Tuvia Tenenbom discovers America

‘Catch That Jew’ author coming to Teaneck with his new book, ‘The Lies They Tell,’ about his cross-country investigation
Tuvia Tenenbom is a fat guy. That sounds unacceptably rude, but it’s the sort of statement he makes about himself all the time; it’s a fact he hands to his readers frequently in his most recent book, “The Lies They Tell: A Journey Through America.” It’s a non-PC fact, which he likes, and it’s offered absolutely deadpan. That flat, childlike, wondering tone is the one he’s used in all three of the travel books he’s published in this country — “Catch the Jew!” and “I Sleep in Hitler’s Room,” both best-sellers in Germany, and now this one. (And it seems that it’s catching.)

In real life, though, his affect is oddly different. He’s big and rumpled, a messy, unthreatening body topped with sunny if improbably yellow hair and bright red-rimmed glasses. He uses his look to great effect in his reporting, coming across as simple, perhaps even simple-minded. It’s a look that breaks down barriers, and gets strangers to confess to him. It’s as if the function of a confessional booth can be taken over by clown-like hair and glasses, plus some extra heft.

In fact, though, Tuvia is not only extraordinarily smart and focused, he’s also passionate about his
work, about finding the truth, and about reporting it. (He will talk about his books at Congregation Rinat Yisrael in Teaneck on Sunday, February 12; see the box for more information.)

It’s a highly complicated, artful thing, that artless affect of his.

In “The Lies They Tell,” Tuvia has turned the guided missile that is himself onto America, the country that has sheltered, housed, fed, and welcomed him, a native Israeli, for nearly four decades.

He expected to like what he found.

He didn’t.

Here’s what happened — and as you read, keep in mind that politically, Tuvia is not easy to pin down. Some of what he says could come from the mouth of someone to the political right; some of what he says could come from a leftist. He would say — he does say — that truth transcends that, and that he looks for truth. Through his own lens, of course.

“I liked the idea of doing a book about America,” Tuvia said. “I wrote a book about Germany that was very critical about Germany. I wrote a book about Israel and I found a lot of anti-Semitism. I needed a change. I came here, to this country, to the goldene medina, with $400 to my name, and I got the chance to form myself from nothing.”

“I wanted to say thank you to America. I wanted the chance to travel around America, and write a praise-and-glory book about it.

“What did I know?”

Tuvia’s travels — accompanied by his wife, Isi, who plans the trip, does the logistics, takes the pictures, and fades into the background when Tuvia writes — took him across the country in 2015 and 2016, as the presidential election played out — took him across the country in 2015 and 2016, as the presidential election played out — profoundly shocked him, even though his persona is someone too placid to be shocked.

“I found that America is different from the one I expected,” he said. “I found an America that, sadly, is deeply racist. I found an America with too many weak parts. I found an America that doesn’t care. I found that people in America were fearful.

“I was looking for the home of the brave, and I couldn’t find it.”

Tuvia’s book is deeply pessimistic. He learned to drive — he’d let that barely acquired skill atrophy and had to regain it — and took to America’s roads to find real people. In Germany and in Israel, he’d taken buses, but people don’t do that much here unless they really can’t help it, he said, so he drove across the country to the places where he’d never been and had never imagined going. “We drove on the so-called ‘scenic’ roads,” he said, making big air quotes around the word. “We drove across the country, through 28 states,” from the East Coast to the West.

He went to the places he calls “the hoods,” ghetto neighborhoods where grim hopelessness reigns, and most of us never see. “I have been to refugee camps in the Middle East, and they are horrible places, but by comparison to the American hoods these refugee places are paradise,” he said.

There are such neighborhoods in many big cities – Chicago, Philadelphia – but he does not include Harlem. “Even where Harlem is not gentrified, it has beautiful buildings, wide streets,” he said. It once was beautiful, in some places is beautiful still or beautiful again. But the places he’s talking about “there is nothing in the house. Nothing. Shrubs and grass grow all the way up to the doors. There are no restaurants at all — you find one, and you walk in and see that the seats are all broken, with one or two lights hanging from the ceiling.”

He describes scenes from deserted Western ghost towns — but he’s talking about big eastern and Midwestern cities.

His descriptions sound deeply unfamiliar — but he goes to places most of us do not, and when he goes there, he says, he often is the only white person there.

“We came to a place that looked like it was not inhabited in God knows how many years, deserted, and then when we get there I see movement. It’s a person, a guy walking.” It was in Detroit, and the man told Tuvia, in words we will not use here, that this was a place where people shoot each other, and black people kill each other.

“I asked him why, and he said because no one cares. No one cares. Nobody cares.”

Wait. Pull back. What’s he doing?

“I say that I am a German journalist,” he said. “Which is true.” Tuvia lives both in New York and in Germany; his main publisher, Speigel, is a highly respected house. It funds his travels — which are not inexpensive — translates his work, which is written in English — into German, promotes it, and sells the translation rights around the world. He also has an accent that could be Israeli — or could be German.

“They love Germans in America,” he continued. “They feel comfortable with Germans. So when I ask them how everything is, they say ‘Great!’ And then I say I am a German journalist, and they feel comfortable with me, and they tell the truth.”

This man and his family, who live in rural Wisconsin, own 100 guns. Tuvia enjoyed himself shooting some of them. He’s good, he said, having learned in the IDF.

Tuvia talked to a group of young men in Germantown, a Philadelphia neighborhood.
“They say that they don’t like blacks — or whites — or browns — or Jews.”

Liberals don’t like Jews because they don’t like Israel, he said, and conservatives don’t like Jews because, well, they just don’t like Jews. People often brought up Israel, he said; he was shocked at how often people who otherwise seemed to know very little about very much still would bring up Israel.

He also found interesting patterns. “I asked if they believe in climate change, and if they are pro-Israel or pro-Palestinian,” he said. “Ninety-three percent of the time” — and yes, that was his statistic — “if they don’t believe in climate change, they are pro-Israel.”

He was not impressed with what he found among American Jews either. If you haven’t noticed this yet, let me preface this by saying that Tuvia does not mince words, even perhaps some mincing — or maybe at least some peeling and paring — might be indicated. “American Jews are pathetic and self-hating,” he said. “Not the Orthodox. The Orthodox I find to be almost the only Jews who are proud of their culture and their heritage, and that is healthy.

“But there are not very many of them, when you get out of the tristate area, this little shtetl, and you see American Jews.”

Tuvia grew up Orthodox, but he is no longer observant. At breakfast in the lovely Café Sabarsky, in the Neue Galerie on Manhattan’s Upper East Side, both he and Isi dug with relish (meta-physical relish, that is) into bacon and eggs. He does not put himself into any category except journalist and truth-seeker; he fuels that with curiosity and lots of local food.

He tells a story about a talk he’d heard in a synagogue in Minneapolis. “It was about black and white racism, and like any good Jewish community at a Jewish event, they have a representative black person. Usually that person isn’t Jewish, but this lady says she is a Jew by choice. And she says that since she came to Judaism, she learned a lot about Judaism and Jews, and she learned that Israel is an apartheid state, and that Jews are racists. And what do the Jews do? They clap. They clap like crazy.

“This is true. I have it recorded. So what can you do?

“I have never seen any other ethnic group so devoted to speaking badly about itself,” he added.

But he has encountered other ethnic groups about which bad things should be said, it turns out — and please note that Tuvia is an equal-opportunity insulter.

“I live in New York, so what do I know about Native Americans? I bought a book about them in Barcelona, and I learn that they are spiritual, their culture is beautiful, and everything has a meaning.

“And then you go to a reservation, and you see people sitting around like this” — here he imitates someone lolling back, drugged, tongue protruding. “You go to a place called Lame Deer, to a college, Dull Knife College” — that’s Chief Dull Knife College in Lame Deer, Montana, an actual college in an actual town — “and you see announcements that all raptors must report that they’re there.”

That’s a real sign, he said; he has a photo of it.

That, of course, is a sign of deep poverty, deeper poverty than we can imagine. Tuvia found such poverty all over. “In San Francisco, I go to my 4- or 5-star hotel, but I cannot smoke, so I go downstairs, and what do I see? Somewhere around 12 o’clock, the sidewalks start filling up with people sleeping. In San Francisco, in Seattle — I couldn’t believe my eyes. You start walking the streets, and you see it, in street after street. And the darkest nights — no lights — and the strong stench of urine, and people lying down in the streets.

“They are not stupid, they are not all mental cases. They simply cannot afford to live there. In San Francisco, a loft the size of this table” — the three of us were sitting at a fairly small table — “costs $3,000.

“We don’t care about this part, the weak part of our society. We have coldly left them out. This is frightening.”

American society is racist, he says. “I came out feeling that America has no right to invade any other country and preach democracy, when the society that we built here is heartless and racist, and we are all deplorable, not just the ones who voted for Trump. We are all deplorable. All of us. We don’t care for the poor among us, the sick among us, the downtrodden among us. We just don’t caring.

“I walked in a hood in Philly, and I see an old man, and he said to me, ‘What are you doing here?’ and I said ‘I’m walking.’ And he said, ‘I ain’t never seen no white man here before.’ There are so many places where that happens.”

Tuvia touched the man, physically, as he occasionally does with people he meets, and “sometimes people cry when I touch them, because I am white, and no one white ever touches them,” he said.

He tells a story about Hawaii, an island paradise with its own pockets of hell. He goes to a homeless camp, “tent after tent after tent, as far as the eye can see. I see homeless people, old people, babies born there. Very frightening.”

He talked to people there, Tuvia reported, and at first they tell him how much they love President Obama. And then, he said, he touched him — put his hand on his shoulder — and “the man said, ‘You touched me. And I lied to you.’ I said, ‘How did you lie?’ and he said, ‘What I answered you about President Obama. I don’t care about him because he doesn’t care about me.’” (Except as Tuvia told the story, there were more expletives involved.)

What about Israel? What about Jews?

Hatred of Israel is rife on American college campuses, he said. “You hear it and you see it.” But anti-Semitism, in its pure form, is rampant as well. He tells a particularly chilling story.

“Isi told me that I had to stop saying I am
German,” he said. “She said that we are not talking to Palestinians. We are not in Iraq. We are in America. Say you are Israeli. I said that it will not work — but okay. “So I try. We are in Georgetown,” a wealthy D.C. neighborhood. “I walk up to a lawyer walking his dog, a Catholic, very nice, very well-spoken. We talk a little bit, and then he asks me where I’m from. ‘You have an accent,’ he says. So I say I’m from Israel, and he comes very close to me,” and here Tuvia shows what he means by leaning in very close to me, “and he says, ‘After 2,000 years, you have learned to colonize.’ And I say, ‘I like you, man. Can I interview you?’ So I start interviewing him, and I start recording him.” Tuvia pulls out his iPhone to show how the recording works. “And he says, ‘I didn’t say colonize, I said coalesce,’ and we argue about it. And I said, ‘You know what? Forget it. I will not record this.’ And I closed the phone. And then he came even closer to me” — Tuvia came terrifying close to me in demonstration — “and he said, ‘What the Nazis did to you, you do unto others.’”

“When you go to places like Montana or North Dakota — red, red states – and you interview the young and they talk to you about freeing Palestine, and I ask them where is Palestine and they say they don’t know, they just know it’s a fight with Israel, with the Jews, it is coming here. “Just as here it used to be an obsession with health issues, with non smoking, and that obsession has moved to Europe, the European obsession with Israel and the Palestinians is moving here. It’s very interesting,” he said.

Tuvia doesn’t think that Donald Trump’s campaign was particularly effective in unleashing anti-Semitism, he said. “I don’t care about the alt-right, because it’s a small minority,” he said. “It’s like the KKK. I went to those places where the KKK is, and I spoke to them. They don’t frighten me because they don’t control anything. Most of them are in little villages, and many of them are on drugs. The anti-Semites who frighten me are the ones who are in universities, who are accepted, who are respected. The ones who don’t have power — there is very little that they can do. The ones who speak about human rights and really hate Jews — like that lawyer in Georgetown — those are the ones who frighten me. Not the skinheads, the ones with no jobs, no power over their lives. “They stay at home. Maybe they get guns. Maybe they kill people, like Dylann Roof,” the murderer who was just sentenced to death for slaughtering nine people at Emanuel AME Church in Charleston, South Carolina. That is a nightmarish, evil thing, but “how many can they kill?” he asked.

“What worries me are the ones who

The Rev. Dr. E. Christopher Hill heads a megachurch, Potter’s House, in Denver.
control the minds of America,” he said. So what about the huge elephant in the room? Donald J. Trump? The country’s 45th president?

“For me, Trump is the exact mirror of America,” Tuvia said. “Who Trump really is we don’t know. That will take time.”

“But what most liberals think about him isn’t the same as what the rest of America thinks about him, and the rest of America, between the coasts, outside of New York and California – most of them voted for him. What they see in him, I don’t know.

“We know that he is bombastic, he is against political correctness, he is a macho man, he grabs women, he says whatever he thinks, and he is a f• • •ing racist. And now the average American should look in the mirror.

“We are racist. We are bombastic. We change our minds often – look at American foreign policy. We are vindictive. And most of all we are feeling strangled, sometimes, by the politically correct, by what we are allowed to say and what we are not allowed to say. That is why we are afraid to talk about politics.

Americans readily will report how much money they make, but “when you ask average American whom they voted for, most of them won’t answer unless they know you,” Tuvia said. “I met couples where the husband didn’t know who the wife voted for, and the wife didn’t know who the husband voted for. This is the land of the free – but people are afraid.”

Trump is America, Tuvia repeated. We are racist, “but the liberals know how to cover it up better than the conservatives do.

“For me, as a Jew, of course I am more attracted to Democratic values than I am to Republican values,” he conceded. “So if the Republicans are •••king it up, I don’t care as much, but if it’s the Democrats…”

Back to the new president.

“So here comes Mr. Donald J. Trump, and reveals our real face to the world. This is us. And the Democrats are frightened by that. We really don’t like to see that image. The Republicans – they don’t care.”

Tuvia thinks that Trump’s racism is so potent because it is matched by a deep racism in many Americans. “What you see in another person that you hate so much is what you hate in yourself,” he said. “I would not have said that a year ago, but after talking to so many people, and hearing what they really think – once they realize that I am German and it is totally safe to talk to me – they say the most racists things, and I realize that’s who they really are.”

So, Tuvia, how incredibly depressing all of this is. Don’t you have anything cheerful to say? Anything even vaguely hopeful?

He searched for something positive to say, “One of the prejudices I had was that most Americans are all dumb. They are not. In no way are they dumber than Europeans.

“I had thought that Europeans are more smart and sophisticated than Americans, and I can tell you that in no way is that true. Americans are not dumb, and they are very patriotic.”

“I am not a rabbi, a priest, or an imam,” he said. “I am not in the job of saying ‘Forgive me Jesus’ – he raises both arms to Republican values, “ he conceded. “So you can change the world. One person can change the world.”

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“Of course I am outraged as a human being by what I saw – and it was not what I expected – but I did not push any agenda,” he continued.

“My job is to tell people what I saw, and to give voice to reality. To give voice to the facts. I am not siding with the whites or the blacks or the browns or the yellows. Not with the rich or the poor, with the Democrats or the Republicans. It is my job to be a tape recorder. It is my job to interview you, and whatever you say, to put it in.

“It is not my job to make it clean. I want you to know, to find out, to know what reality is.

“If you can see the world clearly, maybe you can do something about it. Maybe you can change the world. One person can change the world.”

Who: Tuvia Tenenbom

What: Will talk about all three of his books, and focus on anti-Semitism and anti-Zionism in the United States and Israel

Where: At Congregation Rinat Yisrael, 389 W Englewood Ave., Teaneck

When: On Sunday, February 12, from 8 to 9:30 p.m.

What else: The evening will feature both a question-and-answer session and light refreshments; Tuvia Tenenbom’s books will be for sale.

How much: $10 in advance, $12 at the door. Sponsorships are available.

For reservations or more information: Call the shul at (201) 837-2795 or go to its website, www.rinat.org.

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