

Perhaps There is More to Reality Than Meets the Eye?

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Bashert is one of those special notions that can be applied to either the thesis or the antithesis. Especially when it comes to relationships. If it doesn't work out the way you had hoped, you proclaim that it wasn't bashert—even if, at the beginning of the relationship, everything seemed to be so bashert. It's a very convenient way to deal with the vicissitudes of life.

The truth is that this Yiddish word, which translates as “meant to be”, reflects a universally shared consternation at the meaning of life. We just don't get it. We don't understand why certain things happen the way they do or don't. Yet underlying this theological rationalization is a presupposition that—despite all evidence to the contrary—there is order in the universe. We have a deep and primal need to believe that somewhere, somehow all of the chaos that surrounds our lives will be explained. Unless, of course, you are a nihilist in which case nothing has meaning.

Events like the mass murder of 32 students and faculty at Virginia Tech last month put us to the test. On the surface the tragedy seems so random and senseless. Yet while to leave it at that might satisfy our intellect, our soul—which is far more impacted at such moments than is our mind—agonizes in torment and despair. And even though we say we want to make “sense” out of it all, in fact what we seek is not logic but harmony. More than wanting to know, we need to “feel” that it's simply an unrecognizable part of a universal jigsaw puzzle, the picture of which is too big to see from our narrow and sheltered perspective.

This thought came into particular relief when I learned about Liviu Librescu. He was the professor who blocked his classroom's doorway to the assailant long enough for most of his students to jump from their 2nd floor window to safety, tragically at the expense of his own life. The story would be sufficiently inspiring with just this information, but what elevates it to the level of myth—not in the sense of being unbelievable but rather of having characteristics suggestive of deeper and more enduring truths—is the fact that he was a survivor of the Holocaust.

One of the more common themes I have observed among Holocaust survivors is the quiet struggle they wage with Why. Not “Why did it happen?” but rather “Why did I survive?” Why me? Often it is intermingled with a deep and irreconcilable sense of guilt, particularly when thinking about their loved ones who did not survive. Of course, there is no possible answer, at least not one that will satisfy. And invoking bashert doesn’t seem quite right with such situations; on the contrary to suggest that one person surviving while others perish as being part of a divine plan borders on the heretical.

But I confess, the very first thought that came to my mind when I heard the story of Dr. Librescu was how ironic that he should survive the Nazi methodical genocide only to succumb to a madman’s indiscriminate rage. Indeed, it is the paradigm of tragic irony. But at the same time I allowed myself to wonder, what if...? What if Liviu Librescu was supposed to survive—that he could be there to block the door that day? Believe what you will. For me, embracing the notion of bashert allows me to feel a little bit of order in a world where randomness seems so pervasive.

Liviu Librescu gave his life on April 16. It was Yom HaShoah, the day we sanctify the memories of the victims of the Holocaust.

The older I get the less I believe in coincidences.