Moshe Zonder knows how film and television can change the world.

A former newspaper writer in Israel, Zonder is the head writer on the political thriller "Fauda," the first Israeli television series to be released as a Netflix original. The second season of "Fauda" arrived on Netflix in May.

This fall, Zonder is at Rutgers University in New Brunswick, hosted as a Schusterman Visiting Israeli Artist by the Allen and Joan Bildner Center for the Study of Jewish Life and teaching screenwriting for television in the School of Arts and Sciences.

The Rutgers Jewish Film Festival, running through Sunday, Nov. 11, will feature Zonder in a free panel discussion on writing about historical events at 2 p.m. Sunday at the AMC Loews New Brunswick, 17 Route 1.

Zonder recently spoke with the Asbury Park Press and the USA Today Network via email about "Fauda," teaching at Rutgers and how the film festival can combat hate and intolerance.

Q: "Fauda" is the first Israeli television series to be released as a Netflix original. How do you think Netflix and its fellow streaming services can potentially broaden viewers' perspectives by giving unprecedented ease of access to global film and television?

A: Netflix's platform has changed the world in terms of accessibility and viewing habits. As soon as Netflix acquired "Fauda," the characters we wrote for the series — which at first no Israeli broadcaster wanted — became familiar in many homes around the globe.

Q: You were a journalist before your time as a screenwriter, much like "The Wire" co-creator David Simon. How do you think newspaper writing skills lend themselves to serialized narrative storytelling?

A: Thanks to David Simon I wanted to be a screenwriter. It happened after I became addicted to the series based on his book "Homicide: Life on the Street," and like many others, I think "The Wire" is one of the best TV series ever written.

I started to study film and television parallel to the beginning of my journalistic work, and there is a clear connection between them. For example, the interviews I had with Hamas members and the hours I spent with them, including Sheikh Ahmed Yassin, who founded the Hamas movement and who Israel eventually killed, helped me to write the character of Taufiq Hamed, (whose alias is Abu Ahmed), and is the antagonist of Doron Kabiliu, the protagonist of "Fauda."
In its first season, "Fauda"'s DNA is that there is no good and no bad. The Israeli Jews are not the good guys and the Hamas people are not the bad guys. I may have been able to reach this insight even if I were not a journalist, but without my journalistic experience I would not have been able to write as an Israeli-Jewish screenwriter out of deep conviction of the character of Abu Ahmad, head of the Hamas military wing responsible for the deaths of more than 100 Israeli Jews. Around him is his wife, his mother, his uncle, his children and his right-hand man, portrayed in such a way as to inspire empathy, empathy and identification.

Q: This semester, you're teaching screenwriting for television at Rutgers University in New Brunswick. What have you found most surprising or illuminating about working with American students who have grown up in the era of binge television?

A: I have to say frankly that until now, the fact that the students grew up binging TV has not been expressed. But I can talk about another point. In Israel, I taught and I teach in various educational institutions that reflect the entire Israeli society, which is as divided and stratified as it is because it is a country that Jewish immigrants from all over the world built. But from my private experience, the students in each of the classes I taught in Israel, with exceptions, were members of the same homogeneous society. Here, students at Rutgers University have come from different backgrounds and cultures, making the lessons a unique experience for me.

In order to demonstrate how to write a biography of a character to get to know her or him well and to know what decisions to take on her behalf, I asked them to write a biography of their parents and the connection between them.

In addition, in order to demonstrate a post-traumatic event that occurred in the protagonist's past and influence him in a way that he is not always aware of, I asked them to write about a post-traumatic event in their own life. The materials they brought and read in the classroom surprised me with their level of intimacy, honesty and courage, and reflected a wide range of experiences. I think a screenwriter should be brave, check the conventions of society, of what is permitted and what is forbidden, and let his characters skate on as thin ice as possible.

Q: You've previously viewed your work at the Rutgers Jewish Film Festival, and you will participate in a panel on writing about historical events at this year's festival. How important do you think it is for a university such as Rutgers to place an annual spotlight on specifically Jewish works of cinema?

A: It is very important. The expression of Jewish work in cinema is unique, with rich and deep historical, cultural and social roots, relevant to the life of every person, regardless of his religion. I look at the program of the festival and want to see each of the films.

Q: The Anti-Defamation League reports that anti-Semitic attacks are on the rise in the United States. Do you believe that events such as this festival can encourage empathy and, in some way, counteract hate?

A: I am convinced of this. Racism often originates from ignorance that creates fear and fear that is fostered by a cowardly and populist leadership leads to violence, ranging from verbal violence to causing a person to enter a synagogue and indiscriminately shooting to death people praying.

A film festival can help counteract racism. I believe that art in all of its genres can, perhaps more than anything else, uproot prejudices that the viewers have inherited from the education system in which they have learned. Every tribe or nation has its own narrative that is often based on hatred and fear of the other, mainly to whitewash and conceal governmental incompetence.
For example, I can tell you about a project I am writing now, a drama series about the war of the Israeli Mossad against the Iranian nuclear program. The emotional focus of the series is found in the world of secular young Iranian people in Tehran. My writing partners and I did research on life in Iran and learned that they are much different from the little we knew about them, which was largely informed by ignorance. I think that there can be a very good relationship between the people of Israel and the Iranian people, even though it seems hopeless at the moment. There is much in common between the two nations, but the leadership in both countries is also right for its own reasons to portray the other country as an existential threat.