

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Bashert: English Language and Fate

Steve Fisher · Tuesday, October 22nd, 2013

Hecate and the Three Fates, William Blake

Credit Wikipedia

The next person you meet could be a spy. On a sunny spring day, a man was walking toward me. What caused me to take notice was that he had in each hand a ski pole.

He was not young, but his gait was deliberate. We made eye contact; he stopped and posed. Raising my camera, I took two quick shots.

"I'll send your photograph to the Queens Chronicle."

"No, send them to me. I'll pay you." I offered to email the files. He was not terribly receptive to that idea, so I gave him my card to write his address.

When he saw my surname was "Fisher" he said, "You're Jewish. I'm a Russian Jew. You can do your own printing?"

"Yes."

"I'll come over?"

"Uh, no." I said.

"Ah, you are Jewish. I understand. But I'm a good guy."

Shocked by his brashness, I thought, *But you're still not coming to my house.*

"You have your own business?" He asked.

"No, this is just for fun; I'm retired."

"Retired? How old are you?"

"Sixty-one, but I've been retired for six years." I explained.

"Why so young?"

Toying with him, I said, "I married a wealthy woman."

"How old do you think I am?" He inquired.

"About the same age as me," I guessed.

"LIAR!" he exclaimed, "You're a Jew and a liar. I'm seventy-six." Then: "Where was your father from?" he wanted to know.

"He was born here, but his father was from Russia – now Poland, Bialystok. Where are you from?" He was from Leningrad. He left Russia about forty years ago.

"Where did you learn English?" I asked.

"Do you know the word 'Bashert'?" He returned.

"No."

"What kind of Jew are you?" I was shocked by his rudeness, yet his insults were still somehow charming.

"'Bashert' means 'it is written,'" he explained, "All that happens in life is fated." And with that, he recounted his story.

I graduated engineering school and then worked designing missiles for the government. Someone I worked with was promoted above me; I was not very happy. Soon afterward, a much younger, inexperienced worker was also promoted ahead of me. When I questioned my boss, he told me the government no longer promoted Jews; there was suspicion they secretly worked for Israel. I was really pissed off – I had never given Israel or Jews a thought. I was a Russian engineer. My father had died a hero in WWII fighting for Russia. Who could question my loyalty?

I went home very angry and decided to resign my position and even leave the country. My boss made it clear that I would never get permission to leave Russia. “You have Top-Secret clearance status – they won’t let you out.” He said that he liked me and knew I was a loyal Russian, but his hands were tied. I was trapped. I couldn’t find other work as an engineer – the only job was fixing elevators. Imagine me, a designer of missiles fixing elevators.

I decided to teach myself English. Then I began to teach English to other Russian Jews who were able to leave the country legally. I did that for six years.

One day, my old boss told me I could get out, I had two weeks. “Two weeks?! How can I do that?” “You want out, those are the terms.” My family left for Italy. At the American Consulate, we were denied access to the U.S. Why? Because I was suspected of being a Russian spy. They sent us to an American military base in Munich. For six months they interrogated me, all day, every day. It was awful. Eventually, they allowed us to come to America. They wanted me to work for the government as an American spy! I told them no.

In America, I drove a taxi. One day, a Russian Jew asked why I was driving a cab. “You’re well-educated and speak English.” He suggested I contact a Jewish Wall Street banker he knew. When this banker realized my inexperience, he dismissed me. I was incensed and wrote him a letter saying he should be ashamed. There are 50 million Jews in the world, and unless we help each other, we could readily be wiped out by our enemies.

The letter must have shamed him because he offered me a job – a menial one at \$150 a week. I didn’t know whether to accept it. My wife argued, “You make more driving a cab.” When I conferred with my mother, she instantly said, “Take it. When I was young, I went to see a Gypsy fortune-teller. Asking about you, she advised, ‘Don’t worry, he will grow up to be a wealthy banker.’ At the time, that was ludicrous, but now, it must be bashert.” I took the job. I rose to become a vice president.

The man who had sent me to Wall Street asked if I knew how I came to escape the clutches of Russia. I didn’t; one moment I was a prisoner in my own country and the next I was told to run – like Hebrews fleeing Egypt. He revealed that he was responsible. How was that possible?

He explained: *I am a wealthy member of a Jewish organization here. I became aware of a Russian Jew who had taught English to Russian émigrés. Grateful to him, they sought through their new congregations how they might help. I called my friend, “Henry, you like my money? Carter likes my money in his campaign war chest? Then, get that Jew and his family out of Russia.”*

I thanked him for sharing his story and promised to send the photographs. Continuing on my walk, I realized it was my questioning where he learned English that prompted him to tell his saga. The answer wasn’t simply – Russia. It was why he had found it important to learn English and the irony that those he taught were instrumental in getting him out of Russia through extraordinary steps to accomplish the extradition. It was *Bashert*.

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