

Weep together

by [John Buchanan](#) in the [May 14, 2014](#) issue



A man at the Western Wall in the Old City of Jerusalem. Thinkstock.

The Middle East peace talks appear to be at a dead end. At the last minute Israel reneged on a promise to release Palestinian prisoners and announced the construction of yet more housing in territory claimed by the Palestinians for a future state. The Palestinians responded by applying for membership in United Nations

agencies—something both Israel and the United States have requested they not do. Each side blames the other for the failure of the peace process. Yet it does not seem that either side truly wants a resolution, even though the continuation of the status quo will lead to a disaster for both sides. In the meantime, most likely as an expression of frustration and desperation, the boycott, divestment, and sanctions movement against Israel is gaining momentum.

Recently, in the space of a few days, the editorial staff of the *Century* met with a Palestinian Christian leader and a Chicago rabbi who works for a major national Jewish organization. Both men are friends of mine, as well as distinguished clergy and respected leaders.

After engaging in conversation with them, I was struck once again by the conflicting narratives: how the same events in the same period of time and the same place sound entirely different depending on who's telling the story. It's somewhat like the American story—told one way by European settlers and their descendants and another way by Native Americans and their descendants.

One visitor represented the narrative of a people subjected to a millennium and a half of relentless persecution: expelled from homes, confined behind ghetto walls, and nearly obliterated in state-conducted genocide. Finally, with UN approval, they claimed a nation state in a place where their ancestors had lived centuries before. The other visitor's narrative was about a people who were violently displaced from their land and pushed into camps the size of cities—walled in, denied basic freedoms, and left at the mercy of their oppressors.

Isn't it possible for both narratives to be true and valid? Yes, Jews were and are victims of racial hatred and anti-Semitism. And yes, Palestinians were and are victims of the emergence of a Jewish state through wars and occupation.

Dialogue ends when each side demands that the other "let go of past suffering" and "get over it." To ask a Jew to "get over" the systematic slaughter of 6 million fellow Jews is callous. To ask a Palestinian to "get over" his ejection from his family home and the forcible displacement of 700,000 fellow Palestinians is also callous. Both narratives of suffering and oppression are true. Both people have been and are victims.

Is it too much to hope that somehow Jews and Palestinians could weep together? Is it too much to hope that both acknowledge their own culpability? Is it too much to ask

the church of Jesus Christ to play an honest and hopeful role in the devilishly difficult and complex challenge of peacemaking?

To that end it would be helpful to declare a moratorium on hateful speech and loaded terms: apartheid, racism, the treatment of Palestinians as “a new crucifixion,” Palestinian activists and patriots as “terrorists.” It would also be helpful if churches, of all places, made every effort to be balanced and fair, recognizing the legitimacy of both narratives and trying not to place blame on one side or the other.

As Christopher Leighton says in his article ["False witness,"](#) we must resist both “the messianic zealotry that animates Jewish settlers” and the “anti-Zionist ideologues who have jettisoned the role of peacemakers because they believe that Palestinians cannot win unless Israelis lose.”

A few years ago the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) said the church should “avoid taking broad stands that simplify a complex situation into a caricature of reality” in which one side is clearly at fault and the other side is clearly a victim. It’s sound advice.