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What Would Jimmy Do?

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A former president puts the onus for resolving the Mideast conflict on the Israelis.

Reviewed by Jeffrey Goldberg
Sunday, December 10, 2006; BW03

PALESTINE PEACE NOT APARTHEID

By Jimmy Carter

Simon & Schuster. 264 pp. \$27

Jimmy Carter tells a strange and revealing story near the beginning of his latest book, the sensationally titled *Palestine Peace Not Apartheid*. It is a story that suggests that the former president's hostility to Israel is, to borrow a term, faith-based.

On his first visit to the Jewish state in the early 1970s, Carter, who was then still the governor of Georgia, met with Prime Minister Golda Meir, who asked Carter to share his observations about his visit. Such a mistake she never made.

"With some hesitation," Carter writes, "I said that I had long taught lessons from the Hebrew Scriptures and that a common historical pattern was that Israel was punished whenever the leaders turned away from devout worship of God. I asked if she was concerned about the secular nature of her Labor government."

Jews, in my experience, tend to become peevish when Christians, their traditional persecutors, lecture them on morality, and Carter reports that Meir was taken aback by his "temerity." He is, of course, paying himself a compliment. Temerity is mandatory when you are doing God's work, and Carter makes it clear in this polemical book that, in excoriating Israel for its sins -- and he blames Israel almost entirely for perpetuating the hundred-year war between Arab and Jew -- he is on a mission from God.

Carter's interest in the Middle East is longstanding, of course; he brokered the first Arab-Israeli peace treaty between Egypt and Israel in 1979, and he has been rightly praised for doing so. But other aspects of his record are more bothersome. Carter, not unlike God, has long been disproportionately interested in the sins of the Chosen People. He is famously a partisan of the Palestinians, and in recent months he has offered a notably benign view of Hamas, the Islamist terrorist organization that took power in the Palestinian territories after winning a January round of parliamentary elections.

There are differences, however, between Carter's understanding of Jewish sin and God's. God, according to the Jewish Bible, tends to forgive the Jews their sins. And God, unlike Carter, does not manufacture sins to hang around the necks of Jews when no sins have actually been committed.

This is a cynical book, its cynicism embedded in its bait-and-switch title. Much of the book consists of an argument against the barrier that Israel is building to separate Israelis from the Palestinians on the West Bank. The "imprisonment wall" is an early symptom of Israel's descent into apartheid, according to Carter. But late in the book, he concedes that "the driving purpose for the forced separation of the two peoples is unlike that in South Africa -- not racism, but the acquisition of land."

In other words, Carter's title notwithstanding, Israel is not actually an apartheid state. True, some Israeli leaders have used the security fence as cover for a land-grab, but Carter does not acknowledge the actual *raison d'être* for the fence: to prevent the murder of Jews. The security barrier is a desperate, deeply imperfect and, God willing, temporary attempt to stop Palestinian suicide bombers from detonating themselves amid crowds of Israeli civilians. And it works; many recent attempts to infiltrate bombers into Israel have failed, thanks to the barrier.

The murder of Israelis, however, plays little role in Carter's understanding of the conflict. He writes of one Hamas bombing campaign: "Unfortunately for the peace process, Palestinian terrorists carried out two lethal suicide bombings in March 1996." That spree of bombings -- four, actually -- was unfortunate for the peace process, to be sure. It was also unfortunate for the several dozen civilians killed in these attacks. But Israeli deaths seem to be an abstraction for Carter; only the peace process is real, and the peace process would succeed, he claims, if not for Israeli intransigence.

Here is Carter's anti-historical understanding of the conflict. He writes:

"There are two interrelated obstacles to permanent peace in the Middle East:

"1. Some Israelis believe they have the right to confiscate and colonize Palestinian land and try to justify the sustained subjugation and persecution of increasingly hopeless and aggravated Palestinians; and

"2. Some Palestinians react by honoring suicide bombers as martyrs to be rewarded in heaven and consider the killing of Israelis as victories."

In other words, Palestinian violence is simply an understandable reaction to the building of Israeli settlements. The settlement movement has been a tragedy, of course. Settlements, and the expansionist ideology they represent, have done great damage to the Zionist dream of a Jewish and democratic state; many Palestinians, and many Israelis, have died on the altar of settlement. The good news is that the people of Israel have fallen out of love with the settlers, who themselves now know that they have no future. After all, when Ariel Sharon abandoned the settlement dream -- as the former prime minister did when he forcibly removed some 8,000 settlers from the Gaza Strip during Israel's unilateral pullout in July 2005 -- even the most myopic among the settlement movement's leaders came to understand that the end is near.

Carter does not recognize the fact that Israel, tired of the burdens of occupation, also dearly wants to give up the bulk of its West Bank settlements (the current prime minister, Ehud Olmert, was elected on exactly this platform) because to do so would fatally undermine the thesis of his book. *Palestine Peace Not Apartheid* is being marketed as a work of history, but an honest book would, when assessing the reasons why the conflict festers, blame not only the settlements but also take substantial note of the fact that the Arabs who surround Israel have launched numerous wars against it, all meant to snuff it out of existence.

Why is Carter so hard on Israeli settlements and so easy on Arab aggression and Palestinian terror? Because a specific agenda appears to be at work here. Carter seems to mean for this book to convince

American evangelicals to reconsider their support for Israel. Evangelical Christians have become bedrock supporters of Israel lately, and Carter marshals many arguments, most of them specious, to scare them out of their position. Hence the Golda Meir story, seemingly meant to show that Israel is not the God-fearing nation that religious Christians believe it to be. And then there are the accusations, unsupported by actual evidence, that Israel persecutes its Christian citizens. On his fateful first visit to Israel, Carter takes a tour of the Galilee and writes, "It was especially interesting to visit with some of the few surviving Samaritans, who complained to us that their holy sites and culture were not being respected by Israeli authorities -- the same complaint heard by Jesus and his disciples almost two thousand years earlier."

There are, of course, no references to "Israeli authorities" in the Christian Bible. Only a man who sees Israel as a lineal descendant of the Pharisees could write such a sentence. But then again, the security fence itself is a crime against Christianity, according to Carter; it "ravages many places along its devious route that are important to Christians." He goes on, "In addition to enclosing Bethlehem in one of its most notable intrusions, an especially heartbreaking division is on the southern slope of the Mount of Olives, a favorite place for Jesus and his disciples." One gets the impression that Carter believes that Israelis -- in their deviousness -- somehow mean to keep Jesus from fulfilling the demands of His ministry.

There is another approach to Arab-Israeli peacemaking, of course -- one perfected by another Southern Baptist who became a Democratic president. Bill Clinton's Middle East achievements are enormous, especially when considering the particular difficulties posed by his primary Arab interlocutor. Jimmy Carter was blessed with Anwar al-Sadat as a partner for peace; Bill Clinton was cursed with Yasser Arafat. In his one-sided explication of the 1990s peace process, Carter systematically downplays Clinton's efforts to bring a conclusion to the conflict, with a secure Israel and an independent Palestine living side by side, and repeatedly defends the indefensible Arafat. Carter doesn't dare include Clinton's own recollections of his efforts at the abortive Camp David summit in 2000 because to do so would be to acknowledge that the then-Israeli prime minister, the flawed but courageous Ehud Barak, did, in fact, try to bring about a lasting peace -- and that Arafat balked.

In a short chapter on the Clinton years, Carter blames the Israelis for the failures at Camp David. But I put more stock in the views of the president who was there than in those of the president who wasn't. "On the ninth day, I gave Arafat my best shot again," Clinton writes in *My Life*. "Again he said no. Israel had gone much further than he had, and he wouldn't even embrace their moves as the basis for future negotiations." Clinton applied himself heroically over the next six months to extract even better offers from Israel, all of which Arafat wouldn't accept. "I still didn't believe Arafat would make such a colossal mistake," Clinton remembers, with regret. According to Carter, however, Arafat made no mistakes. The failure was Israel's -- and by extension, Clinton's.

Carter succeeded at his Camp David summit in 1978, while Clinton failed at his in 2000. But Clinton's achievement was in some ways greater because he did something no American president has done before (or since): He won the trust of both the Palestinians and the Israelis. He could do this because he seemed to believe that neither side was wholly villainous nor wholly innocent. He saw the Israeli-Palestinian crisis for what it is: a tragic collision between right and right, a story of two peoples who both deserved his sympathy. In other words, he took the Christian approach to making peace.

Jeffrey Goldberg is a staff writer at the New Yorker and the author of "Prisoners: A Muslim and a Jew Across the Middle East Divide."

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