David Z. Gordon recently published a new translation of Kol Dodi Dofek in conjunction with Yeshiva University.

A NOTE ON THE TITLE OF KOLOLDODI DOFEK

The Rav selected the verse “Kol Dodi Dofek” (Song of Songs 5:2) to entitle his essay because it represents a long-held tradition on the return to Zion. The phrase means, “Listen! My beloved knocks” (or as translated by others, “The voice of my beloved knocketh”). The Midrash says that the beginning of the fifth chapter of the Song speaks homiletically about the return to Zion for the building of the Second Temple in the time of Ezra and Nehemiah. The verse “Kol Dodi Dofek” is the clarion call to return to Zion, which unfortunately at that time remained largely unheeded.

This theme was later expanded upon by Judah ha-Levi in his Kuzari:

This is a severe reproach, O King of the Khazars. It is the sin which kept the divine promise with regard to the Second Temple . . . from being fulfilled. Divine Providence was ready to restore everything as it had been at first [during the first Temple] if they had all willingly consented to return. But only a part was ready to do so, whilst the majority and the aristocracy remained in Babylon, preferring dependence and slavery, and unwilling to leave their houses and their affairs…. It is [the words of the Song of Songs at 5:2 that it is] . . . “The voice of my beloved that knocketh” [that] means God’s call to return. . . . The words: “I have put off my coat” to the people’s slothfulness in consenting to return. . . .

The Kuzari then concludes the dialogue by noting, “If we say: ‘Worship at his holy hill . . . He who restoreth His glory to Zion’ . . . [without actually returning to Zion, then such words become] the chattering of the starling and the nightingale.”

Proof that the Rav had this in mind is found in the fifth chapter of his Kol Dodi Dofek, where he enigmatically paraphrases from both the opening and closing lines of Dialogue 24. The Rav writes:
What did the scholar tell the King of the Khazars?

“You have embarrassed me, King of [the] Khazars!”

These are the opening lines of the Dialogue. The Rav then places three dots as if to say skip from these sentences to the following:

. . . And our saying ‘worship at His holy hill’ (Psalms 99:9) is but the chirping of a starling.

These are the last lines of the Dialogue. By doing this, I believe that the Rav was signaling that he is endorsing the entire Dialogue and the concept of the Kol Dodi Dofek contained therein.

The writings of Rav Abraham Isaac ha-Kohen Kook provide additional support. In the summer of 1914, Rav Kook set out to attend the World Agudah Conference, which was to be held in Europe. Because of the outbreak of World War One, the conference was canceled and Rav Kook was stranded in Europe. He remained in Switzerland until 1916, when he was taken to England to serve as rabbi of the Mahzikei ha-Dat Congregation on condition that he would return to Israel at the earliest opportunity. Thus he was in England at the time of the promulgation of the Balfour Declaration in 1917.

Commenting on that event, Rav Kook wrote:

Great things are transpiring here for our future. Happily, the thick darkness is now pierced by the radiant glow of Divine Providence. Our task is to illuminate, elevate, and exalt these developments . . .

Evidently, “the voice of my beloved knocketh” (Song of Songs 5:2) as the mighty, omniscient, and merciful Architect of history . . . illuminates the darkness . . .

Tsevi Yaron quotes these thoughts and later cites that Rav Kook’s son, Rav Tsevi Yehuda Kook, in this context cites Kuzari II:24 associating “the voice of my beloved knocketh” with the Return to Zion at the beginning of the Second Temple period, when only a handful of people elected to return.

The phrase Kol Dodi Dofek may be understood and translated in two different ways. The first would mean: “The voice of my Beloved calls [you to return to Zion].” This reading, however, ignores a pesik (caesura)
after the word kol. Giving effect to the caesura, the word kol must stand alone. Its meaning according to some commentators is “a voice” or “hark,” or in more modern English, “listen.” The entire phrase would therefore be translated as: “Listen[!] My beloved calls.” The question then is which of these translations would the Rav have preferred?

For many years the Rav gave a Talmud shiur every Tuesday evening at the Moriah Institute in Manhattan. Often, at the end of these sessions he would spend some time elucidating a point or two in the weekly Torah portion. In 1969 or 1970 I was present when he focused on Genesis 4:10, asking how we should translate “kol demei ahikha tso’akim elai min ha-adama.”

Most translate this as, “The voice of the blood of your brother is crying out to Me.” But the Rav said that based on the exegesis of Ibn Ezra, the reading of the phrase is as follows: “Listen! The blood of your brother is crying out to me.” Ibn Ezra arrives at this reading by reasoning that the word kol in the Hebrew is written in the singular and the words “are shouting at me” are in the plural; therefore kol cannot relate to them. Thus, concludes Ibn Ezra, the word kol must stand separate from the rest of the verse, which should therefore be translated as “Listen! The blood of your brother is crying out to me.” Lastly, Ibn Ezra adds that he has translated kol just as he has translated it in the Song of Songs 2:8 “kol dodi hinei zeh ba—Listen! My beloved is coming.” (Unfortunately, in the version of the Ibn Ezra commentary on Shir ha-Shirim 2:8 that is printed in our texts, the actual gloss referred to by Ibn Ezra in Genesis 4:10 is missing.)

Thus the Rav endorsed Ibn Ezra who took kol to mean “Listen.” Consequently, the second translation of his title would have been endorsed by him and is, of course, more in keeping with the imperative to listen to the clarion call to return to Zion.

NOTES

3. Ibid., p. 88.
5. Ibid.
7. Ibid., pp. 155-156.
10. See, e.g., *Shir ha-Shirim* in *Da'at Mikra Hamesh Megillot* (Jerusalem: Mosad ha-Rav Kook, 1973), s.v., “*Kol Dodi,*” p. 43.