Vayakhel-Pekudei 5786

"You Shall Not Kindle Fire"

Our Sages taught: "There are three types of people whose lives are not lives, due to their constant suffering: the compassionate, the hot-tempered, and the delicate." And Rav Yosef said: "All of these are found in me." (Pesachim 113b)

And in *Pirkei Avot* we read: "There are four kinds of temperaments: Easy to become angry, and easy to be appeased—his gain disappears in his loss. Hard to become angry, and hard to be appeased—his loss disappears in his gain. Hard to become angry and easy to be appeased—a pious person. Easy to become angry and hard to be appeased—a wicked person." (Pirkei Avot 5:11)

So let me begin with a simple question: Which one are we? Or perhaps, more honestly, which one are we trying to become?

This question is deeply connected to our Torah portion, *Parashat Vayakhel-Pekudei*, which brings the book of *Shemot* to its conclusion. On the surface, these chapters focus on the construction of the *Mishkan*, the Tabernacle—the accounting of the donations, the materials, and the sacred vessels. But before all the details of building begin, the Torah does something striking. It repeats the commandment of Shabbat.

The Torah says: "Six days work may be done, but on the seventh day you shall have a sabbath of complete rest, holy to the Lord." (Exodus 35:2) And then it adds something new: "You shall kindle no fire throughout your settlements on the sabbath day." (Exodus 35:3)

In the literal sense, this verse becomes the basis for the prohibition against kindling fire on Shabbat. Fire represents labor, production, cooking, heating, and transforming the physical world. That is why, before Shabbat begins, we light candles—because once Shabbat enters, we no longer create fire. For the Torah, and certainly for the rabbis of the Talmud, this verse refers first and foremost to actual fire. But later Jewish tradition asked a deeper question: what if the Torah is warning us not only about the fire in the stove, but also about the fire in the soul?

The *Shnei Luchot HaBrit*, the Shelah, offers a beautiful and powerful interpretation. He writes that the word "fire" here also alludes to "the fire of strife and the fire of anger" (*Shnei Luchot HaBrit, Torah Shebikhtav, Vayakhel-Pekudei, Derekh Chayim 2*). In Hebrew: *esh ha-machloket ve-esh ha-ka'as*—the fire of conflict and the fire of anger. That, too, is the fire we are commanded not to kindle on Shabbat.

Perhaps this is part of the deeper meaning of the Shabbat candles. Just before Shabbat begins, we light one fire: a holy fire, a peaceful fire, a gentle fire. And then, for the next twenty-five hours, we

commit ourselves not to ignite any other fire. Not the fire of work. Not the fire of stress. Not the fire of rage. Not the fire of argument. Not the fire of resentment.

Our rabbis go even further. They teach that even the fire of *Gehinnom* rests on Shabbat. If even the fires of punishment are suspended on Shabbat, how much more so should we extinguish the fires we carry within ourselves.

The connection between fire and anger is not difficult to understand. Fire erupts suddenly. It spreads quickly. It burns everything in its path. Anger is the same. It can come in a moment and make us speak carelessly, act impulsively, and wound the people we love most. Like fire, once released, it is difficult to control. Even physically, anger feels like fire: our blood heats up, our face changes, our breathing quickens, and we lose calm, perspective, and proportion. Just as wildfires often begin with one small spark and end by consuming entire fields, so too anger often begins with something small—a word, a tone, a delay, a misunderstanding—and ends in long arguments, broken trust, and deep emotional damage.

That is why Jewish tradition warns us again and again about the danger of anger. King Solomon teaches: "Better to be forbearing than mighty, to have self-control than to conquer a city." (Proverbs 16:32) The Talmud says: "Any person who becomes angry—if he is a Torah scholar, his wisdom departs from him; and if he is a prophet, his prophecy departs from him." (Pesachim 66b) Another teaching says: "Anyone who gets angry, at that moment even the Divine Presence is not important to him." (Nedarim 22b) And again: "Anyone who gets angry forgets his learning and increases foolishness." (Nedarim 22b, citing Ecclesiastes 7:9)

Anger makes us forget what we know. It makes us lose wisdom. It makes us lose perspective. It makes us lose awareness of who is standing before us—sometimes even awareness of God. Our Sages say elsewhere that anger can even drive a person out of the world, because uncontrolled anger damages relationships, destroys peace, and consumes the one who carries it.

Now, let us be honest: it is difficult not to get angry. And many times, we have good reasons to be angry. We live in families. We live in community. We live in society. Judaism does not ask us to be monks living alone on mountaintops. We are not meant to hide from life in order to remain calm. We are meant to live among other people—spouses, children, parents, friends, coworkers, employers, employees, neighbors. And wherever there are people, there will be friction.

In fact, the Midrash teaches that the Torah was not given to angels. Angels do not struggle with jealousy, ego, or anger. Human beings do. That is precisely why we need Torah and mitzvot. Torah was not given to perfect beings. Torah was given to us: to imperfect, emotional, reactive human beings trying to become better.

Rabbeinu Yonah, commenting on *Pirkei Avot* 5:11, makes a very realistic point. He says: "It is not necessary that a person never get angry, as sometimes a person needs to get angry out of zeal for

God, like Pinchas. Hence it says, 'hard to anger,' since he still may need to get angry—but only with difficulty, in those times when it is not proper to remain without anger."

This is such an important idea. Judaism is not naïve. Our tradition knows there are moments when anger has a place—when we see injustice, cruelty, corruption, abuse, or desecration. There are things that should disturb us morally. If someone humiliates another person publicly, we should be upset. If someone spreads lies about a loved one, we should feel something. If someone behaves dishonestly in business, abuses power, betrays trust, or acts with cruelty, anger may arise. The goal is not to become emotionally numb. The goal is to become spiritually disciplined.

That is why Rabbeinu Yonah says not that one should never be angry, but that one should be hard to anger. Anger should not come easily. It should take something serious. And even when anger arises, it should not immediately control our speech or actions.

Maimonides pushes this even further. In *Hilchot De'ot*, he teaches that anger is such a dangerous trait that a person should distance himself from it as far as possible. Even when it is necessary to appear angry—for educational or moral purposes—one should only act angry, while inwardly remaining composed. Why? Because if we truly surrender ourselves to anger, anger may end up ruling us.

That is where Shabbat comes in. During the week, things happen that upset us. People disappoint us. We feel insulted, ignored, disrespected, frustrated. A fire gets lit inside of us. But when Shabbat arrives, we are asked to do more than stop working. We are asked to stop burning.

Shabbat is not only a pause from labor. It is a pause from rage. It is a weekly invitation to put aside the arguments, the resentments, the tensions, the reactions, and the emotional heat we have been carrying. Perhaps the issue will still be there after *Havdalah*. Perhaps the conversation will still need to happen on Saturday night or Sunday morning. But for one sacred day, we practice another way of being. We breathe. We slow down. We step back. We ask ourselves: Was the anger worth it? Could I have seen it differently? Could I have responded differently? What was the other person feeling? What might I have misunderstood? What in me was touched so deeply by this moment?

The Talmud gives us a remarkable teaching: "Rabbi Elai said: In three matters a person's true character is ascertained: in his cup, in his pocket, and in his anger. And some say: also in his laughter." (Eruvin 65b)

A lot can be learned about a person by his cup—what happens when he drinks a little too much. Does he become vulgar, cruel, foolish? Or joyful and kind? A lot can be learned about a person by his pocket—how he handles money. Is he generous, cheap, wasteful, responsible? And a lot can be learned about a person by his anger. How quickly does he get angry? How long does it last? Can he forgive? Can he reflect? Can he hold back words he will regret? Does anger lead him toward revenge, or toward understanding? And yes, the Talmud adds, much can also be learned from a person's laughter—from their sense of humor, their lightness, their ability not to take themselves too seriously.

That, too, is part of Shabbat, because Shabbat helps us respond differently to the things that usually provoke us. Sometimes we get angry because of impatience. We are rushing, overloaded, exhausted, always running against the clock. When someone slows us down, we react sharply. Shabbat interrupts that rhythm. For twenty-five hours, we stop chasing time. Shabbat teaches us that not everything has to happen now.

Sometimes we get angry because of ego. We imagine that we are the center of the story, that everything revolves around us, that every comment or gesture is about us. Shabbat restores proportion. Standing before creation, before Kiddush, before *Lecha Dodi*, we remember that we are part of something much greater than ourselves.

Sometimes we get angry because of miscommunication. A text message. A rushed email. A short conversation. We misunderstand, assume the worst, and the fire begins. Shabbat brings us back to face-to-face conversation—around a table, without phones, without constant interruption, with the chance to actually listen.

Sometimes we get angry because of unmet expectations. We expect people to act the way we think they should act. And when they do not, frustration becomes anger. Shabbat teaches us to let go of some control and to focus instead on our own spiritual growth.

Sometimes anger comes from stress and the illusion that everything depends on us. During the week, we are managing work, family, obligations, finances, decisions. When one more thing goes wrong, we react. Shabbat is the practice of releasing control. For one day, we stop intervening in the world. We remember that the world can continue without our constant manipulation.

And sometimes anger has deeper roots—old wounds, fears, grief, insecurity, shame, unresolved pain. Something happens in the present, but what erupts comes from the past. Shabbat gives us the space for self-awareness. It allows us to ask: What am I projecting? Why did this affect me so strongly? What inside me still needs healing?

That is why Shabbat is not just a day of rest. It is a spiritual antidote to anger.

And that brings us to a beautiful closing teaching from *Orchot Tzadikim*: "When people are angry and persist in their anger, they are not conscious of what they are doing. They do many things in anger that they would not do if they were free from anger, for anger draws out a person's intelligence from within him until his angry deeds multiply and he is plunged into strife and quarrel."

The author then adds that when a person is angry, his true nature is revealed. If his anger overcomes his wisdom, then anger is ruling him. But if his wisdom is stronger than his anger, and he does not say or do in anger what he would not say or do in calmness, then his wisdom is revealed.

That may be the deepest meaning of our verse: "You shall kindle no fire throughout your settlements on the sabbath day." Not only: do not light a flame in your home. But also: do not let

your home become a fire. Do not ignite the fire of strife. Do not ignite the fire of rage. Do not ignite the fire of resentment. Do not ignite the fire that turns a table into a battlefield.

Instead, light only one kind of fire: the fire of the Shabbat candles, the fire that gives light but does not destroy, the fire that warms but does not consume, the fire that brings peace to the home and holiness to the soul.

May this Shabbat help us become people who are slower to anger, quicker to forgive, deeper in wisdom, gentler in speech, and more capable of peace. And may we learn not only how to keep the fire of Shabbat, but also how to extinguish the fire within ourselves.

Shabbat Shalom.