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# THE SPLENDID LAW OF THE REMNANT

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## BELIEVING IN RESURRECTION, NOT EXHUMING CORPSES

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by Luigino Bruni

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*When rabbi Bunam lay dying, his wife burst into tears. He said, "What are you crying for? My whole life was only that I might learn to die."*

**Martin Buber, *Tales of the Hasidim***  
(English translation by Olga Marx)

The Bible is a composite of many things together, and they are all important. Each generation discovers new meanings in it, and forgets others. It is also a spiritual map to orient ourselves in the mysterious life stories of those

who seriously follow a voice. There is no better place to look for companionship and light during these journeys. History and biblical narratives are also precious and fruitful for understanding and explaining the *collective* experiences, promises, exiles, deaths and resurrections of those communities, movements and organizations born around a *charisma*, whether religious or secular. It is a precious and in many ways unique map especially for understanding and illuminating the night of the great collective crises, even if it is rarely read and used from this perspective - and so some essential resources are wasted.

Among the many but mostly still hidden and unused treasures for the charismatic communities there is the *prophetic logic of the remnant*, which runs through many biblical texts. Placed in a context of great sapiential and theological importance, in the Book of Jeremiah we find it in a particularly developed and powerful form. This prophet had received the task of prophesying the end of a historical time from YHWH, but the heads and religious leaders of his people do not want to listen to him and discredit him. Jeremiah hears, sees and says that the Babylonians will arrive soon and that the people will be defeated and then deported, that an exile will begin in a foreign land, which will last seventy years. But while he announces the end with infinite tenacity, the false prophets - particularly abundant in Jerusalem and everywhere and always - contradict him, accuse him of defeatism, attack him and convince the leaders to persecute him to keep him quiet.

Jeremiah does not say that *the* story of salvation is over, nor that the promise has been put out; he only says that *a* story is over, that great secular story of the great kingdom. He says that an interpretation of the promise has been extinguished, the one that made it coincide with greatness and success. But while announcing the inexorable end of that first world, and with the same conviction, he says that "a

remnant shall return" and history will continue. In charismatic communities and in ideal-driven organisations (IDO-s), to succeed in understanding that the first story - that marvellous story that made us daydream and see paradise - is over, it is really over, requires an ethical and spiritual act that is particularly difficult, especially in the charismatically richer communities with a great history. It is almost impossible to understand and accept that our story has not ended under these ruins, but that *a* story has ended, that only the *first part* of the story has ended. It is also difficult to understand that if we want the same story to continue tomorrow, today we must accept that its first part is really over, that we will have to go through exile, and then write a second part of the story that nobody knows yet. We have to come to terms with the facts that the form and the ways in which we had lived the collective promise - those kings, that greatness, that success, those liturgies, that temple, that religious apparatus and that administration of worship - will no longer return; but history will continue because the garment that our faith had worn in the first part of the journey was not the only one, it was only the first one. One day, in order to save ourselves, we must understand that the truth of a collective charismatic experience does not lie in continuing to grow and reap successes as in the past, but in diminishing, in becoming small, defeated, forgotten and abandoned, provided that this destruction generates a faithful remnant.

But one of the deepest and most decisive mysteries of collective spiritual experiences is precisely the failure to recognize what has always been expected when it really comes. Because we wait for a messiah to arrive on horseback triumphantly, and we confuse Palm Sunday with Easter Sunday. The communities only know the present and the past, and it is therefore natural that to understand the new facts they use the categories and tools available to them, and they are those known and learned in the nice summery season that is about to end. And so they face the winter with their summer clothes, and they seriously risk dying of the cold. Among the words of yesterday there were also some winter clothes, words suitable to face the new climates. There were also the manger, the carpenter's workshop, the small flock, the mustard seed, the no of the rich young man; but when one becomes truly small and fragile these small things and vulnerabilities are read with the memory of the miracles and the springtime of Galilee in one's heart, and we tend to forget the other words of smallness, which would now be the truly precious part of the inheritance. In the original spiritual heritage of the communities the blessing of defeat is almost always already present. In the times of abundance and success those words about the strength in weakness, that wisdom of becoming better as we become smaller moved us, convinced us and helped us to overcome personal crises. But when the words of good fragility become *collective* flesh they are not remembered or recognized. We have understood and valued them many times in order to read our *individual* stories, but now we are not able to make them become light for the present and the future of the entire *community*.

Actually, in these moments it would be enough to listen to the prophets who, if they have not already been killed, are naturally part of the population of the charismatic communities in times of crisis. They are those people who (by vocation and by task) have the capacity to make us remember the right words, and to give us a few new categories that are indispensable to understand and face the new era. The first new category they offer us is the revelation of the inadequacy of the

categories with which we read growth and success yesterday, because today they are obsolete and need to be changed. This is the most important good news, because it is the pre-condition of all the others. Then they tell us that a time of exile is waiting for us, and finally that a remnant shall return. On the roads leading to Babylon and Emmaus it is not the meaning of the three tents of Tabor and the words of Sinai we must learn but that of the devastation of the temple and the three crosses of Golgotha. These new meanings to be learned along the roads of disappointment are declinations of the eternal words of the prophets: *this story* is over, but *our story* isn't, because a *remnant* shall return. But for the faithful remnant to continue the race, today we must accept the reality of the end and, above all, not believe those who tell us that the crisis will pass and we will continue as before. Because, also and above all here, the action of the *false prophets* is always powerful and convincing. They try to persuade us that whoever is announcing the end is not a prophet to listen to, but a charlatan and an enemy of the people, because as opposed to what he announces there will be the great miracle soon that will save us and our "temple", and everything will return as it was yesterday. They bring us empirical evidence that things are not so bad after all, that there are signs of recovery here and there, that the great crisis is passing, and they invite us to look to the future with their optimism (which is the opposite of biblical hope). The consolations of the false prophets give pleasant feelings and do not let us feel pain, because they are the opium of the communities; those of the prophets are painful and ruthless, but they heal and bring us to life.

The people of Israel listened to the false prophets. But a remnant collected the words of the true prophets, and when they returned from exile they did not keep the books of the false prophets, but those of Jeremiah and the other prophets. Prophets are not listened to in their time, that is their task and destiny; but if a faithful remnant saves their words, their true prophecy can continue. Therefore, the prophetic remnant is not a simple group of survivors, nor an elite of the enlightened. Many communities have had survivors, but they have not had a prophetic remnant. This is a *believing remnant*, composed of those few who, in the time of the ruins and exile, continued to believe in the same promise that had been clothed with success and glory before, and who therefore know how to read defeat and exile as a mystery of blessing. It is the honest exegete of the many words of the communities. It is the sprout that emerges from the cut trunk, and makes life continue. Those who believe in the time of disappointment are the ones who did not believe in an illusion, because the illusion (which is real) was not the promise, but it coincided with its first coating of greatness. They are the ones who believe that that end is also a new beginning, and that that cry is giving birth to their future, which is all different. It is *the name of the son*. Shear-jashub, that is "a remnant shall return", is also the name of Isaiah's son (Is 7:3). The faithful remnant is the risen body with the stigmata of the passion, which remain because they were real. The false prophets do not believe in any kind of resurrection, but only try to exhume the body. They are the heirs of Egyptian wizards and fortune-tellers who tried to replicate the wounds artificially, but the fake wounds do not prepare any real opening of the sea.

Finally, the wonderful law of the remnant is also a fundamental law of the existential journey of the person. We start as young people believing, loving and hoping for a life that is pure, meek, poor, crowned with all the virtues, and we

expect all the beauties of the earth and heaven. We would never have set out on our journey without this real and impossible promise. If we try to remain a little faithful to that first voice, as adults and as elders we discover that only a "remnant" of that promise has remained alive. We only find ourselves with a little poverty, or with a little meekness, or with a hope that is still alive despite the ruins of the dream. And one day we realize that we have saved ourselves precisely because of that little remnant that is alive. Because we did our job well, because we were able to love one person very much instead of loving many people just a little, or because at least once we had the faith to say "come out" and a friend came out of their tomb. And then we learn that all the promise was there, kept in that little believing and faithful remnant.