

The polar bear's perspective

by [James M. Wall](#) in the [May 24, 2000](#) issue

Family members gather in a Liverpool hotel ballroom to learn the fate of loved ones who were traveling on the *Titanic*. Everyone is frantically seeking information on survivors. Suddenly an old polar bear walks into the room. He looks sad, and there is a tear in his eye as he asks, "Have you got any news of the iceberg? My family were on it. Have you got any news of the iceberg? They mean the whole world to me." It hadn't occurred to the grieving relatives that a polar bear's family might have been on the iceberg that collided with the *Titanic*. It is, you see, a matter of perspective.

The story about that polar bear, which comes from an old British comedy record I own, came back to me as I brooded over the imminent peace agreement between Israel and Palestinian leader Yasir Arafat. From the perspective of most observers—especially supporters of Israel, which include most of the U.S. Congress, President Clinton and Vice President Al Gore—the final agreement will appear fair and just, at long last bringing security to Israel and a truncated state to the Palestinians. But from the perspective of most Palestinians, their long struggle for freedom will have reached an unsatisfying conclusion—a collection of Bantustans linking a collection of second-class citizens.

When I first traveled to Jerusalem in December 1973, my perspective was strongly pro-Israel. The U.S. had just come through the civil rights struggle of the 1960s and I was very aware of the leadership that Jewish liberals had taken in the fight to eradicate segregation in my native South. Besides, Jerusalem was part of the homeland of the Jewish people, with whom I shared a biblical worldview. I rode from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem along the highway where many battles were fought in the 1947-48 war that led to the establishment of the Jewish state. Our taxi passed by the village where the Paul Newman character was killed in a film version of Leon Uris's *Exodus*. I arrived in a Jerusalem pulsating with the excitement of a new and brave nation that had won its 1967 war against surrounding Arab armies in less than a week, and which had just passed through the 1973 war.

But soon my memory of the civil rights struggle in the U.S. began to merge with what I learned from Palestinians. My trip had been arranged (but not paid for) by the American Jewish Committee. Hotels and restaurants were virtually empty in a postwar fall-off of tourism. In a restaurant overlooking the Old City of Jerusalem, I met Teddy Kolleck, the legendary mayor, who didn't want to miss a chance to greet any of the many visiting journalists in the city that day.

My AJC host had arranged a meeting for me at the Holy Land Institute, an institution of a more evangelical persuasion than that of the *Christian Century*. I was the guest of honor, but I was really on the hot seat, since the *Century's* reputation was that of decades of hostility to Zionism before 1948. Everyone pounded away at me for the *Century's* failure to champion Israel's cause, a sin for which I had little responsibility since I had been editor for only 14 months, and was only beginning to form my views on the subject.

At the end of the evening, American Mennonite pastor Leroy Friesen asked if he could come by my hotel for a chat. Friesen was one of a long line of Mennonite missionaries who worked and identified with the nonpowerful in locations around the world. He wanted to give me a different perspective. He proposed that we travel into the West Bank and up to the Golan Heights—a trip that was not on my AJC itinerary.

We drove northward out of Jericho, along the Jordan River. Along the way, we stopped to visit a Palestinian farmer who showed us his old well. The water level was declining due to a newly dug Israeli well a hundred yards away. The land grab had started. Traveling through the West Bank, we arrived on the campus of Bir Zeit College, where I met the school's president, Hanna Nassir, and a young Palestinian graduate student, Hannan Mikhail, who was completing her work in English literature at the University of Virginia. Her name today is Hannan Ashrawi, and she is perhaps the best-known woman in the Palestinian leadership. She served as official spokesperson for Yasir Arafat during a meeting in Washington.

On my trip into the West Bank, I learned something that I wanted to share with others—the typical response of a convert. I met with future leaders of the Palestinian struggle and many of those who would one day make up the army of that independence effort. I realized that there was more than one perspective on this struggle. Over the three decades since that visit, I have been saddened to discover that the single-minded perspective of American supporters of Israel has prevented a generation of liberal activists from seeing Israel's violations of both the civil and

human rights of the Palestinians. The alliance of peace activists and civil rights veterans that should have taken up the Palestinian cause did not do so, partly because of the strong ties U.S. politicians have with their American Jewish supporters, and partly because of the strong involvement of mainline Protestants with local Jewish-Christian relations.

I've tried over the years to share what I learned from the Palestinians. I regret that I have not been as good an evangelist in presenting the Palestinian perspective to my church and political friends as Leroy Friesen was in presenting it to me on the road to Jericho in 1973.