

“Safeguard the Shabbos day to sanctify it.” (5:12)

Shabbos is more than a *mitzvah* in the Torah; it is a staple of our religion. Yet, it is one of the first *mitzvos* that was forsaken during the waves of the European immigration to America.

“*Shabbos* was important,” the immigrants agreed, “but if you cannot make a living, its significance takes second place to survival.” Consequently, *shemiras Shabbos*, *Shabbos* observance, was identified with the European *shtetl*. Much of Orthodoxy and the moral, ethical and social behavior that was endemic to Orthodox Judaism in Europe was discarded along with *Shabbos*. They were, however, as wrong then as they are wrong today. A Jew identifies with *Shabbos* as *Shabbos* identifies with the Jew. It sustains him physically and spiritually. I recently came across a story that emphasizes the protective power of *Shabbos Kodesh*.

This is a story about a twelve-year-old girl at the beginning of the twentieth century, leaving Europe for America. Of her nine siblings, she was chosen to come to the *goldeneh medinah*, golden land. Life in Poland was difficult, hunger a constant companion. After much scraping and penny-pinching, her family saved enough for a single, one-way ticket. Miriam, as the youngest in the family, was chosen to go.

It was not easy to send away a child in those days. Who knew if they would ever see each other again? Furthermore, would she remain faithful to her religion? With trembling hands and a breaking voice, Miriam’s father said, “Miriam, *mein kind*, my child, remember that Hashem is watching you every step of the way. Remember His laws and keep them well. Especially observe the *Shabbos*. Never forget that *Shabbos* protects the Jewish People. It will be difficult for you in the new land. Never forget who you are. Keep the *Shabbos* – regardless of the sacrifices you must make.”

They both wept as she ascended the steamship. As the ship steamed away from the *shtetl* life in Poland, for many it was also the end to their religious observance. For this young girl, the trip was filled with questions and uncertainty. Would her relatives extend themselves to her, or would she be all alone in a strange land? Would the new land fulfill its promise of hope, freedom and wealth? Would her relatives meet her, or was she now homeless?

Miriam should not have worried. Her family was there waiting for her. They welcomed her to their home with love. It was not long before she found a job as a sewing-machine operator. Life in America was quite different from her European home life. Polish mannerisms, together with religion, were quickly shed. Modesty, *Kashrus* and the Torah were slowly abandoned. Miriam’s relatives insisted that religion was simply not in vogue; it was an unnecessary accessory in America. The young girl, however, never forgot her father’s parting enjoinder. She was prepared to dress the part of an American, but she would never give up *Shabbos*.

Every week she gave a different excuse to her employer. Once, it was a stomach ache; another time it was a toothache. After a few weeks, the foreman, an assimilated Jew, grew wise. He called her over and said, “Miriam, you are a nice girl and I like your work, but this *Shabbos* business has

got to stop. You are in America. *Shabbos* is a European holiday. In America – everybody works on *Shabbos*, or they do not eat. Either you come to work this *Shabbos*, or you can look for a new job.”

Miriam’s relatives were adamant. She must work on *Shabbos*. They applied pressure, but in the back of her mind her father’s words kept echoing in her head. What could she do? The week went by in a daze. She argued with herself back and forth. Should she listen to her father? After all, what did he know about America? On the other hand, how could she give up the beauty of *Shabbos* that her father had taught her?

All the different questions and answers kept gnawing at her! By *Shabbos* morning, she had decided. She was not going to turn her back on thousands of years of commitment and dedication. Jews had sacrificed their lives for the Torah. She was prepared to sacrifice her livelihood. It was a cool day. She walked all over the Lower East Side, and continued on towards Midtown. She finally stopped at a park and watched the pigeons for the rest of the day. She was not going to desecrate the *Shabbos*. Her father said that *Shabbos* would protect her. She was sure that it would.

Three stars had risen in the sky. She recited *Baruch Ha’mavdil*, the blessing said at the departure of *Shabbos*, and prepared to face the scorn of her relatives. She trudged homeward, dreading the nasty scene that was sure to greet her when her relatives learned that she had not been to work that day.

As she neared home, a shout broke through her reverie, “Miriam, is that you? Oh, how are you? Thank G-d, you are alive!” Miriam looked up at her cousin Joe with a sad expression. “I am sorry. I *kept* *Shabbos*, and I lost my job. Now everyone will be angry and disappointed. They will think I am ungrateful. However, I could not let my father down. I will always keep *Shabbos*!”

Joe looked at her strangely. “Miriam, didn’t you hear what happened at the factory?”

“Hear what? I did not go to the factory. I kept *Shabbos*,” she said.

“Miriam, there was a terrible fire at the factory, and only forty four people survived. There was no way out of the building. People even jumped to their deaths.” Suddenly, Joe’s voice became quiet and he began to cry. “Miriam, don’t you see? Because you kept *Shabbos*, you are alive. You survived because of *Shabbos*!”

Out of 190 workers at the infamous Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire on Saturday, March 25, 1911, only 44 workers survived – 146 immigrants who came to this country in search of a new life perished. Because it was *Shabbos*, Miriam was not at work. After all, her father had taught her that the *Shabbos* would always protect her.