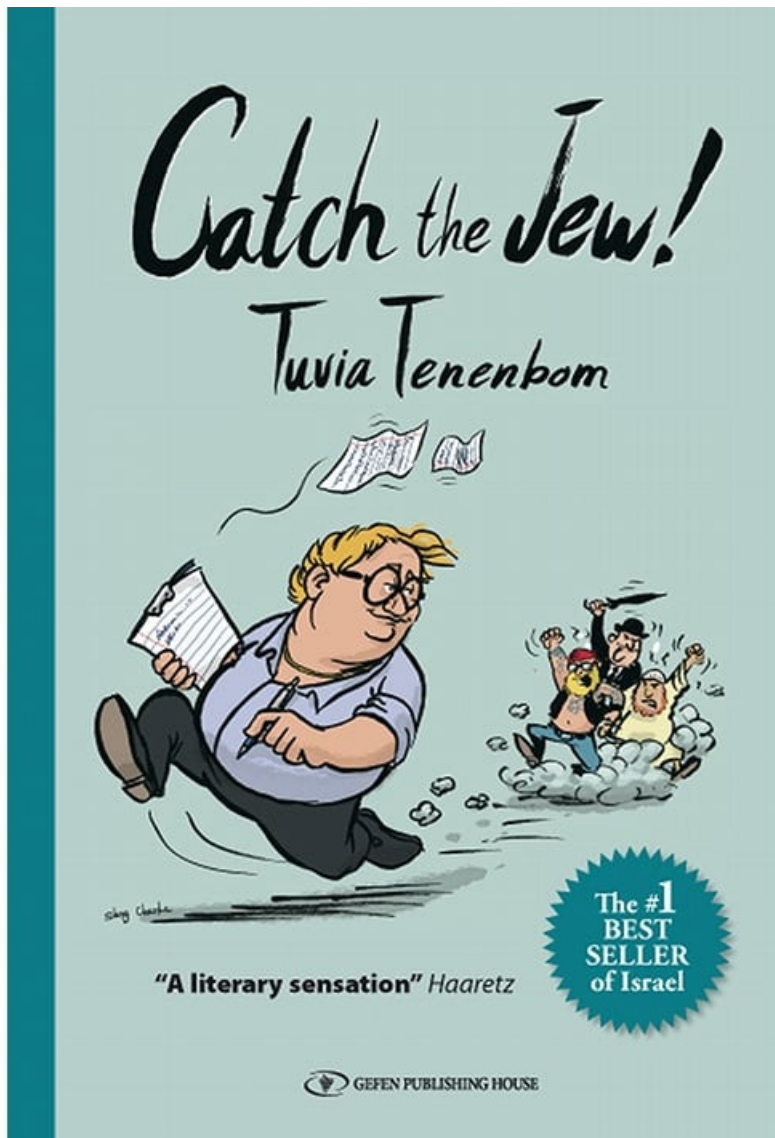


Besieged by Hate

by [Shai Afsai](#) (August 2015)



[Catch the Jew!](#)

By Tuvia Tenenbom

Gefen Publishing House, 2015, 467pp.

Near the end of *Catch the Jew!*, Tuvia Tenenbom repeats a joke told to him by Michael Mertes, head of the Jerusalem branch of the German political foundation KAS, one of many European NGOs

currently operating in Israel:

A man was sitting outside a Tel Aviv café writing when a passerby stopped by to ask him what he was writing about.

Writer: I am an author and I am writing a book about Israel.

Passerby: This is a huge job! How long are you planning to stay in the country?

Writer: I landed yesterday and I'm flying back tomorrow.

Passerby: You are going to write a book about a country after being in it for barely three days?

Writer: Yes.

Passerby: What is the title of your book, if I may ask?

Writer: "Israel: Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow."

Innumerable opinion pieces and editorials, countless articles, and a steady stream of books purporting to offer insight about Israel and the Palestinian territories have been written by people who have not spent significant amounts of time there, who understand neither Hebrew nor Arabic, and who lack a minimal familiarity with the texts and teachings of Judaism or Islam. *Catch the Jew!* is a different kind of book, however, and its author a different type of person. Brought up in an anti-Zionist Haredi family in Bnei Brak, Tenenbom studied in Haredi and Zionist *yeshivas*, enlisted in the IDF, and after being discharged from the army departed to the United States, where he cast off the yoke of religion. He knows Hebrew, English, German, and Arabic.

In *Catch the Jew!* Tenenbom chronicles the seven months he spent traversing Israel and the West Bank/Judea and Samaria in 2013-2014, during which he met with Jews, Druze, Palestinians, and a whole lot of Europeans. His assignment, as given to him by his editor, was to conduct a walking study of Israel (which he left thirty-three years before, and then visited "only sporadically" and "for extremely short durations"), its people, and their most intimate thoughts.

Tenenbom goes to Israeli cities and towns, Palestinian cities and refugee camps, remote Bedouin encampments, and isolated Jewish settlements, encountering an impressive array of characters along the way, from prostitutes and stray cats to Israeli Members of Knesset and Palestinian Authority officials. Though always informing those he interviews that he is an author and a journalist, Tenenbom assumes different accents and adopts various personas depending on his audience, presenting himself at times as Tuvia, Tobi, or Tobias, and as a Jew, German, or Austrian.

His findings, Tenenbom emphasizes at the end of *Catch the Jew!*, “are not based on abstract theories and fancy stories concocted in the comfort of remote labs or refreshments-heavy lecture halls,” but are the product of months spent gathering facts on the ground. Or as [he writes](#) in response to [an error-laden review](#) of *Catch the Jew!* in *The Forward*: “There’s a difference, big difference, between the reviewer and myself. I don’t believe in sipping my latte at a café in NY or LA, Berlin or London, browsing the Web and then writing about events taking place thousands of miles away.” (In fairness to that reviewer, I should note that I am now typing these words thousands of miles away from the Middle East. I hope mine are more accurate.)

Israelis seem to appreciate the book Tenenbom’s approach has yielded, for *Catch the Jew!*, in its Hebrew version, has become a best-seller in his native land. They have had a natural interest in Tenenbom’s observations and wide-ranging critiques of the country they still live in, and of the challenges it faces. Moreover, Tenenbom is an idiosyncratic and amusing narrator, for the most part maintaining a sense of humor even while describing very troubling matters.

Perhaps the most troubling and eye-opening sections of *Catch the Jew!* surround the more than one hundred European and European-funded Israeli NGOs operating in Israel and the Palestinian territories, which are dedicated to the conflict

issue.

The primary function of most of these NGOs, Tenenbom contends, is to catch Jews doing something wrong and then broadcast that fact to the world. Sometimes these NGOs forgo the catching altogether and simply invent wrongdoings. Whatever works, so long as the State of Israel can be delegitimized and its Jewish citizens maligned. "The age-old story of Europe's hatred of the Jew is continuing to this very day with just one minor adjustment: In the days of old, Europeans didn't have to get on a plane to fight Jews, who were then living as guests in their countries and at their mercy, but today they must travel the extra mile to satisfy their thirst to hurt the Jew," he writes.

Tenenbom's conclusions are somber and depressing. He finds that "the inexplicable hatred of the Jew refuses to die," and in the end leaves Israel dismayed and in despair: "Witnessing the tremendous investments and endless attempts of the Europeans, not to mention the Germans, all geared to undermine the Jews in this land, in Israel, was an extremely unsettling experience." Not only that: he finds that often the inexplicable hatred is helped along by the Israelis themselves. "If logic is any guide, Israel will not survive," he predicts in his version of Israel: Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow. "Besieged by hate from without and from within, no land can survive for very long." If nothing changes, there may be no Israel tomorrow.

It is in chronicling this besieging hatred of Israel today that *Catch the Jew!* makes its most valuable contribution to understanding the realities of the Arab-Israeli conflict.

For example, Tenenbom accompanies young Italians, brought to Israel by the EU-funded NGO Casa per la Pace Milano, on a trip to Yad Vashem, Israel's Holocaust memorial museum. The NGO has hired Itamar Shapira, an Israeli citizen and self-proclaimed "ex-Jew," as its guide. Shapira may not be sure how many Jews

exist (“Some say there are fifty-five million Jews in the world, some say twenty million, others say twelve million”), but that doesn’t matter. What’s forty-three million between friends? Nor does it matter that in 2009 Yad Vashem [fired Shapira](#) from his job as a docent at the museum, where he had worked for three and a half years, because of the political agenda he was infusing into his talks. Shapira was still able to give private EU-funded tours to uninformed foreigners after losing his job. He is a guide with a clear agenda: Holocaust inversion, portraying today’s Jews (or Israelis or Zionists) as yesterday’s Nazis.

“In Israel today, Africans are being put into concentration camps,” Shapira tells the Italians. Reaching a section of the museum on the Final Solution, Shapira explains to them: “What you see here is all from the eye of Jewish victims, this is after all a Jewish museum. But what you see here, with the Nazis and the Jews, is also happening today, in Palestine. What happens here in Israel is a Holocaust. Today, the Israeli army is doing the same thing, and the American army too.” African concentration camps in Israel? Holocaust in Palestine? Israeli and American Nazi soldiers? Could the Italians possibly believe any of this? Tenenbom observes: “When you walk with Itamar, seeing the dead of Auschwitz but hearing the name of Palestine, watching a Nazi officer on a video but hearing the name Israel, you can’t deny how effective Itamar’s propaganda is.”

Major General Jibril Rajoub – former head of the Palestinian Preventive Security Force and current head of the Palestinian Football Association and the Palestine Olympic Committee – also realizes the effectiveness of such propaganda, and he makes use of it in his lengthy conversations with Tenenbom, whom he thinks is a German gentile. He tells Tenenbom that if Hitler woke up from his grave and saw Israel’s brutality, he would be shocked, and that Hitler could learn from Israeli soldiers. Why stop at saying Israelis are Nazis? May as well

announce they are worse than Hitler.

[Holocaust inversion](#), as Jewish British novelist and journalist Howard Jacobson has explained, is “the latest species of Holocaust denial.” But the older species certainly haven’t died out. In Jenin, Tenenbom (presenting himself as a German gentile) joins Atef Abu a-Rub, a Palestinian journalist and top researcher for the Israeli NGO B’Tselem, and together they visit Bedouin encampments. At one encampment, the topic of Germany’s murder of Jews during WWII comes up. Atef Abu a-Rub, Palestinian journalist and B’Tselem researcher, offers his historical opinion of the assertion (“what they say”) that millions of Jews were killed: “This is a lie. I don’t believe it.”

Needless to say, not everyone has appreciated Tenenbom’s revelations. In the above instance B’Tselem at first argued that a video clip showing Atef Abu a-Rub denying the Holocaust to Tenenbom was taken out of context, though it subsequently issued [a statement](#) that “we wholeheartedly abhor and reject the sentiments he expressed.” When i24 Morning Edition anchor Yael Lavie [interviewed Tenenbom](#) in Israel in 2014, she aired the video clip, launched into a defense of B’Tselem, asserted that Atef Abu a-Rub was “not a Holocaust denier,” and attempted to minimize the significance of his statements about WWII. Tenenbom remained adamant, however, and so Lavie tried a different tack, questioning the usefulness of bringing such unsavory details to light: “Let’s say, you know, he’s a Holocaust denier, this, this, and that. What does it help, seriously, what does it help, you know, in the agenda of trying to progress a peace process?”

Apparently, on Lavie’s i24 Morning Edition only matters relevant to advancing peace processes are deemed significant. (Lavie is obviously incapable of entertaining the possibility that Holocaust denial and Jew-hatred might explain, at least in part, why the peace process is not progressing.) And for that, abstract theories and fancy stories suffice. There is no

need to, let's say, you know, pay attention to facts on the ground. What does it help?

B'Tselem eventually fired Atef Abu a-Rub [due to Tenenbom's exposé](#). It remains to be seen how this impacts the agenda of trying to progress a peace process. But perhaps Lavie can help the journalist and former researcher Atef Abu a-Rub get a job as a guide for NGO groups touring Yad Vashem.

Tenenbom supplies his readers with important information about Israel today, information that largely transcends questions of left, right, or center. For that reason it would have been better had he cut psychoanalyzing sentences such as these from the final copy: "The leftist Jew, and forget now politics, is the most narcissistic of people that I've ever met. There's not a single moment, day or night, that he's not fully busy with himself or with other Jews. There's nothing on his agenda except his obsession to find fault with himself and his tribe. He just can't stop."

His portrayal of Israel yesterday is less convincing. *Catch the Jew!* describes the intense hatred of Israel, from within and without, as something entirely new. "I have been out of this country long enough to not feel comfortable with so much self-hatred around me," Tenenbom writes after Shapira's guided tour. He is confounded by "the new Left of Israel: the extremist Left. This is a left I don't know, a Left as far as one's left hand can reach." Earlier in the book, he fondly recalls Hebrew University Professor Yeshayahu Leibowitz, who "was the leftist I knew and to whose lectures I went to listen. He had the sharpest of tongues and the most brilliant of minds I knew of, and I wonder if today's leftists are the same." After meeting a group of professors, one of whom claims to be an expert on Judaism, though it emerges she has never heard of the Vision of Isaiah, Tenenbom concludes: "These professors are no Yeshayahu Leibowitz; they are not worthy to even be his servants."

His servants? Let us hope not. Leibowitz, for all he knew of Jewish texts, was also a forerunner of Holocaust inversion, a prelude to Naomi Klein and José “What is happening in Palestine is a crime we can put on the same plain as what happened at Auschwitz” Saramago, as well as to Itamar Shapira and Jibril Rajoub. Yesterday’s Leibowitz loathed The Occupation no less than today’s extremist Left, and was willing to use similar tactics to combat it. “If we will continue to pursue this state policy, then it is certain we will get to” the level of the Nazis, he declared decades ago. Asked by his interviewer if this included death camps along the lines of Auschwitz for Arabs, Leibowitz replied: “Even that is possible.” (Those answers foreshadowed Saramago’s reply, when asked by a reporter in 2002 where, if Palestine was Auschwitz, the gas chambers were: “Not yet here.”) “There are Judeo-Nazis!” Leibowitz avowed, and “a Nazi mentally is widespread among us.”

At least *Haaretz*’s Gidon Levy, a fierce leftist detractor of Israel, stresses to Tenenbom: “Here there are no plans to annihilate other nations, no plans to rule over the world, no concentration camps.” I am not coming to defend Levy, whose work one can learn more about in Israeli journalist Ben-Dror Yemini’s *Industry of Lies* – but Leibowitz, were he alive now, would not be worthy to even be Levy’s servant.

As it happens, Yemini – who himself has [argued](#) that “the intense international meddling in the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, whether by governments or by NGOs,” has “become a major obstacle to the peaceful resolution of this century-long feud” – [hesitated](#) to accept its findings when *Catch the Jew!* was published in Israel: “Tennebaum [sic] is a figurative character with figurative writing. Initially, I thought he was exaggerating, but I was wrong. Tennebaum wasn’t only writing, he also documented everything via photos and recorders.”

A colorful author, Tuvia Tenenbom’s idiosyncratic observations and humor nonetheless rest on careful investigation. With

time, *Catch the Jew!*'s revelations may lead to more than just the firing of Atef Abu a-Rub. And though Tenenbom brings disturbing truths to light and makes Israel's very difficult circumstances evident, there remains room for more than despair and dismay. The Zionist project has proven astonishingly resilient, despite endless attempts to oppose it and despite a besieging hatred of Jewish sovereignty. Israel will still be here tomorrow.

Shai Afsai's ["Jimmy Carter: 'Friend' of Israel and the Jews"](#) appeared in the September 2012 *NER*.