

Jimmy Carter apologizes to Jews for past statements

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ATLANTA (ABP) — Criticized in the past for remarks that upset many in America's Jewish community, former President Jimmy Carter apologized Dec. 21 for any of his words or actions that might have served to stigmatize Israel.

Carter, 85, wrote a letter made public by the Jewish Telegraphic Agency offering an Al Het, a Yom Kippur prayer asking for forgiveness, timed with Chanukah, the Jewish festival of lights.

"We must recognize Israel's achievements under difficult circumstances, even as we strive in a positive way to help Israel continue to improve its relations with its Arab populations, but we must not permit criticisms for improvement to stigmatize Israel," Carter wrote. "As I would have noted at Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, but which is appropriate at any time of the year, I offer an Al Het for any words or deeds of mine that may have done so."

Jimmy Carter
photographed at Nobel
Peace Prize ceremony in
2002 in Oslo, Norway.
(Knudsen Photos/Carter
Center)

As president, Carter, who [won](#) the Nobel Peace Prize in 2002 for decades of work seeking international peace and justice, brokered historic talks in 1978 with Egyptian President Anwar Sadat and Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin that resulted in the [Camp David Accords](#). Those

agreements led to a groundbreaking peace treaty between the two countries in 1979.

He undid much good will with Jews in the United States, however, with his 2006 book, *Palestine: Peace Not Apartheid*. It compared Israel's treatment of Arabs in the West Bank to South Africa's [system](#) of racial segregation, which was brought down in 1994. While promoting the book, Carter said U.S. Mideast policy is influenced too much by lobbying by American Jewish groups, leading some to accuse him of anti-Semitism.

Controversy erupted anew in June, when Carter [labeled](#) Israel's 2-year-old blockade of Gaza an "atrocity" and said people there were being treated like animals.

Carter, famous among Baptists for a Sunday-school class he has taught for decades at [Maranatha Baptist Church](#) in his hometown of Plains, Ga., is the driving force behind the New Baptist Covenant, a series of gatherings in the last two years aimed at uniting America's fragmented Baptist community around common goals like helping the poor and working for peace and justice.

That agenda has included focus on the plight of Palestinian Christians. Hanna Massad, pastor of Gaza Baptist Church, spoke at both an initial [national](#) New Baptist Covenant Celebration in Atlanta in 2008 and at a [regional](#) gathering in Norman, Okla., in August 2009.

Reaction from Jewish organizations to Carter's apology was mixed. Abraham Foxman of the Anti-Defamation League called it the "beginning of reconciliation."

"We welcome any statement from a significant individual such as a former president who asks for Al Het," Foxman said in a [statement](#) to JTA. "To what extent it is an epiphany, time will tell. There certainly is hurt which needs to be repaired."

The Committee for Accuracy in Middle East Reporting in America [responded](#) with a letter urging Carter to back up his words with "concrete actions" by correcting "false and exaggerated charges" he made in a November opinion piece in the *International Herald Tribune*.

The group cited five statements described as "factually false" that "contribute to inflaming negative perceptions of Israel."

"Efforts to redress the errors via communication with *IHT* editors failed with their saying you have refused to correct the false statements," CAMERA Executive Director Andrea Levin said in the letter to Carter. "We do hope you'll set the record straight and affirm your commitment to undo any wrongful stigmatizing of Israel."

Carter's apology came on the heels of a recent announcement that his grandson is [running](#) for the Georgia state Senate in a district with a small but vocal Jewish population.

Jason Carter, 34, an Atlanta-area lawyer seeking a seat being vacated by an incumbent being nominated by President Obama as a ambassador to Singapore, released a [statement](#) saying the two actions were unrelated.

"While I was very happy to see my grandfather's letter, it was completely unrelated to my campaign," he [said](#). "The letter is a product of discussions with some of his friends in the Jewish community that have been going on for a long time. I, like many others, see this as a great step towards reconciliation."

While not a major religious holiday, [Chanukah](#) is well known to non-Jews because of its proximity on the calendar to Christmas. It is an eight-day festival that begins on the 25th day of the Jewish month of Kislev. This year's celebration ran Dec. 11-19.

Featuring the lighting of candles and playing with a spinning top called a

dreidel, it celebrates the triumph of good over evil and recalls a band of faithful Jews who, 21 centuries ago, defeated one of the most powerful armies on Earth, the ancient Greeks, and miraculously rededicated the Temple in Jerusalem.

The story isn't included in Bibles used by most Protestants, but it is in the [Apocrypha](#), a collection of books not in the Hebrew Bible but included in a Greek translation of the Old Testament known as the Septuagint. Catholic and Orthodox churches include them in the biblical canon in a section that generally appears between the Old and New Testament.

-Bob Allen is senior writer for Associated Baptist Press.

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