CONCLUSION

Under Quarantine

It is hard to say whether Capa knew that what he had photographed was not just a solitary encounter, but certainly he knew that something meaningful was taking place. While the people and this fence are universal images of isolation, defiance, and humanity, they are also part of the particular story of Israel’s establishment and its immigration experiment.

It is not difficult to understand those who stick to the framework of Israel’s official international quarantine stations and leave Shaar Ha’aliya out of the equation. Yet this book has attempted to show how much we lose if we stay only within the confines of this limited definition and how much we gain by looking beyond it. This is where the story of Shaar Ha’aliya lies. Beyond is where assumptions about what defines a quarantine are challenged. Beyond is where we find questions about the persistence and evolution of this basic human act in the mid–twentieth century, during a period where practitioners of medical science largely believed that they were on the path to conquering infectious disease. By simply saying that Shaar Ha’aliya was not an official quarantine or that these laypeople were defining it wrong or that their references were only rhetoric and metaphor, we ignore the intricacies of this conflict. We ignore what it meant to the people as they were saying it, enforcing it, and defying it; what it meant to the society taking part in this discussion; and what it meant about the very concept of quarantine. As the story of Shaar Ha’aliya
illustrates, quarantine is not always as straightforward as a particular public health policy. It is an act of exclusion, a perceived “salvation for a threatened society,” a “warding off,” a barrier put in place to isolate both social and biological contagion, and it is a cagey disciplinary mechanism that is at once protective and punitive.1

The structure we see in the Capa photograph, the barbed wire fence of the Shaar Ha’aliya quarantine, was built long before there was a Shaar Ha’aliya. As the boundary for St. Luke’s, it was a part of the intentionally inhospitable exterior of a military camp. When Palestine became Israel and St. Luke’s became Shaar Ha’aliya, that fence, which was kept in place, took on a new dimension. It remained an intentionally inhospitable exterior, but now it was part of a place that many people expected to be uniquely hospitable.

The photograph gives us a glimpse of the conflicts that surrounded this quarantine. The fence was there, it was meant to keep people out, but to a large extent it simply did not. People went under it and through it; they used it as a way to bypass the camp’s official entrance and to come and go as they pleased. Sylvia Meltzer described this act so simply: “I always entered and exited through a hole in the fence.” As such, it became a site where power was negotiated. By keeping it intact, the state was asserting authority while testing the limits of that authority. There would be a barrier, which was a real and intimidating presence, but they would not do much more than that to prevent people like Sylvia from going through it—there would be neither arrests nor fines. Through the act of breaking in and out, the immigrants showed that not only did they belong in Israel but Israel belonged to them: the various barriers, physical and otherwise, really were in no position to keep them out. In trying to make the fence a more serious obstacle, the police were working to assert their own power. They were there to maintain order, but without certain measures in place and functioning properly, such as a fence or a wall, they could not do their job and, as far as they were concerned, they might as well not even be there.
It could be argued that the police and the state ultimately won this battle. By 1951, at least a partial wall was being built. At the end of that same year, selective immigration was implemented. This policy really did keep immigrants out of Israel. Nevertheless, the immigrants’ persistent and ubiquitous protest at Shaar Ha’aliya must be seen in and of itself as victorious. Amnon Rubinstein has asserted that “protest is needed not as a means to immediate political action but as an almost symbolic rejection of deadlock.” Immigrant protest in Shaar Ha’aliya was bold, effective, and empowered. This is enough to make it significant.

Beyond the struggle over the physical structure was the struggle over meaning. Was the Shaar Ha’aliya quarantine a protective measure? Was it a normative act needed to guard the Yishuv against the real threat of dangerous contagious disease? Or was it punitive? Was it an unjustifiable act of isolation that threatened the inclusive ideal of the Jewish state? These were some of the issues that the fence led people to explore. The arguments were passionate, conflicted, and unresolved. That the immigrants arriving at this time were very sick is a point that is largely agreed upon by historians. In addition, it is also largely agreed that the absorbing society was uncomfortable about how the immigrants would influence the country. But if we step back for a moment, away from the atmosphere of near panic that clearly was prevalent, the actual epidemiological data leaves questions about how great a health risk these immigrants truly posed. Let’s look again at a quote that we saw earlier: “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.” Although this particular quote is from Kalman Levin, he was not the only one making the argument. Given the medical treatment available and the medical infrastructure in place in Israel at the time, did trachoma, ringworm, tuberculosis, syphilis, head lice, and
scabies (the most prevalent diseases at Shaar Ha’aliya) really justify such claims? Moreover, did this position make sense in light of the breaches in the fence by the thousands of people who were “under” the quarantine, like the man in Capa’s photograph? The breaches make it clear that the protective argument was faulty, since the fence was not actually preventing contact between the immigrants and the rest of Israel.

These contradictions are well-suited to the history of quarantine, which raises problems about how illness is defined, who is doing the defining, as well as disparities between who is, and who is not, isolated. The contradictions are also well-suited to the history of post-1948 Israel, which was a time of dramatic change and instability. The chaotic environment that Shaar Ha’aliya became was a product of this period in Israel’s history. As the Mapai workers described, conditions ranged “from difficult to very difficult,” with overcrowding, disorderly and exhausting lines, uncomfortable conditions in the tents, and a surrounding barbed wire fence. Here was a young country that had just emerged from a cataclysmic war in grave financial straits, whose bureaucratic bodies and administration were just beginning to learn how to function, that was rapidly being transformed by an extraordinary number of immigrants from diverse backgrounds. To cope with these changes, the Israeli leadership looked to civic and medical policies that previously had been tested throughout the world, such as isolation as a part of immigration control. While it is relatively easy to sit back today and see that the health fears were likely exaggerated, there is no question that these fears were present in Israeli society at the time. From this perspective, quarantine was a salvation. It offered a powerful authority, a method of control and isolation that was fortified by its link to medical authority.

Yet in addition to the fear and instability, this was also a time of great idealism and excitement. For many people, the fact that a Jewish state actually existed and would now take in Jewish refugees—who most countries did not want—was awe-inspiring. From this perspective, the barbed wire fence was a demoralizing symbol of exclusion that repeatedly evoked
comparisons with European DP camps and—worse—concentration camps. As such, the argument that quarantine was a protection was not convincing. To paraphrase Refael Sela, disease is not the only thing that is powerful and destructive—so is the symbolism of barbed wire, a fence, and a wall. It would seem that the different perspectives on this argument, like the Capa image, can be distilled down to fundamental and bold images: salvation, disease, imprisonment, oppression, liberation.

Shaar Ha’aliya has a place in contemporary Israeli culture. The historical remembrances that explore its story are varied and rich but largely bleak. Even Chava Alberstein’s song, “Sharalia,” one of the most popular and lighthearted representations of the camp, describes it as “a grey place with no color, no view.” On the opposite end is the movie *The Ringworm Children*, which describes it as a type of prison where innocent children were subjected to coercive and traumatizing medical procedures. In this movie, we see the continued associations between Shaar Ha’aliya and a concentration camp, which was a recurring theme in the 1950s. Shaar Ha’aliya’s depiction in these historical remembrances challenges persistent idealizations of Israeli history. Nowhere is this better understood than at the site of Atlit, that “harmonious model of the past,” which is celebrated, so prominently, in the Israeli national space. The barbed wire at Atlit is memorialized in much the same way that the barbed wire fence at Shaar Ha’aliya is remembered: as unkind and repressive. In literature, memoirs, film, song, and personal testimonies, there is a recurring image of Shaar Ha’aliya as an isolated, demoralizing space, and there is persistent disappointment that Jews, finally arriving at the Jewish state, would be detained there. Mia Abramov described how, after “the relief of freedom,” the amazing feeling of reaching the Jewish state, the thought of being put behind barbed wire at Shaar Ha’aliya was “incomprehensible.” Considering how Shaar Ha’aliya is remembered and how Atlit has been memorialized, it is perhaps not surprising that Shaar Ha’aliya is currently neglected as a historic site. Robert Capa’s photograph depicts a powerful image of people defying oppression that would easily fit into the narrative conveyed at the
Atlit Heritage Site, of Jews being subjected to, and then defying, British oppression. With such an uncomfortable story to tell, it is perhaps not surprising that the state prefers not to tell it and has let the historic site of Shaar Ha’aliya all but disappear. Nevertheless, we cannot fully understand Israel without understanding Shaar Ha’aliya. The largest, most concentrated space in which new Israelis encountered their new country, it was where this unusual nation of immigrants was first forged. It is at the heart of the Israeli story.