

ISRAEL Teaching Letter

Vol. # 770123 • January 2023 • www.bridgesforpeace.com

CITIZENSHIP

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I RECENTLY HAD THE PRIVILEGE of participating in a Bible study focused on the concept of citizenship. The discussions were fascinating as we explored our understanding of what it means to be a citizen of a country, of the world and of heaven. However, when the study was over, I felt we had scarcely scratched the surface. In this teaching letter, I would like to dig a little deeper into the effect a real understanding of citizenship might have on our lives as members of the Kingdom of God.

What is a Citizen?

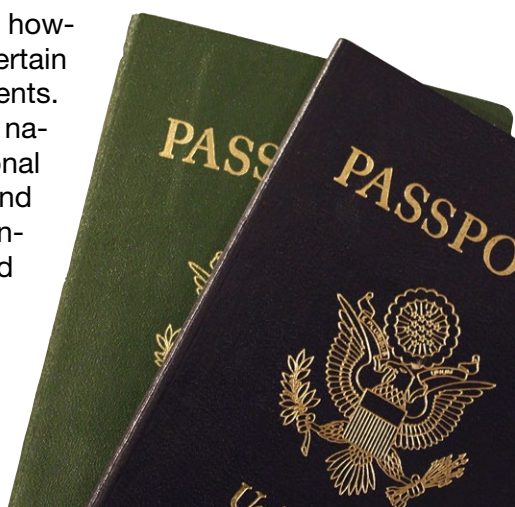
Meriam-Webster defines a citizen as “a native or naturalized person who owes allegiance to a government and is entitled to protection from it.” The same dictionary also describes a citizen as “one who is entitled to the rights and privileges of a free man.”

An individual becomes a citizen either by descent, meaning by birth, or by naturalization, a legal process that one goes through to gain citizenship. Today, one can even purchase citizenship in some countries through investment programs.

Regardless of how one gains the status, all citizens are required to respect and obey the laws of the land and must suffer the penalties for breaking those laws. They are also expected to pay taxes, participate in their communities and respect the rights of others. In some nations, they must register for military draft. Whether or not a country has such a program, citizens may be called upon to fight in the wars of their country.

It's not all about responsibilities, however. Citizens are also entitled to certain benefits provided by their governments. These might include personal and national protections, various personal rights, including the right to vote and to a trial by jury, and in some countries, the freedoms of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.

But what does it mean to be a citizen of heaven? What is the deeper spiritual application here? The rabbis say that to understand citizenship in both the natural and



spiritual realms, we must travel back to the *Torah* (Gen.–Deut.). And I believe for us as Christians, that journey begins with a story.

A Land Called Darkness

The story is told of a man who was a citizen of a land called Darkness under the leadership of a tyrant who ruled with an iron fist. Evil was prevalent in the government and wickedness was everywhere. But the man was forced to obey the laws of the land, no matter how unjust he believed they were, or pay penalties he could not afford. His taxes went to fund the unfair and evil whims of his leader and he felt helpless to do anything about it.

Everything changed, however, when the great and benevolent King of a neighboring kingdom invited the man to relocate. The man was hesitant at first, fearing that he didn't have the funds to cover what such a relocation would cost. But the King assured him he need not be concerned. The bill had already been paid.

The evil tyrant, however, was not so willing to let the man go. He tried everything he could think of to stop him, but was thwarted at every turn. The benevolent King had paid an extravagant price to purchase the man's freedom and the tyrant was helpless to prevent it. So the King took the man by the hand and transferred his citizenship from the kingdom of darkness to the kingdom of light.



For many of us as Christians, this is our story. We lived, as it says in Colossians 1:13, under the power and control of darkness until the great and benevolent King of heaven invited us to change our address. Citizens by naturalization and not by descent, we began the process of adjusting to our new home and the new identity that came with it.

We learned new ways of thinking and new behaviors. Even our vocabulary had to change. Words like strife, fear, shame, anxiety and helplessness, along with the concepts that went with them were replaced with peace, courage, forgiveness, joy and power. And the Bible became our guidebook as we became fledgling citizens in the Kingdom of God.

Paul and Citizenship

In the book of Philippians, the apostle Paul introduced the concept when he said, *“For our citizenship is in heaven”* (3:20a). It was a powerful statement considering Paul’s own experience as a Roman citizen.

During Paul’s lifetime, a person with Roman citizenship was held in very high esteem. Then, as today, there were different levels. Those who were citizens by birth, like Paul, were at the highest level of social strata. Those who purchased their citizenship were able to take advantage of its benefits but did not share the accompanying societal acclaim. Paul’s position was further enhanced by the fact that he came from Tarsus, an important city in the Roman world because of its position on a trade route. It was also a highly regarded center of scholarship, home of a university of considerable reputation.

During his lifetime, Paul would have enjoyed many privileges because of that citizenship, and he certainly used it to his advantage more than once. In Acts 22, he was rescued by a Roman law that protected citizens from chaining, flogging or execution without trial. Soldiers were about to scourge him, but the process was stopped when he mentioned his citizenship. The commander, who had purchased his own citizenship, was frightened when he discovered that Paul was a citizen by descent and took him into protective custody. More than once, Paul’s Roman citizenship saved his life.

Yet he encouraged his followers that regardless of its benefits, he considered it as rubbish compared to the greatness of being

in relationship with the Messiah (Phil. 3:8–10). Our citizenship, he told them, is in heaven. In effect, he was saying our protection and provision, our safety and direction, our very lives and our eternal futures are all secured because we are citizens of the Kingdom of God. And that is where our allegiance must lie.

The Torah and Citizenship

When the *Torah* (Gen.–Deut.) was given, the Israelite camp could hardly have been considered a nation in its purest sense. They were twelve tribes, cursorily united by the history of their forefathers and God’s promise to restore them to their ancient homeland. But God’s plan was much larger than just restoration. His people would enter the Promised Land and create a society, a nation like none before it. This nation would be built on His principles with the Torah at its heart, a nation dedicated to peace and to the dignity of every human being. From these people, the world would learn what He intended nations to look like and how He desired them to function.

According to Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, a society can only be good when it becomes *we-conscious*, not concerned with what is best for me, but what is best for all of us together. This is to



have Torah at heart. A nation is made strong when it cares for its weak; rich when it cares for its poor; and invulnerable when it cares for its vulnerable. A nation is made good, says Rabbi Sacks, when the choices of the people that live in it—its citizens—reflect love and concern for others.

Christian and Jewish scholars alike agree that the foundations of citizenship are found in Genesis: *“This is the book of the genealogy of Adam. In the day that God created man, He made him in the likeness of God. He created them male and female, and blessed them and called them Mankind in the day they were created”* (5:1–2).

At the outset, we are told that humanity is created in the image of the Holy One, God leaving His divine spark in every human being. This principle—that life and dignity are the God-given rights of all people—is the foundation of ethical monotheism and the basis for what we might call biblical citizenship. Second century sage Ben Azzai believed it to be the most important principle in the *Torah*, and the great sage Hillel affirmed it with his famous statement: “Do not do to others what is hateful to you.”

Also based on this foundational principle is Hillel’s teaching that to destroy one person’s life is to destroy a whole world, while he who preserves one person’s life, it is as if he has preserved a whole world. The *Torah* places the highest value on the life of every individual and holds each one accountable for the care of those around them. *“But you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the LORD”* (Lev. 19:18b). This is we-consciousness at its best.

That we-consciousness requires a concern for the stranger and the vulnerable, the *Torah* says, a love that goes beyond ourselves even to loving the unlovable. *“He administers justice for the fatherless and the widow, and loves the stranger, giving him food and clothing. Therefore love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt”* (Deut. 10:18–19).



The poor must also be cared for. Leviticus 25:35 teaches, “If one of your brethren becomes poor, and falls into poverty among you, then you shall help him, like a stranger or a sojourner, that he may live with you.” Leviticus 19:9–10 further instructs, *“When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not wholly reap the corners of your field, nor shall you gather the gleanings of your harvest. And you shall not glean your vineyard, nor shall you gather every grape of your vineyard; you shall leave them for the poor and the stranger: I am the LORD your God.”*

Laborers are also to be treated fairly. *“You shall not oppress a hired servant who is poor and needy, whether one of your brethren or one of the aliens who is in your land within your gates. Each day you shall give him his wages, and not let the sun go down on it, for he is poor and has set his heart on it”* (Deut. 24:14–15a).

There are literally hundreds of other verses in the Torah that paint a picture of what God intended His nation to look like and what the behavior of its citizens would have to be if it were to be successful. Readers of the Writings of the Apostles (NT) will recognize the same instructions, the same heart, sometimes even the same verses, as Jesus (Yeshua) and the early Church leaders brought the very same message.

Citizens of Heaven

The terms Kingdom of God and Kingdom of Heaven were interchangeable in Paul’s day and referred not so much to the heaven that we associate with the afterlife as to those places where God’s people were surrendered to Him and living their lives according to His principles. Perhaps as the citizens of heaven that Paul says we are, he is encouraging us toward biblical citizenship, a heart of *Torah* (Gen.–Deut.) and we-consciousness, truly loving our neighbor as we love ourselves.

Twentieth century Bible teacher Warren Wiersbe said it this way: “Christians have a dual citizenship—on earth and in heaven—and our citizenship in heaven ought to make us better people here on earth.” But perhaps the prophet Micah said it best: *“He has shown you, O man, what is good; and what does the LORD require of you but to do justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God?”* (6:8).

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Scripture is taken from the New King James Version, unless otherwise noted.

TERMINOLOGY:

Many of our readers are seasoned supporters of Israel while others are just beginning to understand the importance of standing with God's chosen nation; some prefer the use of Hebrew names and terms, while others are comfortable with more traditional Christian terminology. Because we want to show respect to all of our readers while providing an enjoyable educational experience, we are making every effort to use both terms whenever possible. The following are some of the most common examples:

- Jesus (Yeshua)
- *Tanakh* (Old Testament or OT) – *Tanakh* is an acronym used in Judaism which stands for *Torah*, *Neviim* or Prophets and *Ketuvim* or Writings.
- Writings of the Apostles (New Testament or NT)
- *Torah* (Gen.–Deut.)

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