

OPINION

While we were cracking down on Ben & Jerry's

By **MARK LURINSKY**

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There are two issues that many in the halls of Congress and state legislatures have argued are existential threats to us as Jews, threats that our elected representatives need to address through meaningful legislation: the danger from rising white supremacy, and the activities of the Boycott, Divestment and Sanction or “BDS” movement.

But for those of us who are growing concerned by the alarming rise in white supremacist violence this raises a question — do these truly deserve equal weight?

The perpetrator of the racially motivated recent mass shooting at a Buffalo supermarket in a predominantly Black community was quite clear in the manifesto he wrote before carrying out the attack, which reportedly included both racist and antisemitic content. Ominously for those of us in New Jersey, three places in our state with highly visible Jewish communities also reportedly were referenced by the shooter. There is a clear thread to follow from the 2017 Charlottesville, Virginia “Unite the Right” rally, in which hundreds of far-right marchers screamed “Jews will not replace us!” and that took one life, through the Pittsburgh “Tree of Life” synagogue massacre the following year, to the events in Buffalo. In each case, ethno-nationalists traded in racist, xenophobic, and antisemitic conspiracy theories about a “white genocide” and a “great replacement” of Christian white Americans with immigrants and people of color — which they portrayed as “masterminded” by Jews.

The white supremacist movement has a strong proclivity to gather military-style weaponry with little or no restrictions, so that both organized and lone wolf deadly violence often are natural outcomes. In October 2020 the U.S. Department of Homeland Security found that “racially and ethnically motivated violent extremists – specifically white supremacist extremists – will remain the most persistent and lethal threat to the Homeland,” surpassing foreign-inspired terrorism threats. The Southern Poverty Law Center reports that in 2021, 12 hate groups were active in New Jersey, while 35 such groups were active in neighboring New York and 30 in Pennsylvania. In our state this includes the AC Skinheads and the (white) Patriot Front, as well as a chapter of the so-called Proud Boys, best known for their instrumental role in the January 6, 2020 insurrection violence at the U.S. capitol.

So why does it seem that our elected officials can address threats to the Jewish people only when they're dealing with a battle of significantly less consequence?

Last December our New Jersey state pension funds blacklisted the parent corporation of Ben & Jerry's ice cream for the offense of being “BDS-adjacent.” Despite the fact that at the same exact moment white supremacy was rising in our state and region, this punishment of a company that did not even support BDS, but just dared to make a symbolic statement questioning the occupation, somehow seemed to these officials to be the most important way to protect New Jersey Jews.

This issue has now re-emerged in the national debate, as the parent company of Ben & Jerry's, Unilever, announced that the ice cream brand has been sold to an Israeli licensee, reversing its ban on selling the product in annexed East Jerusalem and the occupied West Bank.

Let's be clear: the battle over BDS is a propaganda war, pure and simple. Despite extraordinary rhetorical excess over Ben & Jerry's, the impact of the boycott movement by any objective standard has been — and is expected to continue to be — minor. A leaked Israeli government report a few years ago estimated that BDS of all types could cost Israel's

economy less than one half of 1 percent of its GDP. A recent piece in Foreign Policy by Steven A. Cook explained this further, noting that all the most important international tech companies and other powerful organizations — including Amazon, Apple, Google, Facebook, Microsoft, and Oracle — have investments in Israel that are only continuing to grow.

Those of us who are committed to the continued existence of Israel as a democratic national homeland for the Jewish people, including those of us involved in J Street — the pro-Israel pro-peace advocacy group — oppose the global BDS movement.

J Street advocates for a two-state solution and a secure, Jewish, and democratic future for Israel. The global BDS movement does not support the two-state solution, recognize the right of the Jewish people to a state, or distinguish between opposition to the existence of Israel itself and opposition to the occupation of the territory beyond the Green Line. Further, some of the movement's supporters and leaders have trafficked in unacceptable antisemitic rhetoric.

It is clear, however, that placing legal restrictions on speech by BDS supporters is constitutional overreach, and it does nothing to advance the two-state solution or create peace. While supporters of BDS often can be engaged with in dialogue, when it comes to white supremacist violence, there is no ambiguity about both the intent and the danger.

In May, just days after the Buffalo attack, the U.S. House of Representatives passed a modest bill to authorize dedicated intelligence and security offices to monitor homegrown terrorist activity in the same way they address foreign-inspired terrorism on U.S. soil.

This should not have become a political issue, but unfortunately, the “Domestic Terrorism Prevention Act” was immediately filibustered by the GOP members of the U.S. Senate. Today, it has yet to pass.

And yet both the Republican Party as a whole and many other members of Congress continue to push the claim that they stand up against antisemitism.

It's long past time that our elected officials take the existential threat to the Jewish people of white supremacy as seriously as they take the boycotts of Israel, which make little to no dent in the country's success.

Both here in New Jersey, and on Capitol Hill, making Ben & Jerry's a whipping boy in the propaganda war, while refusing to do anything to prevent organized white supremacist antisemitic violence, only hurts our communities further.

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