

The name of the Ark is made of silver

Prophecy is history / 23 - The same biblical word is used for both "chest" and the Ark of the Covenant

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In the words of Rabbi Schmelke: "The poor give the rich more than what the rich do not give to the poor. And more than a case of the poor needing the rich man, it is the rich man who needs the poor"

Martin Buber, Hasidic stories and legends.

There is no conflict between the act of giving a gift and drawing up a contract, money that has been invested, earned and spent honestly is no less noble

than the offers in the temple. Only gifts and contracts together can begin to save us.

Trust in the honesty of the people around us is an essential resource of every economy and society. When the hypothesis of the honesty of others - which in the words of jurists is called good faith - inspires our relationships, the economy improves along with our well-being. Without this premise of honesty, anthropological mistrust and pessimism slowly begins to infest our workplaces and lives. No management can be *subsidiary* and delegate - that is, entrust the responsibility for the choices to be made to those who are closest to the actual work being carried out - if we are not able to think well of others until seeing evident (and repeated) proof to the contrary. Benevolence, thinking well of others, is the root of trust. It values workers, makes them feel appreciated, strengthens trust in organizations and thus improves the effectiveness and efficiency of management.

Once Athaliah was killed, Joash became king and proceeded to reign in Jerusalem for forty years. For the Bible, Joash was a just king and a reformer. He is presented to us as a restorer and reconstructor of the temple of Solomon: «Joash told the priests: "Let every priest receive the money from one of the treasurers, then use it to repair whatever damage is found in the temple"» (2 Re 12,5-6). Years go by, and despite the indications of Joash the temple is not repaired: «Therefore King Joash summoned Jehoiada the priest and the other priests and asked them, "Why aren't you repairing the damage done to the temple? Take no more money from your treasurers, but hand it over for repairing the temple". The priests agreed that they would not collect any more money from the people and that they would not repair the temple themselves"» (2 Kings 12,8).

A good management of an organizations understands, if possible in time before it is too late, when there is a conflict of interest among workers, and when individual incentives are not compatible with common goals. Due to their mentality and task (to manage the religious cult), those priests were objectively in a condition that led them to misuse the money they managed. The king, who proves that he is a wise man, does not continue to insist on a moral level by asking the priests to change; instead the organization changes, revisiting the objective and

formal structure of the financing and the management of the repairing of the temple. Because when there is an objective incompatibility between the role and the incentive, continuing to insist on the moral aspect never proves to be effective and only serves to create frustration and conflict. What we need to do is to immediately change the *objective organizational structure* and remove people from inappropriate roles and tasks. Thus a cash reserve was created in the temple where the offerings were delivered, and the collection and administration of the funds passed under the concerted responsibility of the king and the high priest: «Jehoiada the priest took a chest and bored a hole in its lid. He placed it beside the altar, on the right side as one enters the temple of the Lord» (2 Kings 12,10). It is interesting to note that when the king's scribe and the high priest collected the silver deposited in the box (because it was full), "they melted the money found in the temple" (2 Kings 12:11). Here we find a reference to the economic functions of temples in antique times. The temple was not only the centre of the tax and welfare system; in certain historical periods metals were also fused in the temple to mint coins, thus acting as proto-banks.

In this passage we are hence treated to a live view of a certain level of laicization of the "temple factory" of Jerusalem. While it used to be entrusted directly to the priests, now it passes to those who directly carry out the work: the scribe and the high priest «gave the money to the men appointed to supervise the work on the temple» (2 Kings 12,12). The failure of the first solution - the priests used the offers of the people for urgencies and for the management of the religious cult and sacrifices - produced a "secular" reform where the workers and the technicians began manage the work on the temple: a first application of the principle of economic and managerial subsidiarity or delegation: «They distributed it to the carpenters and builders who worked in the temple of the Lord, to the masons, to the stonemasons, to purchase lumber and cut stones, to repair the damaged parts of the temple and for all that was necessary to repair the temple» (2 Kings 12,12-13). In this way they also avoided "tax" revenues to be used for improper purposes: «The money brought into the temple was not spent for making silver basins, wick trimmers, sprinkling bowls, trumpets or any other articles of gold or silver for the temple of the LORD; it was paid to the workers, who used it to repair the temple» (2 Kings 12,13-15).

It is interesting to note the ethical evaluation that the text gives of this change: «They did not require an accounting from those to whom they gave the money to pay the workers, because they acted with complete honesty» (2 Kings 12,16). Very beautiful, this *honesty*. Delegating and bringing money management closer to those who use it for its specific purpose lead to reducing the costs of supervision («They did not require an accounting...») and thus improved the overall efficiency of that money. But first the king changed something essential in the organizational structure: for trust and honesty to be born and last, they must first be possible and sustainable. Too many relationships of trust and loyalty go awry for lack of organizational reforms. It is also significant that the word 'aron that the text uses to mean the chest placed in the temple to collect the offerings is the same word used for the *Ark (of the Covenant)*, the most precious artefact of all, the one that contained the Tables of the Law, kept in the most intimate and sacred part of the temple, because it is a symbol of the pact with their different God. That case containing silver was placed inside the temple. This silver, made up of taxes and gifts (the offerings were also free), is not deemed unclean, it can enter the temple. The Bible knows that there is money that is "mammon", not because it in itself is a kind of idol (that would be too trivial), but because it gives the possessor the illusion of being a god (every sort of idolatry constitutes an illusion). The most terrible idol of all is actually our "I". This money must not enter temples, because it is not a friend of God, nor is it a friend of man or of the poor.

But there is also another different kind of money. Money that has been donated, of course, but also the silver one has earned honestly. The silver of gifts is a friend of the silver of many merchants, because the fact that a contract is drawn up does not necessarily mean "killing" the gift. Many times, gifts and contracts go together hand in hand. When the Samaritan paid the hotel owner the two denarii to "take care" of the half-dead man, he was performing an act no less

noble and spiritual than those who offered silver in the temple. And even the money we donate today in philanthropy is no more noble and spiritual than the money paid by an entrepreneur to a worker within a just and fair job contract. Civilizations flourish when the gift becomes an ally of the contract, and wither when those who give see those who work and produce wealth with disdain, even hatred, and rivalry. The Ark of the Covenant is not a bank *vault*, their essence is very different; but they come very close if that silver is born in honesty and is administered and invested ethically. Herein lies the secularity of faith and the spirituality of the economy. The last part of Joash's reign is marked by the Assyrian threat to Jerusalem. Joash, the new Solomon, had placed the restoration and care of the temple at the centre of his mission; now he is forced to carry out an act that seems to deny the meaning of his whole life: «Joash king of Judah took all the sacred objects dedicated by his predecessors—Jehoshaphat, Jehoram and Ahaziah, the kings of Judah - and the gifts he himself had dedicated and all the gold found in the treasuries of the temple of the Lord and of the royal palace, and he sent them to Hazael king of Aram, who then withdrew from Jerusalem» (2 Kings 12,18).

The temple is emptied of all the treasures accumulated by him and his predecessors. The Bible speaks to us of Joash almost exclusively in relation to the temple - he repaired it, as a child, he was consecrated king there, he was protected and educated there. His life, entirely devoted to the temple, ends with an empty temple. Another message about gratuitousness and the incompleteness of life, which we find in many pages of the Bible. A life is spent at the service of a specific work or deed which, by vocation and task, becomes the sense of our existence. And then, one day, that treasure kept and accumulated must be given away, and life seems to lose its meaning. A great metaphor of human existence, where the accumulated and cared for treasures must, bit by bit, eventually be returned to become free and poor; it is also a metaphor for every founder or community leader, who spends a first, long, part of his life repairing and increasing the treasure of the community, up to a day when he will have to restore everything, and finally live in chastity. But the story also tells us something else: that treasure saved Jerusalem from the Syrians, who satisfied by the treasure got up and left. Because, perhaps, the treasures that we guard and care for actually perform their best function not while accumulated and stored away, but when they are used to save someone else. If Joash had not kept those treasures he would not have been able to save his city at that decisive moment of his reign. We often see capital resources accumulated while making great sacrifices disappear in a short period of time devoured by lawyers, banks and suppliers; but, from a different and true perspective, maybe while disappearing those funds are really somehow saving us.

While the vicissitudes of Joash, king of Judah are taking place, the prophet Elisha returns to the scene in the northern kingdom one last time: «Elisha died and they buried him» (2 Kings 13,20). We had first met him as a young man leading twelve pairs of oxen. He was a wealthy young man. He was called upon by Elijah who threw his cloak over him. He became the first disciple of a prophet, then a prophet himself. He followed his calling to the end. Unlike Elijah, Elisha is not swept away into the heavens but dies, just like us, just like everyone else. But the Bible gives us a last scene to tell us that the prophets never die completely: «While some Israelites were burying a man, suddenly they saw a band of raiders; so they threw the man's body into Elisha's tomb. When the body touched Elisha's bones, the man came to life and stood up on his feet» (2 Kings 13,21). The bones of the prophets can make us rise again. Not always, and not all of us, have living prophets next to us to save us from our deaths. The Bible, however, has preserved the different words and the "bones" of the prophets alive. They are there, for everyone, for us. All you need to do is touch them to live again.