to refrain from interrogating our belief until some distant date. A tradition of faith that is passed on to future generations begins with us talking about what our faith means to us. WHICH experiences have shaped the contours of our faith- have there been any that have bolstered our faith in God, or have shaken it? Have we felt the hand of God guiding us along the trajectory of our lives? Have we maintained faith in God when we have lost faith in human beings? If we live in exile an unredeemed world, what can we do to bring about its redemption? This one is particularly important, as discussion of and belief in Moshiach is the province of every Jew, and not just Chabad. We need to ask these questions of ourselves and talk about them with others, and remember the formative experiences that developed the nuances of our belief. *Emunah* is not just the product of remarkable stories or witnessing miracles; it is the product of the study of the word of Hashem coupled with the experiences of a life lived in His world. Let us rise to the occasion so we can say, with full faith, *Hashem melech Le'olam va'ed*- God is king, forever and ever.