

Ben & Jerry's Says Black Lives Matter, but Do Palestinians?



Washington, October 13 (RHC)-- The iconic ice cream company, Ben & Jerry's, which is widely known in the U.S. for its support of progressive causes and its adoration of the rock group the Grateful Dead, won even more praise for its activism when it announced this week their support of the Black Lives Matter movement. But the company's ties to illegal Israeli settlements has raised a single, unsettling question for many: Do Palestinian Lives Matter?

In an open letter posted on its website, the company explained that Black lives “matter because they are children, brothers, sisters, mothers, and fathers. They matter because the injustices they face steal from all of us — white people and people of color alike. They steal our very humanity.”

The letter explicitly argues that “systemic and institutionalized racism are the defining civil rights and social justice issues of our time.” They close with, “All lives do matter. But all lives will not matter until Black lives matter.”

But while the decades-old frozen confectionery has supported a multitude of causes, from climate change to marriage equality to challenging voter ID laws that discriminate against Black people, their ties to Israel

have increasingly raised eyebrows since at least 2011.

Vermonters for a Just Peace in Palestine/Israel (VTJP) have been the most vocal, calling for a global boycott of the company, to protest their Israeli franchise that sells ice cream and caters solely to Jewish-only settlements in the occupied Palestinian territories of the West Bank and East Jerusalem.

A campaign begun in 2013 sought to end this relationship, and also urged the company to issue a statement expressing opposition to the apartheid state's military occupation and settlement enterprise.

While VTJP has said, "Ben & Jerry's, to be fair, is not a corporate predator in Palestine in the vein of Motorola, Hewlett Packard, Caterpillar or scores of other companies with ties to Israel's military and police", the campaigns objective is to highlight how simply doing business in Israel normalizes the occupation.

"The simple, unsavory fact is that Ben & Jerry's in Israel, like many other businesses, benefits directly from a political, legal and economic system of military occupation, colonization, and racial segregation," activists wrote. "The commercial ties between the company's franchise in Israel and Jewish-only settlements cannot be reconciled with Ben & Jerry's widely touted 'social mission' or its record of supporting human rights and progressive causes."

In response to the 2013 campaign, Ben & Jerry's issued a statement, that year standing by their decision to continue their business in Israel, as they have since 1987. While they pressed that they do "not retain any profits from the business in Israel" and that their "manufacturing facility and two scoop shops are located outside the occupied territories, just south of Tel Aviv", they make no mention of Israeli settlements.

"This statement, like others before it, deliberately sidesteps Ben & Jerry's contractual responsibility for the franchise's ties to Israeli settlements. It's a classic example of redirection through misdirection," said VTJP. "The statement omits any reference to Israeli settlements and selling ice cream in them. Nor does it acknowledge the stark contradictions between Ben & Jerry's professed values and doing business with racially exclusive colonies built on confiscated land, including the use of Jewish-only roads to distribute the company's products. The word 'Palestinians' is absent from the text."

"'We have no economic interest in the occupied territories', the statement trumpets. Instead, the company asserts, it will allocate all licensing fees from its Israeli franchise 'to foster multicultural programs and values-led ingredient sourcing initiatives in the region'. It aspires to be 'a voice for moderation that builds a sensible approach to multicultural understanding and thriving communities'", they continue.

The most recent mobilization against the ice cream company occurred earlier this year when students at Vassar College in New York introduced a resolution urging that their school ban Ben & Jerry's ice cream because of the company's contractual relationship with the Israeli franchise.

"Despite the company's Social Mission and history of supporting progressive causes, Ben & Jerry's continues to tie its franchise to these illegal settlements. In short, while apartheid ensues in historic Palestine, Ben & Jerry's 'peace & love' ice cream continues to pass through Israeli checkpoints, and be transported on Jewish-only roads to be sold in Jewish-only settlements," the Vassar Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions Coalition (VBDSC) wrote in its resolution.

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