Pope John Paul II arrived in Israel March 21, 2000, for a historic five-day visit, during which he visited the holy sites of the three major religions and met with Israel's political leaders and Chief Rabbis. Though ostensibly a trip focused on religion, the Pope also touched on political issues, blessing Israel, expressing support for a Palestinian homeland and apologizing for sins committed by Christians against Jews.



Pope John Paul II Visits Yad Vashem Holocaust Memorial Museum

In a meeting with President Ezer Weizman on March 23, the Pope blessed Israel, an act seen by many Israelis as final church recognition of their state. For centuries, the Catholic Church taught that the Jews' exile was punishment for the death of Jesus.

Later, during a visit to Yad Vashem, the Pope said, ''As bishop of Rome and successor of the Apostle Peter, I assure the Jewish people that the Catholic Church, motivated by the Gospel law of truth and love, and by no political considerations, is deeply saddened by the hatred, acts of persecution and displays of anti-Semitism directed against the Jews by Christians at any time and in any place.'' He also met with Holocaust survivors, including several from Wadowice, his own home town in Poland and impressed Israelis with the warmth he showed toward them.

Some people were disappointed the Pope did not specifically address the questions surrounding the behavior of Pope Pius XII during the Holocaust, but his remarks were still appreciated and widely praised by Jews around the world.



Pope meets the Chief Rabbis of Israel

The Yad Vashem speech was viewed as the climax of John Paul's efforts to reconcile Christians and Jews. He was the first pope to visit the Nazi death camp of Auschwitz and attend services at a Rome synagogue. In 1998, the Vatican issued a document on the Holocaust, and in early March, before

leaving for his Middle East pilgrimage, the pontiff apologized for the sins of Christians throughout history, including against Jews.

The Pope has also warmed relations between the Vatican and Israel, which were frayed for nearly half a decade. No pontiff has ventured into the Holy Land since Pope Paul VI visited for just 11 hours in 1964. The Vatican and Israel had no diplomatic ties until 1994, and the two sides were so estranged that Paul VI traveled only to Christian religious sites, never mentioned Israel by name in public and refused to address the Israeli president at the time, Zalman Shazar, by his title. In 1993, however, John Paul II agreed to the Fundamental Agreement between the Holy See and Israel establishing relations between the two states and, in 1997, the Legal Personality Agreement recognizing church officials in Israel.

During his trip, which the Pope called a personal spiritual pilgrimage, he visited the major Christian religious sites and conducted masses in Korazim, Nazareth and the Church of the Holy Sepulcher.

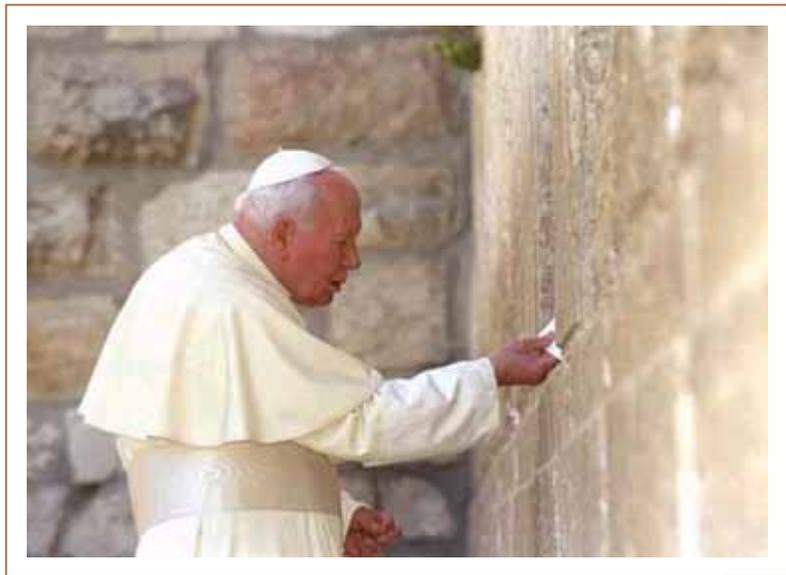He also visited the Western Wall and inserted a letter in a crack that read:


Pope John Paul II at the Western Wall

*God of our fathers,*
*You chose Abraham and his descendants*
*to bring your Name to the Nations:*
*we are deeply saddened*
*by the behaviour of those*
*who in the course of history*
*have caused these children of yours to suffer,*
*and asking your forgiveness*
*we wish to commit ourselves to*
*genuine brotherhood*
*with the people of the Covenant.*

*Jerusalem 26, March 2000*

*Signed: John Paul II*

The Pope returned home March 26 and Israeli officials were relieved the visit had come off without any hitches. To insure the pontiff's protection, Israel had mounted "Operation Old Friend," the tightest security effort ever employed for a visitor to Israel. By the end, even many of the most skeptical Israeli Jews had been impressed by the Pope's words and behavior during his visit and Jews around the world praised the trip as a positive milestone in Christian-Jewish relations.