

The Baal Shem Tov uses an analogy of a spiral staircase.

In Yiddish a spiral staircase is called "*shvindel trep*," literally: Swindling steps. Why? Because when you climb a regular vertical staircase, you see the destination and you see yourself getting closer to it as you climb the stairs. A spiral staircase "swindles" you, because as you get closer to the destination you have to turn completely around, in a 360 degree turn, to the point when cannot see the apex. Indeed, just before you reach the top, you must turn completely around for the last time. When you're still far from the destination you may be able to see it, but just before reaching your destination you have your back to it. The trick is to see it through.

another analogy is brought by Reb Nachman in Torah 206:

"I have strayed like a lost sheep: seek out Your servant" (Psalm 119:176)

When a person sins, it makes a big difference if he comes to his senses at once and repents, in which case it is easy for him to return to his place because he has not yet strayed too far from the good path. For when a person sins, he turns from the straight path and enters a different, twisting pathway. A multitude of wrong turns branch off into ever deeper error and corruption. The person may stray so far and become so entangled that it is very hard for him to turn back and get off the wrong track.

God's way is to call a person the moment He sees him straying from the path of good sense, asking him to turn back. He calls each person in the way most suited to him. To some He beckons with a hint. To others the summons is literally a cry. Some people kick, and He must strike them in order to call them. For "the Torah cries out before them: 'Fools! How long will you love foolishness?'" (Proverbs 1:22, Zohar Shemini 36a) . The Torah is God's voice calling and begging those who sin to return to Him.

As long as a person has not strayed too far from the right path, it is easy for him to return because he still recognizes the voice. This is because only a short time has passed since he was close to God and heeded His voice, the voice of the Torah. He has not yet forgotten it or strayed too far along those other devious paths. Similarly, when a sheep strays from the path and the shepherd immediately calls it, as long as the sheep has not yet strayed too far, it still recognizes the shepherd's voice and immediately responds.

But once the sheep strays far from the path, it forgets the shepherd's voice and no longer recognizes his call. The shepherd also gives up searching because the sheep has been lost for such a long time . Similarly, when a person has been going in the wrong direction for a long time , having strayed far from the true path into all those corrupt, devious and confusing pathways, it is hard for him to repent.

But know that sometimes a person journeys so far along those corrupt and devious paths that his very wandering brings him close to his original place, there being only a small distance between himself and his original departure point, and it only needs an easy test to bring him back to his starting point . But when God calls him and arranges the test, the person does not recognize the voice and feels no need to return. That is the difference between young and old people. One who is still young and has not grown old in his sins can return more easily, because he is still closer and has not forgotten the voice that calls.

This is the meaning of the verse, "I have strayed like a lost sheep: seek out Your servant" (Psalms 119, 176) . "I have strayed like a lost sheep": I have strayed from the good path like a lost sheep that has strayed from the road. This is why I beg of You: ".seek out Your servant, because I have not forgotten Your commandments". Hurry and search for me as long as I still remember the voice of the Torah and mitzvot. Hurry and search for me immediately, because I have not yet forgotten Your mitzvot: I still recognize the call of the mitzvot of the Torah. That is why I beg You to take pity on me and search me out quickly, as long as "I have not forgotten Your mitzvot" and still recognize the voice of the call of the Torah and the mitzvot.

For when a person grows old in his sins, it is very hard to seek him out as he has already forgotten and no longer recognizes the voice of the Torah and the mitzvot. We must therefore beg God to hurry and bring us back to Him before we completely forget the call of the Torah and mitzvot. This was King David's prayer: "Search out Your servant, for I have not forgotten Your mitzvot."¹

IN THIS MAGISTERIAL TORAH RABBEINU PROVIDES US A ROAD MAP TO SPIRITUALITY.

He defines a difference between getting lost early and returning, vs getting lost for a prolonged time when one forgets the path home or the call to return. He seems to be articulating a profound theory of addiction where the possibility of recovery becomes more difficult the deeper and longer one is a victim of the disease. The path of return is treacherous and confusing so that initially it is relatively easy to find one's way back. However after a while, because one tends to get lost and confused on these roads, it becomes hard to find one's way back or even emerge from there. Using the parable of a lost sheep he describes the voice of the shepherd still within earshot of the little lost lamb who is able to return since he still recognizes the shepherd's call. Once at too great a distance it can no longer hear the call or it has been away so long it no longer recognizes the call. More startlingly he suggests "that the shepherd has given up on finding the lamb". The implication is that the divine also "gives up" on the sinner after a time.

But then, not satisfied with what might be considered typical mussar type reproof the Rebbe adds the flip side of the "schvindel trep" ***But know that sometimes a person journeys so far along those corrupt and devious paths that his very wandering***

¹ <http://azamra.org/Essential/teshuvah.htm> translation Rabbi Avraham Greenbaum

brings him close to his original place, there being only a small distance between himself and his original departure point, and it only needs an easy test to bring him back to his starting point . Rebbe suggests that the road map itself allows for the path to paradoxically double back on itself so that by just remaining of the confused path one somehow comes quite close to the original point of departure. Of course if he fails to recognize the invitation of the divine then he will not make use of this paradoxical opportunity. Yet the very paradoxical posture of being so close is the mirror image of the spiral staircase where one is indeed very close to one's destination yet one's back is facing 180 degrees in the opposite direction.

What is the difference between the Baal Shem Tov's implication and Rabbeinu? Both see the roadmap as a "set up" out of one's control. That the spiritual path is treacherous and despite one's motives leads one in opposite directions than intended. However Rabbeinu applies this not only to the path "upwards" towards the divine but also in erring on the path away from the divine. He teaches us that even on the path of sin and corruption, of addiction, where one becomes accustomed to one's life and one's own spirituality wherever it leads one, the same "swindling" occurs.

The trick is to become aware of just how close one is **whether on the right path or the wrong one!** The response is **"seek out Your servant"** ! A request for divine assistance, in the shepherd, in not forgetting the little lost lamb..." Hurry search me out Lord"....

We see here a different approach, a different roadmap, whereby the best we lost sheep can do is pray for the shepherd not to forget us, hurry and remember us before He has lost all memory of us. As long as we can still recognize His voice, we beg Him to remember us and find us...for we are lost.

In this strong reading of the Psalm, Rabbeinu has stretched the Baal Shem Tov's meaning of the Schvindel Trep beyond its upwardly pointing direction towards the divine and extends it into the depths of despair and loss. We live in a world where the divine access is lost, the shepherd has almost forgotten the lost lamb and the road is winding and treacherous. Any belief that we on our own have the capability to "return" on our own steam is fraught. The only path back in this is through the cry and tears for the divine shepherd.