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BOOKS

Before you boycott the settlers, meet them

• PAULINE FELDSCHAREK

Tuvia Tenenbom's *Excuse Me, Is This Yours?* joins the debate over the West Bank (Judea and Samaria) not through resolutions, maps, or diplomatic declarations, but via the people who live there.

Last month, 12 Western countries announced plans to boycott trade with Israeli settlements, once again turning "the settlers" into an international political category. But who, exactly, are these settlers?

Tenenbom spent eight months living among them, moving from established communities to isolated hilltops, while also speaking with Palestinians, Samaritans, soldiers, politicians, rabbis, and activists. What emerges is considerably messier than the familiar portrait of a single ideological bloc.

Some settlers are intensely religious. Some are nationalists. Some are rebels against the Israeli state itself.

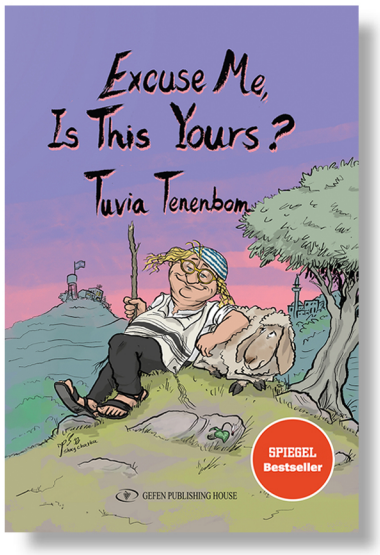
Others, Tenenbom discovers, moved across the Green Line simply because housing was cheaper. In Shaked, one resident tells him that most people now live there "because of convenience and cheaper housing, not because of ideology."

Even attitudes toward Palestinians refuse to behave according to script.



ISI AND TUVIA TENENBOM look out over the Judean Hills. (Courtesy Isi Tenenbom)

EXCUSE ME, IS THIS YOURS?
By **Tuvia Tenenbom**
Gefen Publishing House
488 pages; $30



One settler tells Tenenbom: "Culturally, I feel closer to the Arabs in the next village than to the Americans, including American Jews," adding, "I don't want the Palestinians to go."

And then there is annexation.

The outside world often assumes that settlers uniformly demand it. Tenenbom finds something stranger. Politicians and settlement leaders repeatedly talk about sovereignty, yet Israel somehow never quite gets around to imposing it.

At one point, the author reduces the absurdity to a wonderfully Tenenbomian instruction: "You want it? Take it. And annex it. You don't want it? Leave it. And move to Tel Aviv."

This mixture of politics, theology, absurdity, and human contradiction is the book's strength. The author does not ask readers to love the settlers or hate them. He asks something less fashionable: to meet them first.

Of course, as is to be expected of Tenenbom, the book is also very funny. His classic Jewish humor is important because, without it, the subject could easily become unbearable. His voice, as always, is curious, mischievous, humorous, and occasionally exasperating. It keeps the narrative moving even when the politics become heavy.

Now that international governments are deciding what not to buy from people who live in the West Bank, *Excuse Me, Is This Yours?* asks whether we might first find out who these people are.

The book also examines and challenges the work of Yuval Abraham, co-director of the infamous *NAZA* documentary that recently won a coveted prize at the 83rd International Venice Film Festival and received a 25-minute standing ovation from a roomful of antisemites. ■

In addition to this latest book, Tenenbom is author of the following six: Hello Refugees, The Taming of the Jew, I Sleep in Hitler's Room, The Lies They Tell, Catch the Jew, *and* Careful, Beauties Ahead.



TUVIA CONTEMPLATES. (Isi Tenenbom)