

JEWISH CITIZENSHIP

by Rabbi Naftali Reich

Citizen has always been a title of honor not easily attained. In the city-states of ancient Greece and especially in the Roman Empire, citizenship was a highly prized distinction. It was a recognition of social and economic status and a guarantee of special rights and privileges. But what does citizenship signify in Jewish society?

Let us take a look at the Torah's presentation of the mitzvah of sukkah. After the uplifting experience of the High Holidays, we are enjoined to build an impermanent booth and make that our primary place of residence for an entire week. "You shall dwell in booths for seven days," the Torah tells us, "every citizen of Israel."

This is an unusual choice of words. The Torah always directs itself to "all the people of Israel." Yet here, the Torah seems to limit the injunction to people of status and privilege. We know, however, that this is not so, that the mitzvah of sukkah is universal, regardless of class and social status.

The commentators explain that the Torah is being as inclusive here as everywhere. The use of the term citizen, however, is meant to teach us an important lesson. Jewish citizenship does not derive from an accumulation of worldly possessions, high social status or political power. Quite the contrary. It derives from a deep faith in the benevolent guidance of the Creator, from a focus on spirituality rather than materialism.

Where does this supremely Jewish attitude manifest itself? In the sukkah. When the harvest is in and the weather grows cold, the entire world withdraws to the warmth and security of home and hearth, but not the Jewish people. We leave the comfort of our homes and celebrate the festival of joy in our makeshift booths to show that we are in Hashem's hands. If we have faith, we are secure anywhere, and we if we don't, we are secure nowhere. Those who enter the sukkah are the true citizens of Israel.

A traveler from a distant land paid a visit to a great sage. Many people stood on line for the privilege of spending a few brief moments with the sage, and it was fully an hour before he was allowed to enter.

The sage sat at the head of a rough-hewn table, which groaned under the weight of his holy books; the furnishings of the room were threadbare.

The sage lifted his kindly, wise eyes, greeted the traveler warmly and invited him to sit down. The

chair groaned angrily under the traveler's bulk, but fortunately, it did not collapse.

"If you would forgive me," said the traveler, "I would like to ask a personal question."

"Go right ahead," said the sage.

"You are so famous and celebrated. People come to ask you advice and blessing from all over the world. Why isn't there any decent furniture in this room?"

"A very good question," said the sage. "But let me respond with a question of my own. Where is your own furniture?"

"Back home, of course."

"But why isn't it here with you?"

"Because I am a traveler. I am only passing through this place."

"Ah, that is indeed the answer. And it is also my answer to your question. I too am only a traveler. I too am only passing through this world. In the few years I will spend here, I have no need for fine furniture."

In our own lives, we are inevitably absorbed by material pursuits. We have to earn a living to put food on the table, to provide health care for our families, to pay the mortgage and tuition. We need to replace the old car, and the children need braces. But once a year, we should step back and put it all in perspective. When we enter the sukkah, we face the true reality of our existence, that the kindness of Hashem protects and sustains us and not the walls we build around ourselves. When we accept this knowledge into our hearts and respond with the transcendent joy of the festival, that is when we are granted our citizenship papers. Text Copyright © 2007 by Rabbi Naftali Reich and **Torah.org**.

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