At the heart of this book is a photograph. In 1949, Robert Capa photographed the fence that separated Israel’s central immigration camp, Shaar Ha’aliya, from the area around it. There are three people in the picture, with two standing on the outside. They are facing the third individual, who is moving toward them, crawling under the wires. Although the people and their action are at the center of the image, the frame is dominated by the fence itself. We see that this was no small, token barrier. One year after the establishment of the Jewish state and four years after the Holocaust ended, this image of Israel was dominated by what was a symbol to Jews of European oppression at that time: barbed wire.

This image raises many questions about the motivation for and implementation of so imposing a barrier; about the reactions to it (how it was understood, interpreted, and received); about its failure to act as a deterrent to the people who crawled under it; and about whether there were consequences to this act of defiance for these new immigrants.

This photograph encapsulates a complex and controversial phenomenon. Its story and the many questions it raises are at the heart of the history of Shaar Ha’aliya and the quarantine there of Jewish immigrants in the first years of the Jewish state.
Shaar Ha’aliya was the major immigration processing camp in Israel during the period of the mass immigration that followed the establishment of the state in 1948. The central port of entry during an influx of immigration unprecedented in its speed and in its proportion to the residing population, Shaar Ha’aliya was intended to create order by systematizing the social, military, and medical processing that the immigrants were required to undergo. Translated, its name means “gate of immigration.”

At first glance, Shaar Ha’aliya comes across as a textbook example of an immigrant quarantine station. Photographs of the camp and historical references make it clear that Shaar Ha’aliya was isolated and fenced off and that health concerns played a central role in the camp’s conception and function. As a separated space where immigrants underwent medical examinations before entering Israel proper, Shaar Ha’aliya fits well within the definition of quarantine found in the *Oxford English Dictionary (OED)*:
“A period (originally of forty days) during which persons who might serve to spread a contagious disease are kept isolated from the rest of the community; especially a period of detention imposed on travelers or voyagers before they are allowed to enter a country or town, and mix with the inhabitants; commonly, the period during which a ship, capable of carrying contagion, is kept isolated on its arrival at a port. Hence the fact or practice of isolating such persons or ships, or of being isolated in this way.”¹ More important than the OED, the most significant support for the Shaar Ha’aliya / quarantine connection comes from the trove of archival documents that deal with that exact issue. This evidence makes a persuasive case for studying Shaar Ha’aliya’s function as a quarantine for Israel’s early immigrants.

However, other evidence tells a more complicated story. In the existing literature on mass immigration, Shaar Ha’aliya is referred to in any number of ways: a processing camp, a transit camp, or an immigrant camp.² Quarantine does not appear in this variety of terms. Moreover, among some scholars of Israel, there is resistance to the categorization of Shaar Ha’aliya as a quarantine. One individual cautioned that the rhetoric of quarantine must be distinguished from policy and that even if people referred to it as a quarantine, that doesn’t necessarily mean it actually was one. Another historian was more forthright in their objection, adamantly asserting that it is historically inaccurate to label Shaar Ha’aliya a quarantine, since their own research shows the State of Israel never quarantined incoming immigrants during the mass immigration.³

What makes these reservations particularly intriguing is the many ways they echo the voices coming through in the archival documents. Soon after the establishment of Shaar Ha’aliya in 1949, authorities were immersed in a discussion of its function and perception as a quarantine. The idea that the central port of arrival for Jewish immigrants to the Jewish state could be a quarantine raised passions and resulted in contentious, turbulent debate. Clearly, the contention and disagreement surrounding this issue continue to reverberate into the present day.
Another more tangible point of contention is evident in the archival documents as well: To what extent was the isolation at Shaar Ha’aliya enforced? As we see in Capa’s photograph, the barbed wire fence and the police guards at the camp did not actually prevent people from coming in and out. This gap between prescription and practice was known and discussed widely. The Shaar Ha’aliya administration knew that these breaches were a regular occurrence, but they did not see them as an indication that the quarantine was failing and that the barbed wire fence and police could be removed. Instead, they continued paradoxically to insist that the quarantine was necessary to protect the rest of the country from diseases borne by the immigrants.

Axes of Conflict

What can be learned from the many conflicts surrounding the Shaar Ha’aliya quarantine? The lack of consensus, the paradoxes, the level of passion from different quarters—sustained over so many years—all point to the fact that this discussion represents more than just one institution and its health policy: they are valuable indicators of the stakes involved in a medical history of Shaar Ha’aliya.

The story of the Shaar Ha’aliya quarantine is the story of the Israeli immigration experiment, a modern experiment of nation building, belonging, and power that is deeply tied to issues of health and disease. What is at stake is the image and the legacy of Shaar Ha’aliya, the historic gateway for Jewish migration. The conflicts over Shaar Ha’aliya’s quarantine are fundamentally about whether Israel’s largest, most important “gate of immigration” is understood as a place where Jews were welcomed to Israel or a place where they were made to feel cast out.

We cannot fully understand Israel until we understand Shaar Ha’aliya. Here was the country’s crucible. A gateway for nearly half a million immigrants, this is where they began to be changed into the Israeli people and where the Israeli people began to be profoundly changed by them.
The creation of the State of Israel was one of the most transformative events in modern Jewish history. It was established as a homeland and refuge for Jews from across the globe, people who—despite being from vastly different cultures and points of origin—were expected to form an integrated, cohesive nation. As a twentieth-century country striving for normalcy and success within Western standards of its day, Israeli administrators would use tools of modern state building (such as regulation, processing, biomedicine, and quarantine) to try to create a functioning, thriving state. But at the same time, this country was anything but normal. This was a profoundly idealized destination, the Promised Land that people had been praying to and about, yearning for, and imagining and mythologizing for millennia—a homeland that, in the Hebrew lexicon, Jews weren’t “immigrating to” but “ascending to”—and that people around the world were scrutinizing and holding up to high expectations. Israel's migrants arrived with a sense of ownership. After a long history of being forced out or refused entry into countries throughout the world—with historically tragic outcomes—here was a country from which Jews would not be turned away. For the majority of the people immigrating to Israel in this time, Shaar Ha’aliya was the gate of entry. It was the first spot in Israel where the historic promise of return was met with the banal realities of bureaucracy and processing, such as impersonal medical examinations and temporary detainment behind barbed wire. The subject of the Shaar Ha’aliya quarantine brings together these emotionally charged and often conflicting foundations of the Israeli experiment in the first years of statehood. It raises questions about how this new and unusual nation of immigrants was actually going to work, what “belonging” was going to look like, and which people and ideas would hold power. This is the phenomenon that the Capa photo encapsulates and that this book examines.

Each chapter explores a different sphere of conflict connected to the Shaar Ha’aliya quarantine: confines, structure, meaning, and memory. “Confines” describes life in Shaar Ha’aliya inside the barbed wire fence. It begins with the larger setting of Israel post 1948, as a way to understand
the environment of anxiety into which the immigrants arrived. We will see who came through Shaar Ha’aliya and where they were from. We get a sense of what they experienced in the camp: where they slept, what they ate, who they encountered, how they spent their time. We also learn about the people who worked in Shaar Ha’aliya, many of whom were also immigrants. And finally, we will learn about the function of health services in the camp, the medical examinations the immigrants went through, and the story of the Institute for the Treatment of Ringworm and Trachoma in Immigrant Children, a separate and controversial medical facility that opened in Shaar Ha’aliya in 1952. As will be discussed, Western medicine’s standard treatment for ringworm in the 1950s was a painful procedure involving waxing and tweezing the patient’s head and then treating the bald surface with radiation. Historically, children with ringworm were often isolated from others for extended periods, which is part of what happened at the Ringworm and Trachoma Institute in Shaar Ha’aliya. The traumatic and painful medical procedure in the 1950s, the extended separation from families at the treatment institute, the fact that the majority of children who were treated for this ailment at Shaar Ha’aliya were from Arab and Muslim countries, and then the prevalence of head and neck tumors that appeared in later years among people who had been treated there as children have come together to leave an open wound in Israeli society. The Shaar Ha’aliya Institute for the Treatment of Ringworm and Trachoma in Immigrant Children is at the center of this wound. Its history, and the broader context provided in this chapter, clarify the camp’s particular medical and social role while shedding light on the many challenges that were a part of life in Israel and in Shaar Ha’aliya itself.

“Structure” focuses on the physical struggle for control of the quarantine: the construction of the fence, the ways the immigrants physically defied it—by breaking in and out—and the administration’s ambivalent responses. This chapter puts quarantine in historical context, as a way to understand the development of this phenomenon, particularly in Western medicine, in Palestine and Israel. This contextualization helps explain
why a central camp for the quarantine of immigrants would have a place in the modern State of Israel, and it helps us understand how it could be so brazenly disregarded by new immigrants. We will see that the fence at Shaar Ha’aliya was not only a structure of confinement but also a site of negotiation and a vehicle for immigrant rebellion and empowerment. This section ties in with the work of scholars such as Orit Rozin, Bryan K. Roby, and Orit Bashkin who increasingly emphasize the importance of immigrant rebellion in the experience of the mass immigration.

“Meaning” moves from the physical into the realm of ideas and relates to the conflicts surrounding how the Shaar Ha’aliya quarantine looked and seemed. I focus on the different interpretations that people had of the fence and the images of Israel that it conveyed. For some, it was a comfort, a measure that suggested security, keeping the perceived dangers of disease and immigration at bay. For others, it was an infuriating and shameful symbol of isolation that threatened the social fabric of the new society. This chapter speaks to the tremendous power of what historian Alan M. Kraut has called the “double helix” of health and immigration—two themes that remain inextricably linked and powerfully shape the way absorbing societies see new immigrants. I argue that the only way to understand the contradictions in the defense of Shaar Ha’aliya’s quarantine, which was being touted as medically necessary by the same people who knew that men, women, and children were coming and going through holes in the fence, is through the contexts of Israeli and medical history. This idea of quarantine is directly influenced by the power of fear, fences, and twentieth-century medicine. For the people who defended it, quarantine meant an authoritative and familiar solution, even when it was, in fact, irrational. To many people in what was known as the “Yishuv”—the greater Israeli, Jewish society—it suggested a sense of control in this period of dramatic change, uncertainty, and fear.

“Memory” steps away from the past to discuss the contemporary marginalization of Shaar Ha’aliya in Israeli historiography and in Israel’s official public remembrances, shedding light on why the association
between Shaar Ha’aliya and quarantine could, to many, still be considered problematic. The conflict here is between the numerous and rich personal remembrances of Shaar Ha’aliya, its quarantine, and the state’s omission of this story. I claim this is an intentional omission because the many remembrances of Shaar Ha’aliya that do exist destabilize a few central—and comfortable—hegemonic Zionist narratives that actively construct nationhood: Jewish victimhood; the heroic struggle against an “external” oppressor; the myth of immigration that is Zionist, vulnerable, and heroic; and the myth that medicine is purely benevolent and healing.

I begin the discussion of memory and remembrance through a comparison with the memorialization at Atlit. The site of this former detention camp, where illegal Jewish immigrants to Mandate Palestine were held behind barbed wire by British authorities, is located only a few miles from the historic site of Shaar Ha’aliya. While there is not even a sign at Shaar Ha’aliya explaining what this place once was, at Atlit, there is an elaborate heritage museum that prominently features barbed wire as a symbol of Britain’s cruel containment of the Jewish refugees. Yet the themes that are so importantly a part of Israel’s official memorialization of Atlit are similar to the remembrances of Shaar Ha’aliya that we find in memoirs, oral testimony, and art. As such, this chapter sheds light on how the memory of Shaar Ha’aliya and its medically defended barbed wire challenge a mythic narrative of Israel. An important part of this chapter is the traumatic remembrance of ringworm treatment at Shaar Ha’aliya and the mark it has left on contemporary Israeli society.

I end my discussion in 1952 because this is the year that the number of immigrants to Israel and Shaar Ha’aliya significantly declined, as a result of the selective immigration policy that was adopted by the Israeli government in November 1951. As historian Avi Picard has shown, selective immigration was a controversial idea that was accepted largely because of health concerns associated with the mass immigration. As a result, 1951 marks the end of the first and largest wave of Israel and Shaar Ha’aliya’s post-1948 immigration. These factors join together to give a discussion on
introduction

immigration, health, and quarantine in the years 1949 to 1952 a particular urgency and salience.

Historiography and the Mizrahi/Ashkenazi Divide

Historians began to look to Israel’s mass immigration as a valuable field of exploration in the late 1990s. In her groundbreaking work *Immigrants in Turmoil*, historian Dvora Hacohen was the first to use archival research to show the complex absorption system into which the new immigrants arrived and the numerous obstacles they faced upon their arrival. Recent scholars have built upon this foundation, making important advances in the writing of social and medical histories of 1950s Israel and working to incorporate the perspectives of the immigrants themselves. These invaluable studies have turned a critical eye on state hegemony and systems of power and, accordingly, have put to rest any simplistic or romantic notions of Israel’s “Ingathering of the Exiles.” Much of this newest historiography focuses on the experiences of particular ethnic and immigrant groups. Others map the Israeli policies—as well as medical, technological, cultural, and social norms—that shaped the period and impacted both the immigrant’s arrival and the immigrant-Israeli encounter.

*Under Quarantine* follows in the tradition of this critical turn in Israeli medical and social history. This book is deeply influenced by research that has animated and complicated our understanding of the history of Israel’s formative years. Where *Under Quarantine* departs from other scholarship on this period is in its focus on this one pivotal place and its role in Israel’s origin story. In doing so, it aims to bring Shaar Ha’aliya—and the immigrant experience there—out of the margins of historiography and public remembrance. This book looks at Shaar Ha’aliya as a conduit, unlike any other in Israel, where the particular histories, policies, and norms come together. And it looks at Shaar Ha’aliya’s fence as a microcosm that brings to the surface some of the most crucial issues concerning the history of Israel and its migrants. Furthermore, by choosing to examine Shaar Ha’aliya
through the discipline of medical history, this book allows us to contextualize the phenomenon of this camp and its quarantine within a broader, global frame. For although Shaar Ha’aliya is most directly about Israel, the currents that shape its story—migrants, contagion, isolation—are by no means unique to Israel.

In making its argument, this book moves away from the Ashkenazi/Mizrahi dichotomy that often sets the frame for discussion of Israel’s first years. In Shaar Ha’aliya, the common themes of racism and ethnocentrism toward Mizrahim (Jews of North African or Middle Eastern origin) versus Ashkenazim (Jews of mostly Central and Eastern European origin) are too cut and dry. Orit Bashkin’s complication of the ubiquitous term Mizrahi is valuable for understanding this issue. In Impossible Exodus: Iraqi Jews in Israel, Bashkin emphasizes the cultural and linguistic diversity of the various groups who fall under this label, making the important argument that we need to “break the more general category of ‘Mizrahim,’ in order to explore the histories and identities of specific Middle Eastern countries in Israel.” Bashkin then shows that the Mizrahi identity developed later in the Israeli immigration experience as a result of the struggle against Ashkenazi hegemony. Eventually, the immigrants came to see that there were some problems that immigrants from North African and Middle Eastern countries had in common: poverty, poor access to quality education, housing problems, low-income jobs. It was from this difficult Israeli experience that the Mizrahi identity emerged. With this in mind, we can understand that—in fact—there were no Mizrahim in Shaar Ha’aliya. There were immigrants from countries including Iraq, Iran, Egypt, Tunisia, and Morocco for whom, eventually, Mizrahi would become an additional dimension of who they were. For many, this identity formation began at Shaar Ha’aliya. But in Shaar Ha’aliya itself, the Mizrahi identity had not yet been forged.

Another factor complicating the Ashkenazi/Mizrahi dichotomy is the fact that Holocaust survivors—who went through Shaar Ha’aliya in large numbers and had an important place in the Yishuv’s image of the mass
immigration—were also viewed by the Yishuv as diseased and potentially socially contaminating. A topic that surfaces repeatedly throughout this book is how the immigrants’ various ethnic backgrounds and their encounters with stereotyping and discrimination shaped their Israeli experience in various ways—both in and outside of Shaar Ha’aliya. However, my conclusion is that this camp and its quarantine were not expressly intended to target one ethnic group more than another. In this respect at least, the people who went through Shaar Ha’aliya were bound by the commonality of being immigrants.

As the details of this story will show, Shaar Ha’aliya affected individuals differently. At this first moment of arrival, the large categorizations of Mizrahi and Ashkenazi are not a reliable way to understand whether a person would have felt welcome or happy or discriminated against and traumatized. Some North Africans were deeply scarred by their time there, while others hardly remember it. Some Europeans were unmoved by what they found there, while for others, the camp conjured memories from the war and the Holocaust. One man who was there for weeks considered it “fine,” while others who were there for several hours considered it horrible. How one experienced Shaar Ha’aliya was largely an individual matter, the outcome of the interaction between factors of language, background, time, lodgings, food, weather, interpersonal relations, age, expectations, and past experience that resulted in one’s own personal encounter and memories.

**Migration, Israel**

This book is about the extraordinary phenomenon of mass migration. It celebrates the migrants whose incredible lives form the heart of the story. Today, our early twenty-first-century world is being transformed by the largest mass migrations in recent history, with expansive immigrant and refugee camps appearing across the globe, as well as walls and medicalized, nativist rhetoric and policy. In such a world, Shaar Ha’aliya’s story
is more important than ever. We will see the upheaval that mass migrations bring to everyone involved and the various ways different people cope with this upheaval. We will see the exceptional difficulties a person encounters when reaching a new country, the practical challenges a society faces when trying to accommodate new immigrants, and how deeply vulnerable people can feel when immigrants arrive at their borders. This is a story that helps us understand how those vulnerabilities can both connect to and exaggerate the fear of illness and disease. It helps us understand the important role that medicine plays in controlling migrants. And finally, it helps us see how these fears—of foreigners, of contagion—can lead to quarantine being used to rationalize an exclusion even when it is not medically justifiable.

For Israel, the significance of Shaar Ha’aliya cannot be overemphasized. It has no parallel in Israeli history. Although in various stages of the mass immigration there were other areas of controlled immigration centers, Shaar Ha’aliya was the only central processing camp. In its thirteen years of operation, nearly 400,000 immigrants passed through its gates, with the overwhelming majority (325,296) concentrated in 1949–1952. By 1952, approximately one quarter of the entire Israeli population had immigrated by way of this camp. Some of these individuals went on to become famous cultural and political figures, including the celebrated author Eli Amir, the singer Chava Alberstein, as well as the disgraced former president Moshe Katzav. As we will see, Shaar Ha’aliya shaped Israeli culture, the Israeli landscape, and Israeli society. The Jewish Agency conceived of it as an isolated space where the masses could be met, contained, and controlled with order. But in so many ways, the immigrants who went through Shaar Ha’aliya defied this balance of power. The people who emerged from this flawed process were emboldened, often disappointed, and vocally and physically defiant and carried with them a strong sense of entitlement to the goings-on in their state. In the controlled chaos of the Shaar Ha’aliya tents, huts, lines, and fence, we can see the people, and the newly complicated encounters between people, that were bringing Israel to life.
A “Broader Applicability” of Quarantine

Shaar Ha’aliya’s history pushes the boundaries of what is and what is not considered a quarantine. In 1948, Israel had three official, functioning quarantine stations for international travelers, at the Haifa, Tel Aviv / Jaffa, and Eilat ports. Shaar Ha’aliya was not one of them. Historian Dan Bar-El has shown that modern quarantine systems for travelers to Palestine were introduced as part of international initiatives to control the spread of cholera in the nineteenth century. The first quarantine station in Jaffa was opened in 1835, following the second cholera outbreak in the region. European consulates wanted to closely supervise this main entry to the Holy Land. Medical historian Nissim Levy explains that under the British rule of Palestine (1917–1948), quarantine for travelers faded from use and significance.

According to Theodor Grushka’s foundational manuscript on Israeli public health, in 1948, the diseases listed as “quarantinable” were smallpox and louse-borne typhus. Although there had been a few minor outbreaks of smallpox in 1949–1950, internationally accepted vaccination procedures prevented any recurrence. Indeed the “great quarantine diseases of smallpox, plague and cholera, when they did occur, were limited to small foci and quickly stamped out.” From 1948 to 1965, Israeli public health services did not receive any reports of quarantinable diseases, nor were any registered in vessels coming in to Israel. Nissim Levy goes on to assert that once the State of Israel was established, the entire institution of quarantine “was left off and completely forgotten.”

With this in mind, anyone who argues that Shaar Ha’aliya was not a quarantine is not entirely wrong. It was outside the equation of international quarantine stations that can be framed so precisely. But this definition falls flat: it is limited and superficial. Foucault famously exposed the blurred boundaries between quarantine and other forms of state-imposed isolation and punishment. Carolyn Strange and Alison Bashford have continued Foucault’s comparative approach, asking us to see
what is uniquely modern about isolating practices. They have identified three vital characteristics: (1) flexible rationales for the isolation that “often move seamlessly between punishment, protection and prevention,” (2) architectural dimensions that have been carefully planned out, and (3) the “subjectification of the isolated.”

If we look at quarantine in this way—as a modern method of enforced isolation, with shifting rationales for confinement, a careful architectural structure that is a place where the people inside are not only subjectified but also objectified—we find, almost precisely, a definition of Shaar Ha’aliya. Here, in the modern State of Israel, was a camp that was, to a large extent, being defined by an architectural structure: its fence. But the rationale for what it was and why it needed to be separate (because it was a quarantine, an immigration camp, or a processing camp?) is still, to this day, rather slippery. And the people inside, as we will see, were powerful subjects. This insight helps us see Shaar Ha’aliya’s quarantine as something that fits within a global process of modernization.

Other scholars of quarantine give us an opportunity to strip the concept down and understand it more fully as a basic, emotional, human act of separation and not only as an explicit public health policy. It is a disruption of contact. It is a boundary. It is a way to put distance between people who are contaminating and people who are uncontaminated. But as medical historian David Musto cautions, in the history of quarantine, “social diseases”—including the “disease” of immigration, drugs, and feared minorities—have always been targeted as much as biological disease. Accordingly, he calls for a wide perspective: “The concept of quarantine is far broader than its modern applicability to a well-understood communicable disease. Quarantine is a marking off, the creation of a boundary to ward off a feared biological containment lest it penetrate a healthy population.”

This is where we find Shaar Ha’aliya, within this “broader applicability” of quarantine. Shaar Ha’aliya was not necessarily one of Israel’s official international quarantine stations but—as we will see—neither was it just a metaphor for quarantine. In a time of
deep existential anxiety for citizens of a vulnerable new country, during an extraordinary wave of mass migration, it was a boundary meant to “ward off” the “disease” of immigration, separating the (physically and socially) contaminating from the uncontaminated. But because the people it was meant to ward off were the same people that Israel was said to be welcoming—the same people Israel was meant to be for—it was perhaps inevitable that this “warding off” would not go unchallenged. It was fundamentally provocative from the start.