

And God learned how to whisper

Prophecy is history / 14 – On each new path in life, there is a stage of the "broom bush", of hopelessness, and it can be overcome

By Luigino Bruni



Published in [Avvenire](#) 08/09/2019

«The danger of every human society is unanimity. In ancient Israel, the Sanhedrin realized this and did not allow death sentences, which had been passed by all members, to be carried out. To the Sanhedrin it seemed impossible that an unanimous vote could be human, in other words, thoughtful and rational»

Paolo De Benedetti, *The Death of Moses*

On Mount Horeb, Elijah tells us that we can recognize God during spiritual depression and rise again, if He is able to lower his voice and knows how to make

himself a light breeze.

Crises, fatigue, and depression are not all the same. The Bible tells us there is also such a thing as spiritual depression, a common occurrence in the lives of prophets. They generally manifest in adult life, to those who have received a calling and a mission. We must distinguish spiritual depression from psychological depression, which is not easy because the signs are very similar. Elijah's story presents us with an ABC to recognize these depressions and, perhaps, to try to overcome them.

«Now Ahab told Jezebel everything Elijah had done and how he had killed all the prophets with the sword» (1 Kings 19,1). Despite the great theophany of Mount Carmel, King Ahab remains ambivalent and does not seem to have entirely converted to YHWH. True conversions of the heart rarely stem from spectacular events and violence. The queen, the exterminator of the prophets of YHWH, continues her war: «So Jezebel sent a messenger to Elijah to say, "May the gods deal with me, be it ever so severely, if by this time tomorrow I do not make your life like that of one of them"» (1 Kings 19,2).

Elijah's horizon darkens: «Elijah was afraid and ran for his life» (1 Kings 19,3). This time Elia leaves not because of the voice of God but because of the voice of Jezebel. Even the prophets sometimes take off and leave simply because they are afraid. Elijah was not afraid to face four hundred and fifty prophets of Baal alone, but now he is terrified by this threat and flees. The text allows us to look into the soul of Elijah: «He went a day's journey into the wilderness. He came to a broom bush, sat down under it and prayed that he might die. "I have had enough, Lord" he said. "Take my life; I am no better than my ancestors". Then he lay down under the bush and fell asleep» (1 Kings 19,3-5).

The threat of Jezebel unleashes an authentic spiritual depression in Elijah. Elijah is suddenly eager to die. Yet he has just come back from a stunning public victory, defeating and killing all the prophets of Baal by himself. Now, however, those successes are gone. Only the fear and the desire to retire to the desert and die there, remain.

In this great escape in search of death we can catch glimpses of Moses, Jeremiah, Job, Jonah and his Kikayon tree, Francis, and of many other prophets of yesterday and today, who at the peak of their spiritual journey, went through the "stage of the broom bush". How could the immense verses of the

song of Giacomo Leopardi not spring into mind?: «Perfumed broom bush, merry in the deserts». Elijah asks to die, and instead God sends him another messenger: «All at once an angel touched him and said, "Get up and eat!" He looked around, and there by his head was some bread baked over hot coals, and a jar of water» (1 Kings 19: 5-6). The angel *touched him*.

When it comes to certain kinds of tests, a voice is not enough: the angel must touch us, touch the flesh and *wake us up in shock*. In deep dreams like these, mere hearing is insufficient. The angel must also reach the body, he must reach all of humanity.

God still sends him bread and water. His primary need is satisfied. However, after eating, Elijah «lay down again» (1 Kings 19,6). In this kind of depression, it is not enough to simply eat and drink to get back on the road. At this stage, we could also die perfectly satiated and quenched. In order to leave the shadow of death of the broom and rise again, we need something different: «The angel of the Lord came back a second time and touched him and said, "Get up and eat, for the journey is too much for you." So he got up and ate and drank. Strengthened by that food, he traveled forty days and forty nights until he reached Horeb, the mountain of God» (1 Kings 19: 7-8). The angel returns, touches him a second time, but now he does not simply say "eat"; he tells him to eat *in view of the walk to come*, and mentions a name to him that is a message: Mount Horeb.

To get out of these spiritual depressions we need to find a new path, a new meaning, a new direction. The angel makes him understand that this food was not to survive, but to enable him to walk on. The prophet comes back to life, finding his path again, when he sees a mountain to be reached at the end of the road on the horizon. Prophets do not heal with bread and water. We can fill them with food, but they will remain sick until a new path opens up before them.

Once he arrives at Mount Horeb, the mountain of Moses and the Covenant, we are able to understand the prophetic exhaustion of Elijah better: «There he went into a cave and spent the night. And the word of the Lord came to him: "What are you doing here, Elijah?" He replied, "I have been very zealous for the Lord God Almighty. The Israelites have rejected your covenant, torn down your altars, and put your prophets to death with the sword. I am the only one left, and now they are trying to kill me too"» (1 Kings 19,9-10). God and Elijah *dialogue, talk*. The dialogues between God and the people we find in the Bible always surprise me. The word, which has become flesh, has generated poetry, art, freedom and democracy in Europe and in the world, which is the praise of non-unanimity, because that incarnate word was already a dialogue, because that *logos* was always *dia-logos*.

YHWH, in the dialogue, says: what are you doing here, Elijah? A strange question, given that it was an angel of his who asked Elia to go to Mount Horeb. Elijah arrives, and God asks him: *what are you doing here?* These strange questions are frequent in the life of a prophet. He receives a new command, he obeys, he leaves, he arrives, and once he has arrived to destination, he hears from the one who called him: what are you doing here? Unexpected and always terrible questions, which often amplify the spiritual test.

Elijah's answer clearly tells us that his depression depended on the solitude he found himself in ("I was left alone"). Solitude, however, can only be *one of* the reasons for the profound crises of the prophets, but it is never *the first* reason - the prophets know how to co-exist with many moments of solitude, they are their spiritual environment, as co-essential as the community one. There are other more radical reasons. Elijah suffers to see faith in his God denied by and erased in the people. He uses the same verb that the Bible generally uses for God - «I am zealous with zealous» for YHWH. Elijah is depressed because the God who called him is being profaned, but also because his prophets have been killed - there is great *solidarity* among prophets: when a prophet is killed, all prophets die within him.

These reasons are added to the first cause of suffering, perhaps the most excruciating and unspeakable one, which Elijah had pronounced in his first response speaking with God: «*I am not the best of my fathers*». Here we enter into the heart of Elijah's crisis - and that of his prophet brothers. A mysterious phrase, not easy to exegesis. The "fathers" that Elijah speaks of are Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, Saul, David and Solomon. Fathers who are all marked by limits, by sin, and always by

failure. The history of his fathers had been a spectacle of failures, of the littleness that stood out strong when compared to the greatness of the promise. Under that broom bush, Elijah felt himself close to the «social chain» of his fathers' anthropological wound, he felt exactly like them. A fundamental stage that all prophets experience in various ways, when one day they feel exactly like all the men and women came before them; like everyone else, like the worst. They left from home and immediately there were miracles, deceased that rose again, defeated enemies and great public successes. Then an event - a slander, a persecution, an illness ... - makes us understand that all those achievements and fruits were only *vanitas*, smoke and straw. Everything disappears, we find ourselves in the desert under a broom bush, and we really feel just like our parents and the relatives we left for a task and a vocation that we felt was infinitely different and better. Sometimes feeling this likeness is a great blessing; other times it depresses us because it speaks only of failure.

This stage can constitute the end of a calling; but, if overcome, it can signify death in preparation of actual resurrection. Like what happened to Elijah. In fact, one of the most beautiful, famous and mysterious theophanies of the Bible was performed on Mount Horeb, with his soul crushed by the "dark night". Let us enjoy it without any additional words of introduction: «The Lord said, "Go out and stand on the mountain in the presence of the Lord, for the Lord is about to pass by". Then a great and powerful wind tore the mountains apart and shattered the rocks before the Lord, but the Lord was not in the wind. After the wind there was an earthquake, but the Lord was not in the earthquake. After the earthquake came a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire. And after the fire came a gentle whisper. When Elijah heard it, he pulled his cloak over his face and went out and stood at the mouth of the cave» (1 Kings 19,11-13). There is a strong contrast between this scene and the one on Mount Carmel, where God had manifested himself, with all his power, in the fire. Now Elijah is depressed and discouraged, and God no longer speaks to him with the power of nature. Here we have the end of the primitive religious phase that saw the presence of God in exceptional natural events, and the discovery that God is spirit and breath.

There is something more. That splendid expression - *qol demana daqqa* - which the exegetes and poets have described in many ways, (a soft and subdued sound, the *voice* of silence, the hiss of a light breeze, the sweet whisper of a voice ...), tells us that God must learn to whisper if he wants to talk to us when pain has impaired the hearing of our souls. Inside spiritual caves, words often only serve to bother us - how many times do we not see the discomfort caused by words, including the word of God, in those who experience this kind of test. In order to rise again from certain deaths, the word must stop speaking and return to being merely a voice, a whisper, returning to that original phase, when sound had not yet articulated into actual words. Like that time when, in another cave, it became only the crying of a child. Like the time when, on another mountain, it became merely a scream. As in the end, when all the words we have said will only become a whisper, all enclosed in one last sigh.

In spiritual depression we are able to recognize God if he is able to lower his voice, if he learns to whisper to us. If we know how to do these things, God *must know how to do it* as well.