

# Torah Talk—מאמרי תורה



*The Parasha Post of the Jewish Primary Day School of the Nation's Capital*

**Parashat Bemidbar**  
**May 27, 2017**

**פרשת במדבר**  
**ב' בסיון תשע"ז**

Torah Reading: *Bemidbar* (Numbers) 1:1-4:20

In this *parasha*, Moshe conducts a census of the Israelites and the Levites, and sets up the structure of the wilderness encampment; Hashem describes the unique duties of the Kehati family from which the *cohanim* (priests) come.

In the first four chapters of the book of *Bemidbar*, over the course of describing the census and the structure of the camp, the word מִשְׁפָּחָה – *mishpachah* (family), or its plural, appears 55 times. The census and camp were first divided into שְׁבֵטִים – *shevatim* (tribes), then into extended family units, and finally into nuclear families, one to each tent.

The family unit is not defined here, but the frequent references make clear that the family unit is the most important sociological structure in Jewish thought, by far more important than the synagogue, which many people mistakenly believe to be the center of Jewish life.

Jewish law tells us that in a new Jewish community, even before a synagogue is built, there must be a school, a cemetery, and a *mikvah* (bath used for, among other things, the monthly ritual purification of women of child-bearing age): a school, so that the next generation of children can be taught about Judaism; a cemetery, so that we can bury our dead; and a *mikvah*, so that we can promulgate the Jewish people. All of these institutions center around the family unit rather than the בֵּית כְּנִסְתַּת – *beit k'nesset* (synagogue; literally “meeting-house” or “assembly-house”).

We can see examples of these priorities throughout Jewish history. When Yaakov and his twelve sons and their families go down to Egypt, the verse (*Bereshit* 46: 28) says, וְאֶת-יְהוּדָה שָׁלַח לְפָנָיו, אֶל-יוֹסֵף, לְהוֹרֹת לְפָנָיו, גִּשְׁנָה – He (Yaakov) sent

Yehuda before him to Yosef to show the way before him into Goshen.” The word להורות – *l’horot* (to show) also means “to teach,” and the Midrash tells us that Yehuda went down to Egypt early to set up the schools.

The land for the first Jewish cemetery established in what is now the United States was purchased by the first Jewish settlers in 1656, significantly before the land for a synagogue. We no longer know where this cemetery was, but the “New Jewish Cemetery,” purchased in 1682, still remains nestled among the tall buildings of lower Manhattan.

The existence of a *mikvah* is considered so important in traditional Judaism that, according to the sources, a community must go to the extreme of selling Torah scrolls or even a synagogue, if necessary, to provide funding for its construction.

All of these institutions serve the needs of the family, the unit which passes on our values, ethics, traditions, and history, assuring the continuity of the Jewish people.

Shabbat shalom.

For Discussion:

- Who are the members of your nuclear family? Of your extended family?
- Can you define the word “family”? What does it mean to you?
- How many different kinds of family structures can you think of? What are they?