Chapter 3. Meaning

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In April 1951, Shabtai Keshev, a reporter who wrote under the name K. Shabtai, sat down to compose an article on Shaar Ha’aliya. Keshev was a Holocaust survivor who had been imprisoned in the Kovno ghetto for four years, and he made his feelings clear: this place and its barbed wire fence were a shameful sight. “Shaar Ha’aliya has become the first stain on the country’s name, the first to poison the new immigrant’s soul. . . . Barbed wire fences surround the camp, fences that are a penetrated wall on the one hand and a prison on the other.” Around the same time that this article came out, Shefi (Shaar Ha’aliya’s overseeing police officer) was drafting his own reports about the camp guards, which had a very different take on the Shaar Ha’aliya fence. What Keshev described as a “prison,” Shefi presented simply as a logical safeguard. Unsurprisingly, from his perspective as the man responsible for keeping order and guarding the quarantine, the barbed wire fence was a straightforward matter that he did not question. It was a natural and welcome measure of policy and order.²

Shabtai and Shefi were not alone. Many people, whether Jewish Agency officials, camp employees, international and local journalists, or members of the public, all had something to say about the quarantine. This chapter explores what they were saying.³ These texts make it clear that, just as there was a physical push and pull surrounding the fence, there was also one that was conceptual and verbal; whether within themselves
or between one another, people struggled with and could not agree upon any one interpretation or meaning of the Shaar Ha’aliya quarantine. Some were like Shefi. For them, the Shaar Ha’aliya fence was a comfort, a measure that suggested security, keeping the grave dangers of disease and immigration at bay. This meaning of quarantine is protective. It ties in directly to what Alan M. Kraut has called the “double helix” of immigration and disease, two themes that are linked and deeply feared in the societies that receive newcomers. For many people in the Yishuv, the immigrants and their diseases were perceived as threats and quarantine and biomedicine were perceived as shields. Others were like Shabtai. For them, the fence was a shameful and embarrassing symbol of isolation that threatened the social fabric of the new society. This meaning of quarantine is punitive. It holds on to the idea that the Jewish state was supposed to be a symbol of inclusion for all Jews, whereas a camp enclosed by a barbed wire fence symbolized exclusion and persecution.

These positions are not always dichotomous; people bounced opinions around and moderated them in some cases only to intensify them elsewhere—sometimes even in the same text. Nevertheless, several important ideas come through: (1) The “setting apart” of new immigrants in a camp behind barbed wire hit a nerve in Israeli society even before Shaar Ha’aliya was opened because of associations with the camps of the Holocaust. But it was also, just as quickly, accepted and defended through the logic of disease and quarantine. (2) The fact that the same people who were defending the quarantine as medically necessary also knew that it wasn’t successfully keeping people out ties into Wendy Brown’s theoretical work on walls as theatrical displays of power meant to obfuscate vulnerability. The meaning of the fence, and the discussion surrounding its meaning, comes down to fear, fences, and medicine: the context was one of fear of contagion, the fence was a sign of control in the face of that fear, and medicine (the defending logic behind a quarantine) was a reassuring and powerful authority. (3) Finally, one of the most important meanings ascribed to quarantine in this discourse is as an alternative to the camps
of Europe: displaced peoples (DP) or concentration camps. When people, inevitably and repeatedly, commented on similarities between Shaar Ha’aliya’s appearance and concentration camps of the Holocaust, “quarantine” was offered as an alternative conceptual frame, as a way to say, “You see a fence and an isolation that harm, but you should see a fence and an isolation that heal.”

This chapter disentangles the threads of the Shaar Ha’aliya / quarantine discourse while shining a light on the entanglements that still persist; there are blurred boundaries and blatant contradictions throughout. The story that emerges reinforces Shaar Ha’aliya’s place within a broader frame of quarantine, where we find both an overlap between modern systems of coerced isolation (a prison / a quarantine / a processing camp) as well as fuzzy borders between physical and social “contagion.” Moreover, what also emerges is a sense of the depth of this conflict, as people struggled with what it meant for the Jewish state to have a fenced-in quarantine for these particular people at this particular time and place.

From outside Israel, Looking at Shaar Ha’aliya

In August 1949, the *New York Herald Tribune* published a series of five articles that followed the journey of hundreds of immigrants on the ship the *Atzmaut* (Hebrew for “independence”) as it traveled from Bari, Italy, to Haifa. Ruth Gruber, the author of these articles, was a renowned writer and photojournalist from New York who had begun writing for the *New York Herald Tribune* while living in Germany in the 1930s. Her life’s work was devoted to critical political and social issues of her time: the rise of Hitler and Europe’s growing expressions of anti-Semitism in the 1930s, the Nuremberg trials, the settlement of veterans returning to the United States, and the plight of Holocaust survivors and Jewish refugees around the world. Gruber’s reporting of the story of the *Exodus* in 1947—a ship of Jewish DP’s from Germany that was turned away from British-controlled Palestine—was responsible for the international attention the story
received. Similarly, in 1944, Gruber’s involvement was critical in arranging for one thousand Jewish refugees to get temporary admission—and later citizenship—in the United States. Therefore when Gruber set out for Haifa on the *Atzmaut*, she was already a proven global advocate for the refugees she was accompanying.⁴

The 1949 series on the *Atzmaut* is humanizing and dramatic. The articles’ emphatic titles lay out a story of refugees rejected by Europe and North Africa arriving in their rightful and welcoming home of Israel. It begins with “Sailing for the Promised Land” and ends, four days later, with “Refugees’ Landing in Israel: ‘It’s Our Land, It Belongs to Us.’”⁵ Gruber focused on the immigrants’ stories as they were told to her on the trip over and their hopes and fears about starting a new life. The series ends with a final article describing the first few hours after the emotional arrival in Israel: “They crowded the deck for hours to catch their first glimpse of the Holy Land. At 2 o’clock, jammed against the gunwales they stood, singing ‘Hatikvah.’ It was the song the Jews had sung in the ghettos and on the death march to the gas chambers. It was the song the Jews sang when they ran the British blockade. Now it is the anthem of the new state, and Israel’s newest immigrants sang it with choked voices.” One woman’s story highlighted how, after going through hell, arriving in Israel was an extraordinary feeling of finally belonging somewhere:

A woman who had lost her entire family in the crematoria said to me, “I can’t believe it yet; we’re really home. No more running. It’s our own land. Nobody can say to me anymore, ‘Jews not wanted here.’ This belongs to me. I don’t know how to say this to you, but for the first time since 1939, my heart feels light. Do you know what it means not to run any more, not to be hounded by brutes? To be able to breathe again? To know you’re wanted? That’s how I feel now. Like a person who’s wanted and welcome. Like a human being.”

Gruber described Shaar Ha’aliya as “an elongated jumble of tents and wooden barracks along the Mediterranean.” Then in the last paragraph
of the article, which ends her entire series, she wrote, “Sha’ar Aliyah, where the people stay from four to ten days, is to be turned into a quarantine camp so that any infectious diseases can be isolated. The immigrants received a thorough medical examination and in a week or two were to be transferred to one of three places: a permanent immigration camp, a farm colony, or a former Arab village. The few with relatives or friends with apartments had no housing problems.” Gruber makes no direct allusion to the barbed wire fence. Her reference to quarantine is fleeting and accepting. It implies that it is normative and inconsequential, and perhaps—after going through the Holocaust—for these people, a quarantine camp really was the least of their worries.

For Raymond Cartier, however, the symbol of barbed wire was not inconsequential. Cartier, a French journalist and author, came to Israel in 1949 to cover Israel’s early development. The result was a long article published in the August 1949 issue of the popular French magazine Paris-Match. At this time, Cartier was already a well-known columnist. But it was only seven years later, in 1956, that he became famous for his arguments against maintaining French colonies. Cartier’s main argument against the colonies was that they were an economic burden and that, rather than pay for them, France would do better investing the money in the metropole. This anticolonial position, which would come to be known as “Cartierism,” was first articulated in a series of essays Cartier published for Paris-Match in 1956. Although his earlier piece about Israel deals with a different space and subject, it is possible to see the pragmatic and critical worldviews that Cartier would become synonymous with coming through in his gaze on the new Jewish state.

Cartier, like Gruber, wrote about the immigrant encounter with Israel. His long and compelling article combines several pages of text with large photographs. He remarked upon developments in Israeli industry and scholarship and the general challenges that the new immigrants faced: the housing shortage, a lack of private living space, cultural gaps, and the obstacles to integration. While Gruber’s articles depict immigrants who
were largely reconciled with the difficulties they expected to encounter in Israel ("Immigrants on the Atzmaut Are Prepared to Face Austerity and Hardships for Life of Hope"), Cartier, on the other hand, depicts less reconciliation. He brought attention to an important theme: the clash between the ideal of immigrating to the Jewish state and the very difficult reality.

Accordingly, Cartier emphasized that Shaar Ha’aliya was a problem. He wrote that the new immigrants arrived full of hope for what awaited them in Israel only to find what they had thought that they had left behind them: camps surrounded by barbed wire. Already in the fall of 1949, only a few months after Shaar Ha’aliya had opened, Shaar Ha’aliya is being associated with Holocaust imagery. But Cartier makes an important distinction between the camps of Europe and Israel: "These are camps of hope instead of camps of death, but they are still ‘camps.’" This is not Gruber’s simple acceptance of the isolation. Cartier makes no reference to health and quarantine as justifications. Not only does he see the barbed wire as punitive; he associates it with the worst kind of imprisonment. But he moderated himself by saying that this camp offered possibility and life and not the horrors of the Holocaust.

Robert Capa’s view of Shaar Ha’aliya’s fence was closer to Cartier’s critique than it was to Gruber’s acceptance. A Hungarian-born Jew who had begun working as a photographer in Berlin in the 1930s, by the time Capa photographed Shaar Ha’aliya he was already one of the world’s most celebrated photojournalists, especially known for his images of war. Capa first arrived in Israel in May 1948, after he was commissioned by Life magazine to document the establishment of the state. He left Israel in June 1948 but returned a few months later, in January 1949, to cover the country’s postwar developments with his friend, the American journalist Irwin Shaw. Capa’s images from this time range greatly: there are portraits of politicians, families dancing happily in their Tel Aviv living rooms, Jewish agricultural workers eating in a Kibbutz dining hall riddled with bullet holes, and immigrants arriving at Shaar Ha’aliya.
By all accounts, Robert Capa was moved by the refugees he saw arriving in Israel.\textsuperscript{11} He also identified with them: he too was uprooted ("essentially a stateless person and perpetual refugee by temperament and profession"), and he too was a Jew.\textsuperscript{12} But beyond these connections, which may have colored his encounter, it is clear from his images of people from across the world that Capa was fundamentally moved by the human condition and touched by human vulnerability.\textsuperscript{13} A recurring theme in Capa’s broad body of work, the plight of refugees clearly came in to play in his encounter at Shaar Ha’aliya. One of Capa’s biographers, Alex Kershaw, describes Capa’s photographs there of children, orphaned by the Holocaust, as "the most harrowing" of all thousands of "pictures he took of displaced children in his career."\textsuperscript{14} For Capa, the barbed wire fence was a difficult image to accept in this setting. In an article to accompany his photographs, he wrote, "So the ‘people of the barbed wire,’ who have passed through scores of concentration and refugee camps in the last decade, reach the land of their dreams, only to be back once more behind barbed wire!"\textsuperscript{15} The meaning here is clear: Shaar Ha’aliya’s fence was a symbol of oppression. It evoked images of the Holocaust and DP camps and it dampened the hopeful arrival in the “Promised Land.” No doubt Richard Whelan was correct in writing that “Capa was dismayed by the plight of these reluctant internees.”\textsuperscript{16}

Despite this unsettling imagery, Capa—like Cartier—goes on to describe a camp, and indeed a country, bustling with energy. People are moving out of Shaar Ha’aliya to start a new stage of life. He describes a country facing grave problems but filled with romantic possibility. Capa was buoyed by the immigrants themselves and “fascinated” by the way they were being integrated “into the life of the new nation.”\textsuperscript{17} He was amused by stories of people breaking out of the barbed wire to visit prostitutes.\textsuperscript{18} He remarked on how the immigrants quickly settled into the camp routine.\textsuperscript{19} And while his pictures show the hardships of refugee life, the difficulty of arriving in Shaar Ha’aliya, and the severity of its barbed wire enclosure, they also show people enjoying themselves, caring for one another, carrying on with
their lives, and interacting with simple normalcy. Moreover, the photograph of the man crawling out under the barbed wire fence is not a simple image of oppression. Through the lens of his camera, Robert Capa gave the image more meaning. He pushes Raymond Cartier’s idea (that this is a camp of life) even further and—perhaps—adds a wink: this is a camp of chutzpah. The fence may be a symbol of oppression, but the people are not being oppressed.

Ruth Gruber, Raymond Cartier, and Robert Capa were all journalists who had traveled across the globe documenting the human experience in vastly different places during tumultuous times. They were all trained to have a critical eye, and for a brief while in August 1949, they turned those critical eyes on Israel’s immigrants arriving at Shaar Ha’aliya. With their international outsiders’ perspectives, they looked on with curiosity at this phenomenon. The fact that this story was being written about in great detail in the New York Herald Tribune, Paris-Match, and Illustrated shows that clearly it was of interest to the large audiences of widely read, international magazines. Each of these celebrated journalists mentioned the quarantine and fence in some way and interpreted it differently. For Ruth Gruber, the barbed wire fence seems not to have even made an impression. She focused on the incredible hope that Israel gave the immigrants and the “quarantine camp” of “elongated jumble of wooden barracks” in no way dampened that hope. But for Cartier and Capa, it was more troubling. They did not find resolution in the idea of “quarantine” and protection from infectious diseases. They found resolution, hope, and even romance in the larger context of the country and its peoples, but they were unsettled about what Shaar Ha’aliya’s barbed wire structure conveyed, and they were not the only ones.

From inside Israel, Looking at Shaar Ha’aliya

The following year, in 1950, Yaakov Meridor, a member of Israel’s right wing party, Herut, stood up in the Knesset, the Israeli parliament, and
made a provocative statement: “Does the honourable minister know that, in appearance, the immigrant camp ‘Shaar Ha’aliya’ in Haifa gives the impression of a British concentration camp, or another concentration camp? Does not the honourable minister feel that it is not in accordance with the honour of the Jewish State to be holding new immigrants behind barbed wire?”23 Like Cartier before him, Meridor draws attention to the similarities between the image of Shaar Ha’aliya and the European camps used for Jewish oppression and persecution. At the time of Meridor’s comment, it had only been five years since World War II had ended, and Holocaust survivors made up a significant number of the immigrants to Israel. In this context, the image of Jews held in a camp was terrible, familiar, and immensely powerful.

It was not only members of the opposition party, Herut, who were making this association with the Holocaust as a way to challenge government policy. Even before Shaar Ha’aliya was opened, people were aware that it would be controversial. As part of discussions held by the Labor Zionist Mapai leadership in 1948, Giora Josephtal addressed these concerns: “Whether we like it or not, our processing camps will, to some extent, resemble the internment camps in Cyprus, and maybe even the internment camps in Germany.”24 For his part, Josephtal insisted that the fence was unavoidable: “There is no way to process and examine the immigrants if they are not initially concentrated in closed camps.”25 Here we see the beginning of what will become the Jewish Agency’s recurrent justification for the fence: it is unfortunate but necessary. In this response, Josephtal does not mention disease. He appeals to a need for order. While he mentions the need to examine the immigrants in closed camps, he doesn’t say that it is a medical necessity.

Three years later, we find echoes of the same justification intensified through the threat of disease. In March 1951, Kalman Levin wrote a letter to a Dr. Berman, who worked as director of a Tel Aviv high school. Dr. Berman had heard his students talk about how difficult an experience Shaar Ha’aliya had been for them, and he wrote Levin, it would seem, for the
purpose of making his disapproval known. Levin responded, offering his own explanations for the points Berman had criticized. On the issue of the enclosure, he made an unequivocal statement: “The Shaar Ha’aliya camp has to be fenced and closed, as it is a quarantine. The Ministry of Health, Defence, Customs, Immigration and our department all demand that it be so. Were Dr. Berman to know of the number of diseases that we are treating at Shaar Ha’aliya among the immigrants, and among them the number of contagious diseases, you would also think differently and you would say, along with us, that our government must close the camp in a thorough manner for the sake of the Yishuv and for the sake of the immigrants.”

In response to criticism of the fence, Levin acknowledged both the negative and the reassuring meanings of the image: “Perhaps from an emotional standpoint you are right. Because we are all opposed to the barbed wire fence [sic], which reminds us all of so much, but is there any alternative?”

Levin’s explanation includes ideas that were central to the Jewish Agency’s meaning of the quarantine—namely, that it was normative and essential: “One of the aims of the camp is the isolation of the new immigrant from the moment he arrives until after the medical examination, the results of which are received by the medical services. The isolation is the only guarantee to protect the Israeli Yishuv from epidemics and disease that could have flooded the country as a result of the great wave of immigration.”

It is then no surprise that Yehuda Weisberger also explained it in a similar way. In 1950, a letter was published in the newspaper the Jerusalem Post that was extremely critical of Shaar Ha’aliya. The author was an immigrant from Bulgaria who went through the camp as part of his immigration process. After having been there for only a few days he was so appalled that he was moved to write a scathing and public account. He held nothing back. He said that Shaar Ha’aliya was an embarrassment to Israel, that arriving there made the immigrants lose their love for the land of their forefathers, and that instead of being welcomed as brethren, the immigrants were made to feel rejected and unwanted. The letter pinpointed specific problems in how the camp was run and made suggestions for changes that
could be made to improve the living conditions. But the most dramatic assertion came right at the opening of the letter: “Next to the German concentration camps that I have heard about and read about, Shaar Ha’aliya is the worst place I have ever seen in my life.” Here, again, Shaar Ha’aliya conjured images of the camps of the Holocaust. This letter does not make direct reference to the quarantine or the barbed wire, though by making an association with a concentration camp, the idea of oppression and forced containment is very bluntly present.  

The Jewish Agency asked Weisberger to reply. His response followed the pattern of many of his official letters; it was a long, point-by-point rebuttal of the issues raised in the complaint. He noted that when the immigrants arrived at the camp they actually received a warm greeting from the officials as well as an explanation of camp policy “in a language the immigrant understands.” He defended the Shaar Ha’aliya staff and said that they were in a difficult position because the immigrants had unrealistic demands. The tone of this letter is often dismissive, patronizing, and then, finally, denigrating. Weisberger said that the author was “excessively emotional.” He wrote that there were points that he simply wouldn’t even bother answering, and he ignored the fact that many of the complaints were in fact absolutely accurate. He ended by suggesting that the man was mentally ill and that the problems described were true only in “the complainant’s sick imagination.”  

This letter prominently features the trope of “quarantine as a necessary measure of protection from disease.” The following was Weisberger’s response to the comment that Shaar Ha’aliya looked like a concentration camp: “There is no point in explaining to him [the author] the necessity for the existence of the quarantine that has been implemented to protect the health of the Yishuv from contagious diseases from overseas.” Weisberger explained that they had tried to educate the public on the difference between Shaar Ha’aliya and camps outside of Israel; they used presentations, public relations, and publications to “blur” the associations that arose. And he used the same sort of reasoning that Josephtal and
Levin had used: the associations are unfortunate, but for the good of the public health, Shaar Ha’aliya has to be a fenced-in quarantine: “However, the basic fact remains the same. For a period of 5–6 days the immigrant stays closed inside a camp that is surrounded by a fence. There are a few people, especially those who, in the past, had been imprisoned in camps, for whom this brings up associations [with concentration camps]. As it is known, the immigrant leaves the camp as soon as the doctor determines that he is allowed to leave. And even if the immigrant does not grasp the necessity for the quarantine that does not mean that we should do away with it.” From the podium of the Knesset to the pages of national and international newspapers, immigrants, politicians, and journalists were saying—no less—that Israel’s “gate of immigration” looked like a concentration camp. Ruth Gruber did not make this association. She mentioned quarantine in passing, as a normative, untroubling part of the immigration process. However, Joseph Tal, Levin, and Weisberger were well aware of how disturbing the image of the fence was, and they publically acknowledged that it was not ideal, but then they raised the issue of health. The immigrants were bringing diseases. These diseases threatened the Yishuv. The barbed wire fence controlled the spread of these diseases. Therefore the barbed wire fence was unfortunate but necessary.

Fear, Fences, and Medicine

What complicates this position, that the Shaar Ha’aliya quarantine was a necessary public health measure, is—of course—the man in Capa’s photograph who is crawling under the barbed wire fence. At the same time that Jewish Agency officials were arguing that the fence was “unfortunate but necessary,” they knew that there was a steady movement of people going in and out. This movement would mean that from a health perspective, the effectiveness of the quarantine at Shaar Ha’aliya was compromised. Moreover, most Shaar Ha’aliya employees did not actually live on the premises; they commuted every day, which makes it all the more clear that the
quarantine at Shaar Ha’aliya was not hermetic. And so the argument being made (that they needed to isolate the people in Shaar Ha’aliya to isolate their diseases) does not make sense.

This, then, raises the question: How could the same people who knew that the quarantine was ineffectual still insist that it was medically necessary? One possible answer is that they were just using the term quarantine incorrectly. Shaar Ha’aliya was, in fact, simply a processing camp of which medical exams played a part. This explanation seems to make the story of Shaar Ha’aliya very simple, but it is in fact evasive and superficial. It does not give the nuances and undercurrents of the camp, the mass immigration, and Israel in the 1950s the attention they deserve. And it is the easy way out because it suggests that only people from above—policy makers, public health officials—get to say what is or is not a quarantine. The fuller answer is found in a combination of fear, fences as a meaningful response to fear, and medicine as a powerful conceptual frame.

_Fear_

In her seminal work on pollution beliefs, Mary Douglas identified foreigners as a group that is “credited with dangerous, uncontrollable powers.” They are conceived as a “polluting” and threatening presence and, as a result, “an excuse is given for suppressing them.” If we recall, David Musto included the “disease” of immigration in his survey on the various groups that have traditionally been quarantined throughout history. Howard Markel and Alan M. Kraut have both argued that the desire for physical separation from people who are sick is heightened when they are immigrants. Moreover, a central theme in Musto’s discussion is a broad idea of the “elemental fear of contagion,” which is not purely biological:

The fear of a disease, as the history of quarantine indicates, arises not just from a reflection of the physiological effects of a pathogen, but from a consideration of the kind of person and habits which are thought to cause or predispose one to the disease.
When we look to the Israeli setting, we see this combined fear of immigration and disease, blurred boundaries between physical and social contagion, as well as the simple desire to establish a boundary between the “healthy” and the “diseased.” It is well-documented that many members of the Yishuv were wary of the mass immigration and the type of people coming in to Israel. Ben-Gurion expressed some of these fears in his journal: “We are facing a wave of immigration that is different from earlier ones not only in its size, but also in its quality. The mass immigration that will now be arriving in the country . . . will mostly be coming from Jewish areas that are materially and spiritually poor . . . the Yishuv’s character is at risk of being damaged and its pioneering identity is at risk of disappearing.”

In his visits to Israel in 1949 and 1950, journalist Irwin Shaw described the environment that accompanied the arrival of the immigrants. After sketching a hectic scene—with the frantic speed of arrival and a mish-mash of languages, cultures, and standards of living—he makes it clear that “there is fear” among Israelis that their “conduct and modes of life will be smothered.” His conclusion is unsettling: the immigrants “loom as a huge, dark puzzle for a nation rich in puzzles.”

Shaw presents the larger, national concern for how the variety of immigrants and their different norms would alter the nation’s course. At the same time, he conveys Israeli society’s perception of the “dangerous” Moroccan immigrants: “If you stroll about the city after midnight, you are very likely to be approached by the police, who travel in threes, armed with carbines, and who politely remind you that it is not safe to be out so late because of the large number of immigrant North Africans, who have imported into the community their old and unpleasant habit of knife-wielding.” In these two passages, the fear of the immigrants is framed
both as an abstract apprehension of the influence of the unknown masses as well as a more specific fear of the dark, foreign individual who was perceived as a violent intruder. Moshe Lissak’s study on how the Yishuv stereotyped and stigmatized immigrants in this period references these two angles of fear: the quality of individuals and the larger danger posed to the Yishuv’s traditions. Shaw’s illustration of the knife-wielding North African fits in well with Lissak’s study, which shows that the Moroccan immigrants were subjected to the worst, most widespread stereotyping.

We see another depiction of this subject in a passage from Meir Shalev’s classic Israeli novel *The Blue Mountain*. During an encounter between a Moroccan immigrant and a veteran (vatik) from the mythic Second Aliya, it was explained that the new immigrants brought out the others “scorn and compassion.” Shalev describes acts of assistance that were laced with paternalism and contempt. The Israeli villagers volunteered with the immigrants, donated food, taught them skills that would help them acclimate. But then, afterward, when they were alone, the villagers denigrated the same people they had just helped. They spoke of “the little men in blue berets who did nothing but drink, play cards, and shoot craps all day while longing for their caves in Morocco and wiping their rear ends with stones.” This example of “scorn and compassion” reinforces the claim that Israelis sympathized with the immigrants while also being suspicious of the changes they were bringing to their familiar world.

But it was not simply a scenario of reservations and hesitations. Ben-Gurion spoke of the “risk” of “damage” and “disappearing.” Shaw wrote of the “fear” of being “smothered,” and a “looming,” “huge,” “dark puzzle” while concurrently describing night streets that were not safe because of armed foreigners. Horowitz and Lissak describe “heightened tensions.” Henrietta Dahan-Khalev described the Yishuv’s “threatened” Zionist identity, while Lissak described “widespread fears and even panic regarding the influence that the immigrants of the 1950’s would have.”

This general sense of panic ties into the sense of panic that was specific to health and disease that we discussed in chapter 2. The two ideas
became inextricably linked. As historian Orit Rozin has shown, the Israeli population was very fearful of the Mizrahi immigrants’ “diseases,” which, she explains, were seen as including not only trachoma and ringworm but also primitiveness, laziness, alcoholism, poor parenting, and prostitution. Haim Malka’s documentation in The Selection sheds light on the persistent fear that the Moroccan immigrants would contaminate the Ashkenazim with their primitive and Levantine ways. And Hanna Yablonka writes that the Yishuv viewed Holocaust survivors as morally and spiritually diseased. There truly was a pervasive fear that the immigrants would socially and biologically contaminate the new country.

Fences

When exploring the universal meanings of fences, it is worthwhile to turn to Wendy Brown’s Walled States, Waning Sovereignty. Part of Brown’s work is not relevant to Shaar Ha’aliya: her focus on what she calls “new walls,” national walling projects of the twenty-first century and post-Berlin walls that signify a contemporary predicament of state power. Brown concentrates on massive walls (as opposed to Shaar Ha’aliya’s smaller fence) and sovereign nations that are largely walling out other nations (as opposed to Shaar Ha’aliya’s internal fencing off of Israelis within Israel). But where Walled States is extremely relevant to Shaar Ha’aliya is in its important analysis of the nature of walls.

Perhaps, to begin, it is important to explain that the Shaar Ha’aliya fence does fit in with Brown’s definition of walls (although, of course, not her frame of “new walls”), since she casts a wide net, from “crude fences through fields” to “mammoth, imposing structures heavily adorned with contemporary surveillance technology.” Walls are an age-old means of delineating, excluding, and exercising power. Brown reminds us, “Indeed, there have been fences since the Beginning.” They are performative, they are symbols, they spectacularize power. They shape identities. They awe, they pacify.
Scholars Amy Chazkel and David Serlin remind us that a fence is both an architectural reality and a symbol. So too Brown discusses the material and emotional role of walls, “functional instruments” that divide, separate, retain, protect, and shore up support. They express moods and feelings, depending on how they look and where they are. They are an outlet onto which people project their desires and anxieties. Brown brings us back to the play between the physical structure and the symbol: “Walls are consummately functional, and walls are potent organizers of human psychic landscapes generative of cultural and political identities.” And while it is easy to think of walls entirely in an either/or dichotomy of inside/outside we are, rightly, warned against being so overly reductive. Using one of her examples of twenty-first-century walls, Brown cautions that it is “too simple” to say that it “connotes protection and security to one side and aggression, violation, and domination to the other.” Indeed we see a parallel here with the meaning of Shaar Ha’aliya’s fence. It is too simple (and really just wrong) to say that the people outside of the camp saw it only as protective and that the people inside the camp saw only it as aggressive and violating. It is even too simple (and really just wrong) to say that the camp administrators saw it only as a measure of security that they defended and accepted. And so I return to the issue of conflict. The meanings that people ascribed to the Shaar Ha’aliya fence were, like its architectural structure, deeply contested.

It goes without saying that not every community or medical facility in Israel was or is enclosed behind barbed wire. What would lead a particular people, in a particular time, to feel that a fence might have a place? For Brown, it comes down to anxiety and vulnerability. It comes down to a feeling that a nation’s sovereignty is under threat. The walls “reveal a tremulousness, vulnerability, dubiousness, or instability at the core of what they aim to express.” Walls are put up in societies where sovereignty is being compromised “from its edges and from its interior.” And there is nothing like the “image of immigrant hordes” to inspire anxiety, a sense of
being under threat, “xenophobic nationalism,” and a desire for exclusion and walling. What Brown is describing beautifully captures the context of Shaar Ha’aliya: a nation feeling vulnerable, with its identity, culture, and economy under “threat” from the “image of immigrant hordes.” She describes walling contexts where there is “an increasingly blurred distinction between the inside and outside of the nation itself.” She touches on the deep sense of anxiety out of which these walls emerge: “The call for states to close and secure national borders is fueled by populations anxious about everything from their physical security and economic well-being to their psychic sense of ‘I’ and ‘we.’” This echoes back to Moshe Lissak’s description of “widespread fears and even panic regarding the influence that the immigrants of the 1950’s would have.” The immigrants in Shaar Ha’aliya, their religiosity, dress, and culture, were a source of anxiety for many Israelis, a threat of change and difference, a threat of “cultural-religious aggression toward Western values.” This was most certainly a case of a nation whose distinction was “blurred,” which had a deeply unsettled “psychic sense” of “I” and “we.”

This, then, is where walls come in. They symbolize definition where there is confusion, they signify reassurance where there is anxiety, they stage state power where there is, in fact, vulnerability. It is not hard to see how—if Shaar Ha’aliya had been open—it could have given expression to “the nation-state’s vulnerability and unboundedness, permeability and violation.” Imagine Shaar Ha’aliya without a fence being observed by a Jewish resident from Haifa: newly arrived foreigners, “unbounded,” with nothing to stop their visiting family members from coming in and out, nothing to keep the immigrants from flowing into, blending with, the perimeters of the permeable city. This Jewish resident of Haifa would have “the vantage point of a subject made vulnerable by the loss of horizons, order, and identity attending the decline of state sovereignty.” We can see how, for him, “amid these losses,” of identity, horizons, and order, walls could offer “psychic reassurances or palliatives.” And as we
Imagine a fence being drawn around the camp, we see it defining, containing, to “generate what Heidegger termed a ‘reassuring world picture,’” to “express power that is material, visible, centralized, and exerted corporeally through overt force and policing.”

Yet Brown is quick to remind us how much of this sense of reassurance is, in fact, a façade: “Walls do not actually accomplish the interdiction fueling and legitimating them.” In Robert Frost’s classic poem “Mending Walls,” the desire to rebel against walls comes from a deep force of nature,

That sends the frozen-ground-swell under it,
And spills the upper boulders in the sun;
And makes gaps even two can pass abreast.

Then why walls? Since there is something to them that deeply engenders rebellion (“Something there is that doesn’t love a wall / That wants it down”) and they don’t create closure but rather new types of entry, then what purpose do they serve? Brown homes in on the role of performance. Perhaps this is what drew Robert Capa’s expert eye to the Shaar Ha’aliya fence: its theatricality. As “spectacle,” it projects “an aura” of sovereign power, it projects an image of the state establishing order and control over these immigrants who were, for so many, an unsettling, nebulous threat.

**Medicine**

In *Discipline and Punish*, Michel Foucault describes quarantine as a “disciplinary mechanism” designed in response to the “real and imaginary . . . disorder” that results from plague. “The plague is met by order; its function is to sort out every possible confusion: that of the disease, which is transmitted when bodies are mixed together; that of the evil, which is increased when fear and death overcome prohibitions. It lays down for each individual his place, his body, his disease and his death.” The quarantine at Shaar Ha’aliya was a far cry from the absolute, tyrannical quarantine in plague-ridden seventeenth-century France that Foucault illustrated.
Nonetheless his perspective of quarantine as an attempt to respond to disease with order and discipline (“the disciplinary mechanisms to which the fear of the plague gave rise”73) offers important insight into Shaar Ha’aliya.

There was “real and imaginary” fear among Israelis who felt that their bodies, lifestyles, and ideals were threatened by the immigrants. Quarantine, that ancient act of separation, has been understood as a means of self-preservation for thousands of years, clung to as “the immediate salvation of a threatened society.”74 So it was that the Shaar Ha’aliya quarantine was the perceived “salvation of a threatened society.” Even though the breaches in the fence clearly show that it did not make sense to insist that a quarantine was necessary, for those who were feeling threatened, the fence was a symbol of salvation, comfort, protection, and control. Or as Mary Douglas has concluded, “I believe that ideas about separating, purifying, demarcating and punishing transgressions have as their main function to impose system on an inherently untidy experience.”75

Yet if it was just an issue of general control, why was there any reference at all to a quarantine? And why was there such a heavy reliance on the health rationale to defend Shaar Ha’aliya? In the chapter on Western medical science in the book Medicine: A History of Healing, author Ann Dally has included a section titled “The Rise of Medical Power.” This section is devoted to understanding the exalted position of the medical profession in twentieth-century Western societies. We see how, through the medicalization of domains such as pregnancy and childbirth, contraception, abortion, and drug addiction, medical practitioners have succeeded in “gaining and increasing its power over many aspects of human life where before it played no part.”76 Adding to this power is the physicians’ privileged knowledge: “They have known secrets, both about poisons and remedies, and about their individual patients.”77

But it is not only membership in that elite guild that gave physicians their authority. The successes of and their connection to biomedicine gave them even more power and status. In the first half of the twentieth century, scientific medicine could seem invincible, celebrating a “long
anticipated therapeutic revolution.” Following numerous successful discoveries, “more than all previous centuries put together” medicine became “infinitely more powerful than it ever was before.” In the first half of the twentieth century alone, TB (one of the most fatal diseases of the modern world) was made preventable as of 1924 and increasingly treatable from 1944 to 1956 with the discoveries of streptomycin, para-aminosalisalysic acid, and isoniazid. In 1921, Frederick Banting and Charles Best’s discovery of insulin dramatically helped turn an often fatal disease into a manageable life condition, and Alexander Fleming’s discovery of penicillin in 1929 contributed to infection’s diminished potency. For medicine, this was truly “an era of spectacular victories.”

Well before the significance of the Nuremberg Doctors’ Trial and the atrocities of the medical system under Nazism were fully comprehended, this was a period of proliferation of scientific thought and a belief in the capacity of medical progress. By the time Shaar Ha’aliya opened its gates, there were precedents throughout the world where state concerns superseded the freedoms of individuals in the name of the public’s health and under the authority of medical science. Moreover, public health and medical science were trusted and respected in Zionist thought, as European tools for simultaneously resuscitating the “degenerate” Jewish body and the “neglected” and “desolate” Jewish homeland.

Shaar Ha’aliya’s Israel was born of this context of twentieth-century medical authority. Although the state had only just been established, there was already a deep-rooted tradition of medical activity and institutions that dated back to the prestate Yishuv. When the Shaar Ha’aliya officials turned to medical explanations, they were relying on a known, trusted, and prominent authority that made the medical argument seem like the final, indisputable word. The officials who used the medical rationale in the defense of the quarantine were themselves part of the environment that was feeling threatened by the foreignness that the immigrants embodied. As a result, they took refuge in the health rationales they were espousing. The contradictions between the defense of the quarantine and
the known breeches in the quarantine suggest that the administration’s concerns were emotional and visceral fears of foreignness, change, contagion, and chaos expressed in rational, scientifically defensible terms. Mary Douglas has identified this tendency in modern society: “We moderns [...] fear pathogenicity transmitted through micro-organisms. Often our justification of our own avoidances through hygiene is sheer fantasy. The difference between us is not that our behavior is grounded on science and theirs on symbolism. Our behavior also carries symbolic meaning.” These ideas offer a framework for understanding what was happening in Shaar Ha’al’iya: the chaotic environment, the feeling that the absorption of immigrants at Shaar Ha’al’iya was spinning out of control, the experience of anxiety, and the reassurance and discomfort caused by the quarantine.

**Unfortunately, Sort of, a Quarantine**

In March 1951, members of the Labor Zionist party, Mapai, who were stationed at Shaar Ha’al’iya drafted a three-page letter to their party headquarters in Tel Aviv. It is a passionate outpouring of deep-rooted frustrations that is divided into two sections: “The Existing Situation at Shaar Ha’al’iya” and “The Slander.” As a cry from Mapai in Shaar Ha’al’iya to Tel Aviv, it illustrates the difficult position the camp’s employees were in: they were the ones who had to implement unpopular absorption policies, and they were feeling abandoned by the Yishuv. In the section “The Existing Situation at Shaar Ha’al’iya,” the authors depict the camp’s troubled environment: “The conditions at Shaar Ha’al’iya range from difficult to very difficult. The housing conditions are awful, the tents make a terrible impression upon the immigrants . . . the crowding in the camp is very great . . . the mixture of people from all corners of the world, different ethnicities, different languages, different customs . . . all these factors put every immigrant in a bad frame of mind and make them irritable from
the first moment they step foot into the camp.” This “bad frame of mind” and “irritableness” found a raison d’être in the absorption policy that was geared toward sending the new arrivals to communal agricultural settlements (kibbutzim, moshavim) or development towns, when most immigrants wanted to be housed as near as possible to the large cities, particularly Tel Aviv and Haifa.87 The authors describe how this settlement policy made the immigrant “angry with the state, the camp and the institutions.” And of course, the most perceptible part of the state, the camp, and its institutions were the absorption workers—the people standing in front of the immigrants telling them where they could or could not live.

The authors are open about the strain that they were under: “The employee is attacked by the immigrant in many different ways, including curses and physical force . . . the workers in every office toil under incredible pressure from the immigrants.” The job’s hours, pay, and general conditions, as described in the Mapai report, only exacerbated their stress: “[The Jewish Agency employees in Shaar Ha’aliya] work overtime with no compensation, they work nights, Sabbaths and holidays. The work itself is quite particular, difficult and irritating, demanding and sometimes dangerous.” “The Existing Situation at Shaar Ha’aliya” ends by praising the Shaar Ha’aliya staff while emphasizing how precarious there situation was: “Our work demands incredible mental strength, nerves of steel and dedication . . . the Jewish Agency’s system in the camp is working beyond its capacity.”

This sense of inundation leads into the fascinating section “The Slander”—half a page of vented frustration and finger-pointing and, ultimately, an appeal for assistance. The writing is forthright and accusatory: “And what is [our] reward: slander. And who is doing it? No less than the central agents in Mapai; its newspapers and its people.” The authors accuse the critics of Shaar Ha’aliya of making unconstructive attacks that do not offer any solutions but rather undermine the work being done by the absorption workers at Shaar Ha’aliya by “making empty promises to
the immigrants.” The Mapai authors restate their belief in the Shaar Ha’aliya staff before closing their letter with a barbed appeal: “Join us in fixing the situation and don’t dance a demonic dance around us. . . . Help us and don’t hinder us.”

The dominant themes of this letter are exhaustion and resentment. The picture that crystallizes is of young idealists, who had dreams of “seeing the existing situation and trying to fix it,” being bogged down by the realities of implementing a flawed policy upon a hostile crowd. But the issue that seems to have aggravated them the most is that while they were actually doing this demanding work, their party members—the ones who were not there at Shaar Ha’aliya trying to “fix the situation”—were openly criticizing their efforts. It is significant that in the report, the immigrants are also shown to suffer as a result of the absorption policy. The Mapai authors show how the fate of everyone at Shaar Ha’aliya, staff and immigrants alike, is linked:

[The long lines] sometimes make it impossible for the clerk to properly explain, to those interested, the reasons why their requests were not carried out.

The pioneering roles that the state assigns the immigrant “occasionally against his will” determine the immigrant’s approach to the clerk.

This report describes a situation where everyone at Shaar Ha’aliya was suffering at the hands of a flawed and overwhelmed system. By depicting the immigrants and the employees as a form of an alliance, the authors convey a sense of the rest of the country being poised against Shaar Ha’aliya and all its players. This impression is reinforced once again by Weisberger’s involvement in the report. The copy found in Weisberger’s file is a typed document, presumably the Mapai authors’ original, with detailed corrections added in Weisberger’s handwriting. This creates a new particular document with interaction between the voices: the uncensored voice of the Mapai representatives, the edited version that merges
Weisberger’s voice with that of the original authors, and Weisberger’s editorial decisions, which are, in and of themselves, revealing.

The overall change that comes through Weisberger’s editing reinforces the authors’ claims of the Shaar Ha’aliya staff being overworked, underpaid, and underappreciated. It still exposes the tension experienced by the camp personnel while, in keeping with Weisberger’s diplomatic tendencies, softens the wording, making it less emotional, and tones down the accusations made against Mapai. Where the authors write “existing conditions at Shaar Ha’aliya range from difficult to very difficult,” Weisberger tones it down to “camp conditions are not easy.” The original authors claim that the camp’s tents made “an awful impression,” whereas Weisberger edited it to “a difficult impression.”

Weisberger cuts out many sections altogether. What is perhaps most interesting is his censorship of the first three paragraphs of the section “The Slander.” These paragraphs, the most unleashed criticism of the Mapai leadership, receive a simple response from Weisberger: they are crossed out with a large X. But even as he edits with such bluntness, Weisberger still allows the letter’s most important claim to come through: the Yishuv was subjecting the Shaar Ha’aliya staff to unfair criticism.

In this letter, in fact, two texts refer to the quarantine. The original authors of the letter explain that “Shaar Ha’aliya is a quarantine, transit and processing camp for new immigrants.” This point is conveyed briefly and matter-of-factly, not unlike the way it comes across in the police documents. It isn’t a problem or even a big deal. But then a second voice, that of Yehuda Weisberger, comes out through his handwritten corrections. Weisberger changes the statement to read, “Unfortunately, the camp very quickly became a sort of large quarantine.” It is a small alteration, but it is telling. What is the difference between “a quarantine” and an “unfortunate, unintentional and sort of, large quarantine?” The first is unquestioned, deliberate, and definitive: this is just the way it is. The second is hesitant, regretful, expressing hints of shame and indefiniteness. It is
unfortunate that this is the case. It is not what we would have wanted, and it isn’t even exactly a quarantine but it, kind of, became one.

The end result is very different from the unapologetic stance that Weisberger took in his 1950 Jerusalem Post letter. Part of this is almost certainly an issue of audience and context. In the Jerusalem Post letter, he is angry that Shaar Ha’aliya has been attacked. He is defensive, assertive, abrasive, and even nasty. Through the Mapai letter he is—indirectly, via his edits—speaking to his superiors. Throughout the letter, his corrections and changes are consistently mollifying, leaving a far more moderate text than what he was given. This is Weisberger the diplomat at his most diplomatic. His diplomacy may be the result of not wanting to upset his superiors. It may be him acting as a guide (or censor) to the passionate authors of the text. But his revisions show a hint of leeway, a slight acknowledgement that this idea of a quarantine was not without its problems, that it was not necessarily as simple as the “it is a quarantine” that Weisberger had declared so clearly at other times and that the unedited Mapai text suggests so simply and straightforwardly.

A Gate of Immigration or a Quarantine Camp?

Just as Weisberger seems to have been wavering over whether the quarantine was punitive or protective, others were more certain: in March 1951, two different articles were published in Israeli newspapers with strong and opposing positions in this argument. Journalist Refael Sela published an article for the left wing, antiestablishment newspaper Haolam Hazeh that covered three large pages with text and stirring photographs, illustrating the difficult conditions of camp life. The entire three pages were framed by a bold border of barbed wire, thick and black, at the top and bottom. The barbed wire was a stark statement that suited the article’s title, “A Gate of Immigration or a Quarantine camp?" Sela’s main claim was that Israelis needed to see that Shaar Ha’aliya was more than just a processing camp: it was an important symbol of how the
new immigrants would be welcomed in Israel, and it was failing. Rather than embracing the immigrants in their new homeland, giving them a warm and eager welcome, the camp’s terrible, isolated situation was proof that the “veteran” Israelis did not like nor want the immigrants near them. Sela was careful to point out how hard this situation was also for the people working in the camp: “It is difficult to blame the clerks. They are working in conditions that put human patience to its greatest test.” To his mind, the blame was with the Israelis outside of the camp: “In the entire country, in the heart of the regular citizen, the attitude toward the immigrants has changed. The new immigrant has stopped being considered an unfortunate being, the citizen of the future, who should be received with love and help, with the aim of being given full partnership in the country. He has become an annoying, unpleasant problem to be gotten rid of, as soon as possible, by housing him in a transit camp (ma’abara) that is as far away as possible, or by hiding him behind a tall wall.” He did not disagree that the conditions in the camp were terrible; he bluntly and honestly described the camp’s awful conditions. What he said was that the rest of the country was blaming the immigrants for the camp’s problems, associating them entirely with this place and all its problems and then trying to cast them, physically and socially, outside of Israeli society. Sela argued that actually Israeli society outside the camp walls, the “veteran” population, was
responsible for the “degeneration” of the camp and, by association, the “degeneration” of the new immigrants. “Residents of Haifa claim that the criminal world has gotten a hold of the camp; that girls from the camp fill whore houses. But there is no doubt that the root of evil is the camp itself, which sentences its residents to degeneration and idleness that corrupts their first days in their homeland.” This reference to “degeneration” is a subversive term for a Zionist to use as criticism of Israel, and it is repeated throughout Sela’s article. “Degeneration” is associated with the Zionist physician and intellectual Max Nordau who used it as a way to describe the physical and social decline of Jewish life outside of the land of Israel. Yes, Shaar Ha’aliya is degenerate, Sela claimed, but it was the rest of Israel that was to blame for this, not the immigrants. “Anyone who sees the conditions in the camp cannot help but think: Zionism is also dead in the State of Israel. Otherwise, there is no possible explanation for new immigrants being received in a camp that forces them to live, for weeks on end, a life of complete degeneration without any form of occupation.” The root of the problem for Sela was isolation. Shaar Ha’aliya is a quarantine, he explained. Its isolated location, its barbed wire, and its concrete walls keep the immigrants physically and emotionally cast out of Israeli society. The established Israelis do not want to have anything to do with them. They don’t even want to see them, and so they are kept behind walls. The immigrants feel this rejection, and because this is their first “home” in Israel, it taints their entire immigration experience. This theme of the isolating quarantine appears, in text and in images, again and again, throughout the piece. Sela opens the article with a story: “A man peeked out of the windows of the Chrysler that sped past the Shaar Ha’aliya camp, he glanced at the tall concrete wall that straps the camp in like a belt, and spit out: ‘It’s good that we can’t see them anymore!’” It’s not clear whether Sela invented this story or whether it actually occurred. But he described this man as a symbol of Israelis, “all the thousands of people” who pass by the camp every day and either give it no thought at all or, like the man
in the story, look at it with animosity. One of his most biting comments is an accusation of hypocrisy: “The Yishuv, while pounding away at the drums of the Ingathering of the Exiles—mostly to get itself, and donors from America, all excited—encloses the new immigrants in a quarantine that is surrounded by barbed wire and police and whose tall walls block out a disgraceful situation.” Sela finds the imagery of the wall and the barbed wire particularly disturbing: “This is the reception: barbed wire.”

If a reader is unmoved by the text and the barbed wire border, the images that accompany the article make apathy practically impossible. The first page of the article has three stirring photographs that capture the main ways that Shaar Ha’aliya makes the people there suffer. The middle of the page has a photograph of an impossibly long winding line, with people of all ages waiting in the sun. There are more than one hundred people in queue. On the bottom of the page, there is a beautiful image of a family resting on the camp beds in an arrangement that is both humble and public. And then, at the top of the page, with a place even above the title of the article and the author’s name, is a photograph of Shaar Ha’aliya’s barbed wire fence. In this picture, the rolls of barbed wire have been pushed down. A middle-aged woman (she may in fact be elderly) is stepping on the tangled wires. Standing in a manner that looks awkward and unstable, she is being helped by a man on the other side, also seemingly elderly, who is grasping her hand and watching her as she takes a step. This pose of an adult woman in a skirt, moving unsteadily over sharp wires, seems humbling, if not humiliating. And yet there is also room to interpret the action in the photo as empowering, as people saying, “Although we are no longer young and agile, we will not be repressed by an intimidating barrier and we will not be caged.” You can’t make out the expressions of the couple photographed. We can’t tell if they are suffering, angry, irritable, or smiling, joking, or perhaps enjoying their adventure. The focus of the frame is bodies in dialogue with an ugly barrier. Both interpretations fit with the message of Sela’s writing: the fence is shameful, the people are not.
The barbed wire appears most prominently in this particular photograph, but it is also the subject of two other pictures that accompany the article. In the middle of the second page there is a small shot of people crawling out through the barbed wire. This is juxtaposed with a photograph of a wall being built to fortify the breached fence. There is a written caption underneath the two:

“Welcome?” The camp is surrounded by barbed wire. To put an end to the breaches a tall wall is now being built [ . . . ] The administration’s claim: the immigrants come into town, do dealings on the black market and spread sexually transmitted diseases. But to the world the wall looks like a remnant of the regime of Nuri al-Said in Iraq, as a reminder of the camps in Eastern Europe. They brought us here for this? They complain. The administration’s plan—to paint the wall white, to paint “Welcome,” in spectacular lettering—will not put an end to these complaints. They don’t want the wall.

Sela raises the popular idea that the immigrants’ diseases make the isolation necessary. In addition to the reference to sexually transmitted diseases that appears in the caption under the fence and wall photos, there are two
other references to this theme. One follows the story of the man driving by in the Chrysler: “If we asked the man he would find explanations for his behavior: the immigrants broke out of the camp to the city, sold gold watches, cans of meat, sausages on the black market; they bring sexually transmitted diseases into the city (particularly syphilis); they started knife fights, street fights, outbursts.” The next reference comes later in the article: “The wall can be justified through logical explanations, which is what Kalman Levin—the dedicated administrator from the Jewish Agency’s Department of Immigrant Absorption—does: fixing the barbed wire is very expensive, a wall is needed to protect the city from contagious diseases, also to protect the immigrants themselves.” It is not clear what exactly he means when he says it is “to protect the immigrants themselves,” perhaps this ties into other claims that “the criminal world has gotten a hold of the camp” or, later, that there are children in the camp who do not have parents and are easily preyed upon.

The theme of quarantine preventing the spread of disease appears in the text several times: “They bring sexually transmitted diseases into the city,” “a wall is needed to protect the city from contagious diseases,” and “the administration’s claim: the immigrants come into town, do dealings on the black market and spread sexually transmitted diseases.” For two of these three references, the camp administration is given as a source, for the third it is “the man in the Chrysler” that symbol of the apathetic Israeli. Sela does not seem to dismiss these claims. He attributes them always to others and frames them as “logical,” “rational.” However, throughout the article, he emphasizes that where the country is going wrong, failing the immigrants and allowing for Shaar Ha’aliya’s decline, is by honoring only these logical justifications and ignoring the power of symbols: “Beyond every argument, beyond every convincing explanation there is a cancerous truth.” He says, yes, “in theory,” Shaar Ha’aliya is nothing more than a processing camp. But he argues that there is much more beyond this theory: “For the 300,000 immigrants, who have gone through the camp up
until now, this was much more: the first experience in the State of Israel, the first greeting that the country gives them.” One symbol he introduces is the camp itself, as a symbol of the immigrant’s welcome to the country. The other symbols are the fence and the wall: “But the wall is a symbol that no explanation can negate: a symbol of division between peoples. A symbol that says: the state no longer believes that it can absorb the immigrants by way of the heart. She [the state] has given up her foremost, most holy responsibility: to penetrate into the heart of the person she is bringing to the land.” Perhaps the greatest power of this article is that it is one of the few documents (if not the only one) that challenged the finality of the health explanations presented by Shaar Ha’aliya officials. The article raises the issue of the state’s moral obligation to the immigrants by asserting that, regardless of the claimed health threat, the state was obligated to embrace the immigrants and that putting them behind imposing barriers was unacceptable. It does not accept the threat of contagion as omnipotent. It proposes that physical contagion is not the only threat to a society: the alienating, isolating symbol of the wall was a threat in its own right. Sela’s article is more than a critique. It is an appeal for humanity, compassion, and hospitality. He asks, “Do things have to be this way? Can we not absorb [the immigrants] through the power of love?”

Israel’s Gate

Sela’s explicit criticism was aimed at the country at large; and as we have seen, he openly expressed sympathy toward the camp’s staff. Nonetheless there were people in the Shaar Ha’aliya administration who were upset by this depiction of the institution that they were running. In response, they cooperated on a different article titled “Israel’s Gate,” which was written by journalist and former Palmach member Pinchas Yorman and illustrated with photographs by Boris Carmi. “Israel’s Gate” forcefully challenges and even snidely derides Sela and his thesis. It is not clear who initiated
Yorman’s article. It may have been someone in the immediate levels of the camp administration or maybe someone in the Immigration and Absorption Department of the Jewish Agency. Regardless of whose idea it was, there is no question that both Yehuda Weisberger and his deputy, Haim Goldstein, were directly involved in its development. They are both mentioned by name and quoted repeatedly, offering facts and information to help counter Sela’s specific claims.

“Israel’s Gate” and “The Gate of the Country or a Quarantine?” frame Shaar Ha’aliya so differently it almost seems like they are talking about two different places. While the first article shows photos of crowded lines, people lying on the ground, children playing in dirt, and people maneuvering the barbed wire fence, Yorman’s has photos that show order, industry, and tidiness.

The top of the article has a large panorama of the camp site. There are hardly any people around, and the long, orderly huts and view of the sea epitomize calm and structure.94

A smaller photo on the second page shows dark-haired men in suits and button-down shirts reading at a table in a clean, modestly decorated room. The caption reads, “In the reading room—a cultured atmosphere.”
Perhaps most significantly, in Yorman’s article, there is not a hint of the wall and barbed wire that were featured so prominently by Sela. In the middle of the first page, he makes it clear that this article is all about responding to Sela: “The newspaper Ha-Olam Hazeh (volume 709, 31.5.51) is lying on the camp director’s desk. The first pages are devoted to a sensationalistic article—‘A Gate of Immigration or a Quarantine Camp?’—No less.” Yorman makes it known that Sela is a member of Herut. As a result, his writing is politically motivated and cannot be trusted, especially since he is collaborating with the radical paper Haolam Hazeh: “Well, you can imagine what fruits could be expected to blossom out of a connection between a writer from Herut and the editors of

Figure 5. The caption reads, “In the reading room—a cultured atmosphere.” Photo by Boris Carmi, 1951.
Haolam Hazeh [. . .] The article is so full of distortions that it is hard to know whether they are the product of malicious intent or complete ignorance of the subject at hand.” With Weisberger and Goldstein’s help, Yorman carefully refutes Sela, point by point. Yorman writes that the camp did not hold ten thousand people, as Sela had asserted, but only seven thousand, “according to precise lists from the camp’s offices.” He asserts that Sela’s description of new immigrants who only had hay to sleep on (because the material binding the mattress had been removed by previous tenants) was impossible: “To the best of the camp administration’s knowledge,” this could never have happened, since “the camp’s sanitary workers go through every tent and every living quarter after the resident has left and before a new resident arrives, and disinfects the beds and the mattress.” He is lavishly sarcastic about the depiction of Shaar Ha’aliya’s lines: “Mr. Sela made a resounding discovery and he announces it with the triumphant demeanor of Columbus discovering a new continent [. . .] It seems to us that also in the State of Israel, outside of Shaar Ha’aliya’s walls, there are lines. Food, the cinema, buses, the Israeli citizen acquires all these through lines.” Yes, there are many lines, Yorman writes, but they are a part of life everywhere in Israel, and the ones in Shaar Ha’aliya are the best that they could be under the circumstances: “It is hard to imagine it possible to have a more productive, quicker method than what I saw in these lines.” Yorman never actually says that the lines are not bad and long and unpleasant. He just says that the staff are doing their best to keep the lines moving while still doing their jobs to the best of their ability. And he completely dismisses the idea that the line is a cause of any suffering for the immigrant or that in Shaar Ha’aliya, it is uniquely difficult. He emphasizes the theme that life outside of Shaar Ha’aliya (Tel Aviv is his go-to reference) is also hard. People in the rest of Israel stand in lines, he says. Lines in Tel Aviv can also be unpleasant: “In a decent line of Tel Aviv residents waiting for a movie on Saturday night do not curses fly, heaven forbid?! ”
Yorman’s explicit argument is that the Shaar Ha’aliya system and personnel are logical and civilized. His implicit argument is that the immigrants are not. This is encapsulated in his opening story. He describes a meeting between a clerk who was giving out housing assignments and an immigrant who wanted to live in Afula near his brother. By the second line of text, the immigrant (who is never given a name) is identified as coming from Babylon (i.e., Iraq). “Look,” the clerk explains, “Afula isn’t possible. There’s no room. But Ginegar is close to Afula. You can see your brother whenever you want.” The immigrant brusquely refuses, “I don’t want Ginegar,” and leaves the office. At that point, the immigrant inquires into Ginegar’s exact location from another man outside the office, “a young Jew wandering aimlessly with nothing to occupy him.” The reader later learns that, unbeknownst to the immigrant, the “young Jew” is a communist mole, hanging around the camp looking to stir up trouble. He lies to the immigrant. He goads him, saying that Ginegar is in fact in southern Israel, far from Afula: “Don’t go there. Don’t give in. They want to trick you. They are lying to you.” The immigrant takes the bait, returns to the clerk, and continues to refuse Ginegar even after the clerk “does not lose his composure, takes out a map and indicates to the immigrant” where it is. The immigrant rips up the map and spits on the clerk “in a fit of rage.” He is joined by backup: “friends, family and just random immigrants who like violence.” In this story, the clerk is extremely patient, reasonable, and level-headed. The Iraqi immigrant is hot-headed, irrational, violent, impatient, ignorant, and impressionable. It is a depiction that perfectly embodies the Ashkenazi Yishuv’s stereotype of Shaar Ha’aliya’s “Oriental” immigrants.

Yorman is so set on defending his Mapai colleagues against Sela, the Herut-affiliated author, that his description of Shaar Ha’aliya is utterly whitewashed. He easily dismisses any claim that might suggest that life in Shaar Ha’aliya is particularly hard: “The crowding is not terrible.” The conditions are “sparse and simple but by no means are they terrible or
inhuman.” He makes repeated parallels to the conditions outside of the Yishuv: The line is normal, just like a line for a movie in Tel Aviv. The immigrants at Shaar Ha’aliya don’t sleep in villas but “last I checked not every Jew has a villa on the Carmel.”

Whereas Sela puts the fence and quarantine at the top of his article’s agenda, Yorman does not; but around half way through “Israel’s Gate,” Yorman devotes three long paragraphs to a strong and derisive refutation of Sela’s argument about the quarantine:

The honorable author of Herut—Ha-Olam Hazeh objects to the barbed wire fence and concrete wall that surround Shaar Ha’aliya. He admits, however, that this can be explained through logical reasoning: “A wall is needed to protect the city from diseases and to protect the immigrants themselves. However a wall is a symbol of a division between peoples.” Oh how bitterly Mr. Sela weeps.

The simple truth is that Shaar Ha’aliya is an isolation camp (known in other languages as quarantine). That is to say that when the immigrant enters it he must undergo strict medical examinations, including a lung x-ray. If the state of his health is satisfying then he is directed to the processing committee that determines his future place [of residence], and after a week to fifteen days he leaves the camp. However, if it is discovered that the immigrant has any sort of illness—his exit into his new life is put on hold and the immigrant receives the appropriate treatment.

If we look here at what the quarantine means to Yorman, we find logic, reasoning, a “simple truth.” It is part of a system of order and authority: strict medical examinations. It is associated with powerful technology: a lung X-ray. He looks at it wholly from the perspective of someone on the outside who does not in the least question the system. For Yorman, it is not messy, not emotional. His parenthesis “(known in other languages as quarantine)” is a subtle and telling reminder that this is not just a system
we use here, in the backwaters of small, emergent, provincial Israel. No, what we are doing, this quarantine, is part of something larger, a logic that is known beyond this small place, throughout the world and in other languages. It connects Israel to the world and gives quarantine more authority by association. But there is also something important being conveyed in the way he derides Sela. He is suggesting not only that quarantine is logical and straightforward but that anyone who imagines it otherwise, anyone who does not see that it is “simple,” and anyone who sees it as messy, emotional, and upsetting is worthy of scorn and condescension.

Yorman’s passage on quarantine continues as follows:

Now, let’s imagine to ourselves that Shaar Ha’aliya were wide open and anyone and everyone would come and go (in accordance with the medical wisdom of Haolam Hazeh). This would mean that an immigrant with active tuberculosis would ride on a busy public bus to Haifa and to any other place. The same with eye diseases, sexually transmitted diseases, etc. This means that the first security measure to insure the extermination of the diseases is the (partial) isolation of the sick immigrant.

Thus the wall which, by the way, is not a tall concrete wall, but rather a low brick wall. . . .

And it is not only because of the health problems that the gates are locked.

The fear is based on profiteering, black market business, theft—all these together are additional factors that motivated the camp administration to act as they have acted.

Here, Yorman introduces fear and the threat of the contagious immigrant. He paints a scary image for his readers of a threatening and anonymous force that could mingle “among us,” unbeknownst to us; come into our places, our cities, our buses; and bring harm upon us. This is a defense of the quarantine that would be hard to challenge, since the fear of disease is so visceral and alarming and the image Yorman uses is so accessible. In *Isolation: Places and Practices of Exclusion*, Strange and Bashford have
Meaning explained this type of approach: “Expounding theories of cure proclaimed the important message that therapeutic practices of isolation were the marks of a civilized society. Exclusion is rationalized in legislation and politicians’ speeches but it is also legitimated through appeals to public fears and sentiments concerning suffering.” Yorman would have his readers feel that, given the danger the immigrants embody, the “(partial)” isolation and “a low brick wall” are really so little to ask. Again his derision is significant: “In accordance with the medical wisdom of Haolam Hazeh.” The implication is that the bleeding hearts know nothing about medicine. If we followed their ignorant advice and if they had their way, the outcome would be disease, harm. We on the outside, in the cities, in Haifa need this barrier for our security. If only temporarily, we need to keep these people away from us. And we do not need to feel bad about the immigrants being isolated in this place. Since, as Yorman and “the facts” have shown, the conditions in Shaar Ha’aliya and the “low brick wall” are not that bad. They are hardly any worse than conditions in Tel Aviv.

His final paragraph about the quarantine brings his earlier defense into question. It also gives a broader expression to the ideas of fear and contagion. If, as Yorman has stated, Shaar Ha’aliya is a medically necessary quarantine, then isn’t that enough? Is it not the “simple truth” that he presents earlier? This brief addendum would suggest that it is not quite so simple. It was not only the immigrants’ bodies that were sickly and contagious, it was also their morals and their lifestyles, which were threatening to contaminate Israeli society. “Theft,” “profiteering,” and illegal business practices thus justified incarceration. Throughout “Israel’s Gate,” Yorman belittles and demonizes the immigrants. Where there are problems the immigrants are to blame. The lines would be more tolerable if the immigrants weren’t ignorant: “If the immigrants kept to the appointed time they would save themselves unnecessary waiting. The problem is that not everyone knows how to read.” The housing assignments (sending an immigrant to Ginegar rather than Afula) would be pleasant and reasonable if the immigrants were not violent, impressionable, and irrational.
His defense of the quarantine also follows this reasoning: it would not be necessary if the immigrants were not physically and socially tarnished.

Sela wonders whether Shaar Ha’aliya’s most important role is as a symbol—of isolation and of the immigrants’ poor welcome. Yorman also considers Shaar Ha’aliya’s greater meaning, in an early passage: “Is it an immigrant camp? No, it is more than that. Immeasurably more. A boiling cauldron of humanity. A stormy and distraught vessel, a great creation that must overpower impulses. An experimental greenhouse in which east winds blow, scorching sirocco winds and a burning heat wave. Torment and redemption. Light and shadow. White and black.” This flowery excerpt gives added insight into the way Yorman interpreted the quarantine. He saw Shaar Ha’aliya as exotic, dramatic, and disembodied. His image of Shaar Ha’aliya did not include any injury to the immigrants. It ignored the specific human experience for the immigrants in Shaar Ha’aliya but not for the workers. In this dramatic, metaphorical passage, the logical, solid solutions offered by the state (vessel, a great creation, greenhouse) are up against the immigrants’ pulsing primitiveness (boiling, stormy, east winds, scorching, burning). For Yorman, Shaar Ha’aliya and its quarantine are part of a simple dichotomy of the good and proper (redemption, light, white) up against the degenerate and reprobate (torment, shadow, black).

Shaar Ha’aliya and Modern Policies of Isolation

The conflict over the meaning of Shaar Ha’aliya’s quarantine was unsettled and often severe. It touched upon fundamental fears: Now that the Jewish state is finally established, how can we allow it to have any symbols associated with European oppression? Now that that Jewish state is finally established, how can we stop it from being threatened by disease? But not only was there little agreement, the different positions were a wide range of extremes: an imperative security measure, a safeguard, a painful symbol, a prison, a concentration camp. At the heart of this conflict stands the
porous yet medically justified barbed wire fence—a simple, powerful and flawed symbol. It was both an expression of and a response to the “near panic” rippling through Israeli society as it faced the mass immigration with its power, inevitable changes, and contagion (both real and imagined). It meant order, control, exclusion, persecution. It was upsetting, reassuring, isolating, and permeable all at once.

At times it seems that the idea of quarantine as a security measure was limited exclusively to people who were responsible for the camp’s administration within the Jewish Agency. This leads to the possibility that the protective meaning of quarantine was a PR construction that both began and ended within the Jewish Agency. But then we see that there were cases where this same meaning of quarantine was introduced by people who did not represent the Jewish Agency, such as American journalist Ruth Gruber and then, later, Israeli journalist Refael Sela.

It is important to consider the possibility that the Jewish Agency used the protective idea of quarantine as part of a PR strategy. This is certainly conceivable, since, as we have seen, a recurring theme in their texts presents the fence as unfortunate but necessary. Yet all the while that they were saying that it was necessary to prevent the immigrants’ diseases from reaching the rest of the country, the Jewish Agency representatives knew that the fence wasn’t fully stopping people from reaching beyond Shaar Ha’aliya, since the immigrants were breaking through the barrier regularly, the rest of the country wasn’t actually protected. This could mean that these officials were using the term quarantine incorrectly, or we could take it to mean that they were consciously aware that what they were saying was just rhetoric; the fence was a general mechanism of control and the idea of quarantine was simply masking it, making it more palatable to the public. But there is also a strong possibility that these contradictions were unintentional. We can find insight into this, once again, from Mary Douglas: “It is part of our human condition to long for hard lines and clear concepts. When we have them we have to either face the fact that some realities
Maybe the Jewish Agency representatives did push the protective idea of quarantine as a way to defend Shaar Ha’aliya’s image. But they could still very well have believed what they themselves were saying. The people making the health/disease argument were part of the environment that was feeling threatened by all that the immigrants embodied. Even when irrational, quarantine and medicine are authoritative recourses. They offer “hard lines and clear concepts,” a sense of control, a perceived solution for the change and uncertainty many Israelis felt during the period of the mass immigration.

Moreover, whether or not people believed that the quarantine defense was just rhetoric doesn’t change the reality that Shaar Ha’aliya was separated by a barbed wire fence; it isolated a feared population during a time of intense and popular fear of contagion. There was a “marking off,” a boundary to isolate a “contaminating” population. Not only does this fit into the argument for a “broader applicability” of quarantine; it also reinforces what scholars have been arguing about the blurred boundaries between systems of punishment and isolation. The fact that it is difficult to say with certainty whether the fence was meant just as a general method of control or as a method to control disease reinforces Shaar Ha’aliya’s place within modern policies of isolation. For, as articulated by Carolyn Strange and Alison Bashford, “historical practices of correctionalism within prisons and the punitiveness of medical isolation in modern democracies are often difficult to distinguish.”

It is precisely those blurred boundaries that made the image of Shaar Ha’aliya so upsetting and made the protective meaning of quarantine so significant. The visual similarities between Shaar Ha’aliya’s barbed wire exterior and displaced person or concentration camps were immediately apparent, and so “quarantine” offered a reassuring and acceptable way of seeing the same structure.

One way or another, people were moved by Shaar Ha’aliya’s fence. Outsiders and insiders—whether international journalists, Jews, gentiles, established Israelis, new immigrants—had their eyes on this place. They
were occupied with what the fence meant and what it said about this new country about which so many people were interested. The fence brought out passionate, often angry feelings. It evoked raw imagery and blatant contradictions. Yet most significantly, it brought to the surface a conflict that has yet to be resolved decades later as, over time, signs of Shaar Ha’aliya, its fence, and its entire, rich, difficult history all but disappeared from the contemporary Israeli landscape.