

From the Rabbi

September 2018/Tishrei 5779

*“Kol Dodi Dofek”*

My dear wife, Cantor Benjie Schiller, has been working on an anthology of her songs for the past several years. In August the book finally came out in print, complete with a stunning photo of her *punim* on the front cover.

I bring this good news to your attention partly because I’m so proud of her I want to brag about her to anyone who will listen. My other reason is to celebrate what I see as the book’s overarching theme, which is also one of the essential themes of the Days of Awe.

That theme is “calling and awakening.” One of her songs is a setting of a passage from the biblical *Shir Hashirim* (the Song of Songs). In it, the “speaker” proclaims “I was asleep but my heart was wakeful, and the voice of my beloved – *you called.*”

The plain meaning of the text is no doubt a simple interaction between courter and courted. But in the richly imaginative tradition of the Rabbis, it becomes an expression of the profoundest spiritual crisis of all. Our mortal souls are sound asleep. We are living a gifted life, but we are oblivious to it. We accomplish our

tasks and assignments, we make a living, we put food on the table, we get ourselves to every place we need to go. But at our core, we are snoring through the journey of life itself.

Along comes the “voice of my beloved,” which is a metaphor for the divine, or if you prefer, one’s innate conscience. Like a shofar blast, it abruptly knocks on our eardrums and adjures us to wake up. Wake up and take stock of ourselves. Wake up and notice the needs of others, the neglect of our loved ones, the “call” of those to whom we are related by blood or friendship or fate.

Of all the themes of the Jewish new year, this one may be the most difficult to face. It points to our greatest human failure, which goes largely unnoticed (at least to ourselves) because it is masked by our enormous successes. As long as we are doing fine in the world of expectations and duties, we fail to notice that we are “asleep” to the call for us to be caring, compassionate, merciful, and deeply connected. The Days of Awe come to wake us up, to beg us to connect to one another at the point where the divine image emanates from our fellow living creatures; the synapse between others’ divine image and our own.

The Hebrew of the text is not quite “you called,” though that’s the sense of it.

The Hebrew is “*dofek*,” which means “to knock.” It’s as if the divine, or the world,

or our family and friends and community, or all of the above, possess a collective voice that has the capacity to “knock” on the door of our soul. At Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur it knocks more intently than at other times of the year. It makes enough of a racket to wake us up. But we have to be willing to hear it and respond. To answer the door, if you will.

I wish us all a sweet – but also awakened – new year.

Rabbi Lester Bronstein