

Carter apologizes for any words stigmatizing Israel: Mixed reactions to Yom Kippur prayer asking forgiveness

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

Carter, 85, wrote a letter December 21—made public by the Jewish Telegraphic Agency—offering an Al Het, a Yom Kippur prayer asking for forgiveness, timed with Hanukkah, 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.”

As president, Carter, who won the Nobel Peace Prize in 2002, brokered historic talks in 1978 with Egyptian President Anwar Sadat and Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin that resulted in the Camp David Accord. Those agreements led to a groundbreaking peace treaty in 1979.

He undid much good will with Jews, 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 U.S. Jewish groups, leading some to accuse him of anti-Semitism.

Controversy erupted anew in June when Carter termed Israel's two-year-old blockade of Gaza an "atrocious" and said people there were being treated like animals.

Carter is the driving force behind the New Baptist Covenant, a series of gatherings over two years trying to unite America's fragmented Baptist community on such common goals as 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 inaugural New Baptist Covenant Celebration in Atlanta in 2008 and at a 2009 gathering in Norman, Oklahoma.

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 to JTA. "To what extent it is an epiphany, time will tell. There certainly is hurt which needs to be repaired."

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, 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 toward reconciliation." -*Bob Allen, Associated Baptist Press*