Note to kind readers:

What follows is a slightly pared down version of chapter 4 from my current book project. Defying many social norms, the unmarried Sampter embraced a Judaism her parents had rejected, bought a trousseau, drolly declared herself “married to Palestine,” and moved there in 1918. But Sampter’s own life and body hardly matched typical Zionist ideals: while Zionism celebrated the strong and healthy body, Sampter spoke of herself as “crippled” from polio and plagued by sickness her whole life; while Zionism applauded reproductive (women’s) bodies, Sampter never married or bore children—in fact, she wrote of homoerotic longings and had same-sex relationships we would consider queer.

In the book, each chapter tells Jessie Sampter’s story differently. The first uses her story to theorize religion and revise the idea of religious diversity; the second tells her story through the lens of disability studies; the third tells Sampter’s life as a story about queerness and history; and the fourth is a theo-political story of her life and thought. This “weird biography,” as I have come to think of its genre, highlights what scholars already know but the form of our work does not always acknowledge: the worldview of the scholar shapes the data she interprets, and there is never only one true story. Sampter’s stories refuse the idea that life-writing should be a single teleological whole or a continuous narrative and instead insists that this life—as all lives—has many threads, stops and starts, contradictions, and loops, and should be written as such. Yet, as I hope you’ll see hints of in this chapter, I also want the project to show the ways that these stories intertwine: Sampter did not experience her disability as separate from her queerness or her religion, and so we too should look at them as intertwined. And in fact, seeing them in this way illuminates how Sampter’s Zionism was a crip Zionism and, to a lesser extent, a queer one.

Another word about style: I have recently come to see accessibility as a feminist issue, and so I am experimenting with writing in ways that are accessible to broad audiences. I know this sometimes means sacrificing technical language and even some engagement with scholarly literatures. I’m curious to hear your thoughts about this choice and how well it works (or doesn’t) here. It’s very much a work in progress, so I welcome all feedback.
A Crip Zionism? Jessie Sampter, Disability, and Gender in the Yishuv

“I preach labor, with limp hands,” Jessie Sampter wrote from her home in Palestine. How queer, for a disabled woman to champion an ideology that promoted manual production and sexual reproduction. But Sampter’s Zionism never quite toed a party line. To do so would have been challenging in any case, given the varieties of positions that different Zionists held: there were labor Zionists, political Zionists, cultural Zionists, religious Zionists, and dozens of ideological disputes divided even within these groups. Sampter brought her own queerness to Zionism—and she also subtly tried to bring Zionism to queerness, not in the sense that she actively promoted same-sex sexuality (she didn’t) but in the sense that she challenged its gendered, religious, and political inclinations.

This chapter tells Sampter’s life as a political-theological story—a narrative about how someone could simultaneously espouse nationalism and internationalism, pacifism and state building, Zionism and democracy, gender ideals and the reality of inequality, and how she could make sense of the gaps between the ideal and the real. Just to take one example, when Sampter arrived, Arab non-Jews outnumbered Jews in Palestine (somewhere between five to one or ten to one, depending on who was counting and where). So if Zionists were really in favor of democracy, as they claimed, wouldn’t any democratic movement go against the creation of a Jewish state? How could Sampter be both for Zionism and for democracy?

Gaps between the ideal and the real are part of the human condition. When Sampter sought to understand and then deal with these gaps she had the same set of options available to all of us: pretend there is no gap, claim that the gap is mere illusion, adjust your ideal to match the real, or work to change the real to match your ideal. She did a little bit of each. When she

1 Speaking Heart, 417.
worked to change the real, she also worked to challenge the norms that made social ideals as she saw them. She queered Zionism when she praised non-nuclear families and living arrangements. Disability activists give the name “cripping” to the process of upending bodily norms—and Sampter did this too, such as when she wrote short the short story “Bed Number Six,” which featured a weak, chronically ill Zionist stuck in a hospital.

To tell Sampter’s life as the story of a Zionist thinker is to attend to her own voice. But it is also to attend to a road not taken. In spite of her prodigious writing and her famous associates, Sampter did not become a prominent Zionist icon. Israel has no major street named after her like it does for her fellow Americans Henrietta Szold and Judah Magnes. Today’s Zionists rarely cite Sampter, and all of her books are out of print. But to tell Sampter’s life as a political life shows how embodiment can matter profoundly for political and religious writing.

Scholars who study modern Jewish philosophy have very little to say about thinkers’ bodies. Jessie Sampter’s hands were limp. But what about the Jewish philosopher Benedict Spinoza? What were his hands like? His back? His face? Students in Jewish studies hear that the thinker Moses Mendelssohn had a hunchback—and scholars have theorized why this matters to his thought about aesthetics. But what about Hermann Cohen, Martin Buber, or Franz Rosensweig? What were their bodies like? The assumption is that bodies only matter when they are disabled, or when they are different. I see a close parallel to the field’s gendered assumptions, under which it matters for scholars trying to understand their philosophies that Hannah Arendt was a woman but not that Emmanuel Levinas was a man.

Our bodies are not just sacks of meat and bone designed to carry around our thoughts. Our brains need our bodies—and in fact, they are part of our bodies. Our bodies are the way we

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experience the world, whether we are men or women, able-bodied or not. At times, Jewish philosophy has pushed against mind-body dualism, especially a dualism in which the mind takes priority over the body. Theologies in which the body is inherently sinful while the mind or soul can be purified are more commonly Christian than Jewish. From either a scientific or a Jewish theological perspective, then, we should see the mind and the body as intimately related, dependent, and intertwined. Sampter’s story shows us that to understand Jewish thought more fully, we must also pay attention to thinkers’ bodies.

Path to Zionism: Universalism and Particularism

Jessie Sampter never wrote her own life as a story about religion, queerness, or disability. But she did write her life as Zionist story. The year before she died, she penned a two-part article in the Reconstructionist. Her friend and teacher Mordecai Kaplan had founded the journal as part of the new movement called Reconstructionist Judaism, which thought of Judaism “as a civilization” and endorsed Zionism. Though Sampter, then living in Palestine, did not identify herself as part of his movement, she and Kaplan shared many political and religious positions. This assignment was different from the sorts of pieces she usually wrote for publication, she must have thought. Her writing so often described others, described life in Palestine, and described her Zionist and religious philosophies. But she rarely described her own life in print form. She probably sat at her typewriter in Kibbutz Givat Brenner, outside of Rehovot, from where she told a tale of her earliest years in the bustling metropolis of New York.

I was born into a German-Jewish, third generation American upper middle class, well-to-do, completely assimilated, highly cultured bourgeois and individualistic family in New

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1 For one articulation of this philosophy, see Mordecai Kaplan, Judaism as a Civilization: Toward a Reconstruction of American Jewish Life (New York: Macmillan, 1934).
York City where *trefe* meat was eaten as often as three times a day, where Christmas trees and Easter eggs obliterated all traces of *Hanukkah* and *Passover*, whose prophet was not Moses but Darwin. My maternal grandfather at on *Yom Kippur* and my paternal grandmother made fun of people who kept kosher. I am now a citizen of Palestine, a vegetarian. I am a member of a Socialist-Zionist commune of agricultural and industrial but highly cultured workers, the chief aim of whose rapidly growing and penurious settlement is to bring as many Jews as possible, as quickly as possible, to our ancient home land.¹

When Jessie recounted the trajectory of her life in the *Reconstructionist*, she dramatized the events for effect. Though the details were truthful, the way she told her story sounded just like a conversion narrative: she once was lost but in Zionism was found.

This story of Jessie Sampter’s life begins when she was seven. Jewishness, or the “Jewish consciousness” that Jessie would later cultivate, were not explicit cultural identifications for the Sampter family before then. As we saw in chapter 1, she recalled her moment of “enlightenment” in the *Reconstructionist*: “When I was seven years old, some children in the street told me I was Jewish, which impressed me exactly as if they had told me I was a rag-picker, a gypsy, or an idiot. I denied it hotly. I went home to be enlightened, to pass through the fire of indignation into a defender of my race, but to continue to hang up my Christmas stocking and paint my Easter eggs.”² Although Jewishness was not central to her childhood, it formed a central part of her self-conception as an adult. In the *Reconstructionist* article, this moment of first knowing the truth of her Jewishness marked the moment that would lead to her Zionist awakening.

As she explored Jewishness, Sampter grappled with an age-old question for Jews: Was Judaism about particularity—specialness and difference? Or was it about universality—a religion for all? If the essence of Judaism was specialness and difference, wasn’t that chauvinism and even prejudice against non-Jews? On the other hand, if Judaism were universal, why not

² “Confession (part 2),” 12
proselytize and work for the whole human race to become Jewish? Although these questions remain perennial, Zionism helped Sampter make sense of her own answer: Jewish national character had something unique to contribute to the overall project of humanity. “We are a religious nation. It is our mission as a nation to teach, or show, righteousness and justice to the nations,” she wrote. “Our religion is universal. But being human, it must have a dwelling place in the heart and hearth of a people.” 6 Zionism was the promotion of this unique national character, including Jewish history, literature, morals, and customs—what we might call culture. Sampter’s Zionism, then, did not proclaim Jewish superiority, but it did claim Jewish distinctiveness. Just like the Irish or the Chinese, she thought, Jews had something special and distinctive that should be helped to flourish.

Sampter’s path to Zionism was part of her journey of religious seeking. Throughout her life, Jessie read texts from a variety of religions—the New Testament, theosophical works, Christian Science texts, the Theosophy-influenced writings of Jiddu Krishnamurthi, and the Vedas, to name a few. Her seeking also included looking to a series of mentors. Early on, her religious self-conception was shaped by her adoration of Josephine Lazarus. When she was in her early twenties, Sampter would visit the aging Lazarus at her home to discuss writing and learn Hebrew, though they spent little time discussing Lazarus’s Zionism, a fact that Sampter came to deeply regret later. In 1910, Sampter published The Seekers, a book chronicling “a philosophic adventure, an experiment in which [she] met once a week with seven teenagers to reflect philosophically on the nature of the world.” 7 The Seekers denied a personal God, and pooh-poohed “those clogging superstitions” of dogmatic creeds. 8 For a short while, Sampter

7 Seekers, 1.
8 Seekers, 5-6.
joined a Unitarian church, in part because she admired the writing of its pastor, Merle St. Croix. But though St. Croix told her she could be Jewish and Christian, she doubted it. When he introduced Sampter to the Jewish poet Hyman Segal at the Poetry Society, she felt “as if a door had been opened to her.”

She credited her conversations with her Russian immigrant friend Segal with lighting the sparks of her Zionism. His poetry in *The Book of Pain Struggle, Called the Philosophy of Fulfillment* tells of a hero who lives in spiritual and physical worlds marked by pain and struggle. “In the beginning there was pain, pain, pain,” begins one poem. The hero finds himself in the desert, a setting where “the Strugglers of olden, the Painmen of my people… grew to manhood, Saw their visions.” After finding an ancient parchment, he hears a voice that says: “the land/ Languisheth without its own people/ And man without his ancient faith.” Segal’s description of the spiritual and physical worlds as one of pain, but also as ones of belonging and unity, resonated deeply with Sampter.

Part of this resonation may have been the way that *The Book of Pain Struggle* crippled Zionism. Rather than offering Zionism as a balm for Jewish suffering, Segal’s work posited that chronic pain and suffering were fundamental to Zionism—and they were fundamental to Zionism because they are fundamental to the human condition. Its hero declared: “I am of a Chosen People… From the right hand of our Lord/Runs a law of Pain and Struggle.” And though he called this God “our Lord,” it was the God of all: “Pain is all, all is Pain… All’s alive

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⁴ Segal, 71.

⁵ Segal, 60.
with Pain… Lo, the laws of the universe/ Show the ways that it always/ Responds to the pain of God, for Pain-Struggle is God!”

Those who were “pain-lacking!” did not have truth or beauty, nor could they accomplish the divinely ordained quest of the pain-saturated hero. This Zionism took bodily (as well as spiritual) pain as its baseline, and only from that pain could the Zionist hero pursue his quest. Bodily wholeness and comfort could not give rise to the prophecy nor its fulfillment. Though religion was part of her path to Zionism, then, her chronic pain was another part.

Sampter could also have read Segal’s poetry as that of a religious recombiner, given the possibility of reading Christological themes in it. The hero declared, “The Lord came to me in Pain-Struggle” and bellowed, “I sought thee/ that though bring that faith to mankind!”

Completion of the hero’s quest did not mean an end to the pain; it merely meant that the “pain-man” hero could help others see that pain was the source of all human thought and action. Sampter was not the only one to notice the way Segal had upended Zionism’s traditional relationship to suffering. When *The Catholic World* reviewed Segal’s subsequent book, *The Law of Struggle*, the reviewer was appalled perhaps because of the idea that a Jew other than Jesus could live a life of redemptive suffering on behalf of the human race. (Although Segal’s book could be read as engaged in crippling and religiously recombination, it surely was not in the business of queering Zionism: throughout the hero’s life, appealing girls and women appeared beside him, from the “little dark-eyed girl” companion of his boyhood to the “nobly-hipped and tall, and lithesome as a flame” host in the Land of Beauty.)

Segal, then editor of the Zionist monthly *Maccabaean*, helped bring Sampter into the

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14 Segal, 66
15 Segal, 66-67.
16 Segal, 70-71.
18 Segal, 7, 48.
world of American Zionism. He took her to Cooper Union to hear speeches in Yiddish and Hebrew, neither of which she understood very well. And yet the visit made a strong impression on her. The Hebrew lecturer was, she recalled, “a visiting Palestinian Jew. The speaker had a fine physique, a commanding brown beard that shadowed the coarseness of his features; but he was not a person; he was a symbol, as much a symbol as the white and blue Jewish flags that hung about the hall.” Sampter’s description of the man leaves little doubt as to the gendered nature of Zionism: it exalted healthy male bodies that worked the land. Jessie, of course, did not have such a body, so she would have to engage with Zionism in other ways.

Her first experiences with Zionism kindled within her a feeling of profound kinship with other Jews. “The Jewish people: I realized the Jewish people,” she wrote. “I have a people, a congregation. It is not in the church of the synagogue. It is in the streets, in the tenements, in the crowded pale of Russia and Poland, in the little agricultural settlements in Palestine. It is my people, a chosen people. God has called it, has chosen it for suffering and service. The God that is in me is also in my people.” Jewish people had spiritual and material needs, which she shared. Although she felt this sense of spiritual kinship, she also felt a social distance from most other Jews. After all, many of her friends and acquaintances and neighbors were non-Jews. In the years following her adoption of Zionism, she moved into a settlement house in Harlem “in a congested Jewish quarter” and later a YMHA, where she was closer to immigrant Jews than to the acculturated life she had known.

She also described her commitment to Zionism with language and theology that she knew—and that language and theology was not only Jewish but also reminiscent of Christianity and Hinduism:

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19 Speaking Heart, 170.
21 Speaking Heart, 173.
It meant social salvation, for the Jews and through the Jews for mankind. The Jewish people has a social religious ideal, the socialist foundation but with a watch tower facing the stars; the divinity, the holiness of man because God is holy, the equality, the oneness of man because God is one. ... For the scattered Jewish people they are only dreams, but in our own land, lived by a community, they will become a beacon to mankind, a Messiah to the world. The Jewish people is the Messianic people; it is crucified; by its sufferings the world shall be saved, and its resurrection in its own land shall give life to mankind.  

Jewish national culture should create an example of justice and morality on the earth, and Zionism was the path to allowing this Jewish national culture to flourish. That part was typical of other Zionist thinkers. But the language of the “oneness of man” because of the oneness of God—as well as her belief in the oneness of God with nature, which included humans—was not. In fact, it recalled a Hindu-like theology. With this understanding, Sampter wrote, “So Zionism became my religion, the Jewish people my congregation.”

Perhaps even more striking, the crucifixion of the Jews for the savior of all peoples used the themes of crucifixion and redemption in ways far more familiar to Christianity than Judaism. Similar to Segal’s work, Sampter’s Zionism crippled the norms of the Zionism she saw around her: in her view, Jews would suffer for the redemption of all humans. Sampter’s writing made the Christological theme of pain and suffering for the sake of humanity’s redemption even more prominent than in Segal’s work. Like a crucified and resurrected Jesus, Jews would suffer physically in order to bring spiritual and ultimately political redemption to all peoples.

As she immersed herself in Zionist networks, she also turned to Judaism. Segal introduced her Henrietta Szold, who served as a guide to both Zionism and to Judaism—Jessie sometimes attended a Conservative synagogue with Szold and her mother Sophie. Jessie began meeting with the rabbi and philosopher Mordecai Kaplan, who held small salon-like gatherings to discuss Zionism in his home. There Sampter befriended fellow Zionists Lotta Levenson and

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22 Speaking Heart, 162.
23 Ibid.
Alice Seligsberg, both of whom would remain conversation partners for many years. She also came to know Horace Kallen, the philosopher who advocated for Zionist causes and promoted “cultural pluralism” as opposed to the “melting pot” as the ideal model for American society. Through her relationships with these men and women, especially under the tutelage of “Miss Szold,” as Sampter always referred to her, she came to espouse a Zionism that included a return to the land of Palestine. Rather than focusing exclusively on political nationalist ends, she saw Zionism as a spiritual means of cultivating the Jewish people that she now cherished so deeply.

Sampter’s erudition and interest in pedagogy made her an asset to the young American Zionist movement, and Szold recognized her writing as a much-needed addition. In 1913, Szold wrote to her new associate: “I am glad that you are going to write. You will serve Zionism best in that way. I believe it is what we need – good writers from whose work Zionism will radiate as a fine aroma.” The Zionist movement in the US was still small; Sampter estimated it claimed 20,000 people in 1914. Szold saw Sampter as a more serious contribution than the “brochures, the apologia, the party pamphlet, the disquisition” that had characterized the movement. Sampter would provide a philosophically serious literature, which would be both literary in quality and convincing in its claims, Szold thought. And in this, she proved right: although Sampter remained an active Zionist until her death, she never became an organizational advocate or a political figure, but she remained a writer.

In addition to her literary skills, Hadassah valued Jessie for her commitment to education. She founded the Hadassah School of Zionism, for which she created materials so that each

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11 Badt-Strauss, 42.
13 Fineman, 80.
Hadassah group could teach and learn Zionist ideas, and basic facts about Palestine. She herself taught the courses in New York. Szold praised Sampter’s work with the school: “I am more convinced than ever that yours is our most important work.” Sampter thought of the school not merely as education, but as an act of political and religious creation. She told the Hadassah convention in 1915: “The class in Zionism, conducted by the director of the school [Sampter herself], had before it an exceptional task, a piece of pioneer work. … There are no text-books of Zionism.” Jessie, who had already been at work on her own Zionist course book, saw herself as a pioneer—not the sort of pioneer who would till the soil, but one who would lead others by her literary creation.

From early in her educational work, she saw Zionism as a space that allowed for deviation from popular gender ideals. For example, what she described as Zionism’s “ennobling” potential was in part about gender relations: “The effect of Zionism on the Jewish character, its ennobling, invigorating power, I observed in my associations with settlement workers and settlement groups. As a character-builder, quite apart from its direct aim, it was appreciated even by those educators who were anti-Zionists.” When they were discussing co-ed Zionist clubs, an anti-Zionist settlement worker said to her, “My own feeling is that no serious work can be done by mixed clubs, that they tend to flippancy. But in our house we have only one mixed club, a Zionist club and this is successful. As theirs is a serious aim, it is not fair to judge others by them.” In Sampter’s eyes something about Zionism allowed for different relations of the sexes.

Though she often had to cancel speaking arrangements at the last minute because of her

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*For more on the Hadassah School of Zionism and Sampter’s role in the wider Hadassah project, see Carol Ingall, “Jessie Sampter and the Hadassah School of Zionism” in *The Women Who Reconstructed American Jewish Education, 1910-1965* (Waltham, MA: Brandeis University Press, 2010).*


* Speaking Heart, 193.*
health, she still took on new roles, such as heading the education section of Hadassah’s Central Committee and serving as a consultant to set up Zionist education in Baltimore. These moves toward more intellectual and behind-the-scenes roles suited Sampter well. There is little evidence that she was a popular speaker; her speeches were dense and heady, and I would be shocked if anyone every referred to them as fiery or charismatic. But writing educational materials and designing curricula pleased her and Hadassah. Yet through all of these new responsibilities, she wrote: “Always the specter of illness.” Sampter would remain a Zionist for the rest of her life, but her Zionism would be a crip Zionism, a queer Zionism, and a religiously recombined Zionism.

[In the complete chapter, sections on Nationalism and Internationalism, Pacifism and State-Building, and Zionism and Democracy go here…]

*Crippling Democracy*

“Here being a Jew is the norm, not the abnormal,” Sampter declared several years after moving to Palestine. She had spent most of her life being “abnormal,” in part because she was Jewish but also in large part because she was disabled. If being Jewish suddenly felt normal, being disabled still did not. In fact, in some ways, her limited strength for walking and physical labor was more disabling in Palestine than it had been in the United States.

Not only did Palestine have less developed infrastructure than the US did, but also the Zionist culture there promoted physical health as noble and ennobling. Even Hadassah saw the task of Jewish state-building and citizenship as manly—and as things for the able-bodied.

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"Speaking Heart, 221.
"Speaking Heart, 298."
Henrietta Szold in 1921: “Our nerves need steadying, our muscles are flabby, our resilience weak, our morale and discipline infirm. … Everything must be brought in, until men of muscle, judgment, experience, expertise, and means come in and develop its resources. Men of muscle have begun to come – the young, energetic halutzim of whom you have heard. They are the brawn of the Jewish community.” With this kind of rhetoric, what space was there for people with disabilities in this new Jewish society?

Sampter spent several weeks in Hadassah’s hospital in Jerusalem soon after she arrived in Palestine. When she recovered enough to write about it, she did not apologize for her inability to work, nor see herself as a drain on the Zionist cause. Rather her essays framed her experience as a celebration of Zionism for her English-speaking audiences. She praised the hospital itself: “To me it was almost worth the discomfort of a serious illness that I might spend several weeks as a patient, in the ranks of patients, in our own Hadassah Hospital in Jerusalem—the Rothschild Hospital.” She celebrate its democratic structure: “I had no special privileges, save the privilege of a pleasant personal acquaintance with many of the physicians and nurses. I lay in the general women’s ward. In the Rothschild Hospital, there are no private rooms, and consequently there is no “private” and “ward” psychology on the part of the nurses—they are in fact sisters, as they are called in Hebrew “Ahiot”—sisters to all their patients, with a friendliness, a kindliness, a comradely helpfulness that seems equal toward the Yemenite housemaid, the poor Askhenazic widow, the Hebrew school teacher or the physician’s wife.” Her American Zionist audience could see the Zionism the hoped for: democratic, collectivist, philanthropic, and scientific.

Her readers in Hadassah, including the big yearly convention, loved it. A. H. Vixman, president of the Pittsburgh Hadassah chapter, wrote it up for the Jewish Criterion. She closed her

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1 Henrietta Szold to Hadassah chapters, Oct 26, 1921. CZA A125\23
own with Sampter’s words: “as for myself, I hope I may be pardoned for repeating again, the words of Jessie Sampter—who concluded her beautiful article entitled ‘Bed Number Six’ published in the last issue of the *B’nai Israel Bulletin* with the phrase ‘God bless Hadassah!’ ‘and forgive me if I am proud of her.’” Copies of “Bed Number Six” were subsequently sent to all Hadassah chapters.

And yet, even while “Bed Number Six” strongly supported Zionist ideas, it also crippled Zionism: its narrator and many other characters were physically or mentally disabled, and yet they played important roles in the new society. It even shows pioneers as potentially ill and disabled: “Two or three young pioneers, ‘halutzim,’ look down ill from the workingmen’s camp. They are contented and quiet.” All bodies, even those of the hale pioneers, were susceptible to illness and disabilities—and that was nothing to be ashamed of. Sampter herself, physically in pain and struggling with depression, told the story of her time in the hospital as a time that illustrated not only Hadassah’s Zionist ideals of state building and providing medical her, but also her own Zionist ideals of an inclusive Jewish culture that embraced Yemenite Jews, disabled women, and sick halutzim not as outsiders but as central. Even from her early days writing from Palestine, then, Sampter was crippling Zionism to make space for disabled bodies.

This commitment echoed beyond her writing. Sampter helped create the first Deaf school in Palestine. She raised money from both the US and Palestine and worked on the committee that would ultimately create the school. For her, the project was part philanthropy, but also part political work: she wanted to shape a Zionism that included these students. Although she followed along with the dominant mode of teaching Deaf students—“oralism,” in which students are encouraged to speak instead of using sign language—she still insisted that these students

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“Organization Activities,” *Jewish Criterion* (Jan 13, 1922), 16.
could and should be full members of the new Zionist society.

This is not to say that making space for disabled bodies was easy, and Sampter sometimes despaired. In May 1921, she wrote: “I dreamed the other night that I offered my life for the life of a halutz. Then I found myself turning into the halutz. I did not want that; I wanted to give him my life. I said so, and it happened. I died and he lived. A simple enough dream of desire.” Her dream suggested a society that valued the life of a pioneer over the life of a disabled woman. Though she called it “simple enough,” clearly it was not simple at all: Sampter struggled with the popular Zionism that valued strong and healthy Jewish bodies above all.

Several years later she wrote of a similar sort of despondency in response to feeling like there was no space for her:

It seemed to me there was nothing for me to do here because I had not the working body. I thought I had lost all influence and power; I was wasted. Our gift of language must in large measure be wasted here. It may seem as if the best and deepest of us were wasted. But I think it is not true. There is a better and a deeper. … It is our vanity that is shattered, not our worth that is lost. … We shall unify at last the body and spirit, sanctify the work of our hands with the consecration to it of heart and head.”

The paragraph reiterated her metaphysical understanding of the unity of the mind, body, and spirit, but it also despaired that Zionism in Palestine valued only physical prowess and “wasted” minds and spirits.

Creating space for a disabled body and recognizing minds and spirits were more than philosophical issues for her: without them, she questioned the value of her own life. She later reflected: “This paragraph was much more despondent, despairful as to my own powers,” she admitted, but Leah and another friend had listened to her read the paragraph and supported her.

“This conversation, in which they insisted on my worth as a friend, proved a turning point in my decision, for I was at this time resolved to kill myself as soon as I had finished the book [her

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* Speaking Heart, 387
* Speaking Heart, 417
unpublished autobiography]."

As she toured different parts of Palestine, she met pioneers and workers, and even as a tourist she saw gaps between the real and the ideal. The Jewish colonies in the Galilee were “inspiring and depressing,” she wrote to her brother-in-law Edgar. She wrote that Jewish villages all have something in common: “They all have a fine, daring spirit, pioneer courage.” And yet they also at once took physical health for granted and glorified it: “They do not fear work but, with few exceptions, they do not understand its dignity. … A tendency to be arrogant, super-intellectual, to look upon themselves as heroes.” Her unpublished novel *In the Beginning* had “Jewish boys, bronze-legged, working in the fields,” but was critical of the narrowness of these same Zionists.

She wanted a broader Zionism, one that recognized the unity of body and soul—and also recognized the diversity of bodies. To Mordecai Kaplan she wrote: “The problem of the Jewish soul can be solved only here, and through first hand knowledge of life here. Yet no one will solve that problem even here unless he comes truly in the spirit of the halutz, prepared to make material sacrifices and to take his chance in the ‘labor market’ here, whether in the highest or the lowest field.” For an engineer or a painter, that might mean willingness to work in the field. For Sampter, that meant the material sacrifices ranging from American toilet paper and the particular woolen stockings she liked to the closeness of family and the less-disabling infrastructures of American urban environments. Spiritual regeneration and a “sound economic basis” were not two unconnected goals: “I believe the two must come together, that they are aspects of one

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* Speaking Heart, 417
* Jessie Sampter to Edgar Wachenheim, Sr., Oct 30, 1919.
* Speaking Heart, 305
* Speaking Heart, 305
* In the Beginning, 114
* Jessie Sampter to Mordecai Kaplan, Dec 30, 1920, American Jewish Archives.
vision.” Although Kaplan’s Zionism was not always orthodox, it did center on the image of the “viril[e], self-perpetuating Jew” in Palestine. Despite Kaplan’s influence, Sampter’s never did.

Even some of her essays that did not explicitly discuss disability showed the tensions between a Zionist ideal of ablebodiedness and the reality of a population with a variety of bodies. In 1923, for example, Sampter penned an article about why Jews were leaving Palestine. The answer seemed like a mundane one: they didn’t have jobs. But it was more complicated: not only did they not have jobs, but they did not feel that they had a place in the society if they were part of the “so-called non-productive element.” Sampter thought that the problem could be fixed, but she recommended ways of increasing options for more productivity, such as creating fisheries or expanding ICA loans to include Palestine-born Jews, not just brand new immigrants. Perhaps she felt that a plan that truly valued “the so-called non-productive element” was too radical to be accepted by other Zionists—but more likely, she had also internalized some of Zionism’s producer-minded ethos. The article shows how a non-normative embodied life, in this case, a non-producer in material and economic senses, mattered deeply for Zionist politics.

Even a crippled Zionism, however, did not always mean a fully inclusive Zionism. In 1938, the year of Sampter’s death, she published another personal essay about a hospital stay in which she was assigned bed number six. But the story was not about her: it was about the patient in the next bed over. “Bed Number Five” was less rosy, but it still portrayed Hadassah as a force for good, operating with a sense of noblesse oblige, and it still crippled Zionism. Sampter opened the essay with a description of the girl in the bed next to her: she had “a lovely face, flower-like and delicate, with dark skin, framed by curling light brown hair with a braid over each shoulder, the sunburnt skin and the sunburnt hair of a daughter of Jerusalem. From each small well-shaped

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a Jessie Sampter to Mordecai Kaplan, Dec 30, 1920, American Jewish Archives.
b Speaking Heart, 192.
ear dangled a gold ring. To my mind, earrings give to the face a barbaric flavor; and in the girl, half-woman, half-child, they emphasized a wild sweetness. She did not look ill."

Today we might say that the girl had an invisible disability: depression. She had attempted suicide, which many of the hospital employees attributed to the difficult conditions at her home. “All the housework for my little sisters and brothers and parents and everybody” fell to her, she explained. Sampter described Shoshanna’s joy at reading and picking flowers in the garden. At the conclusion of the essay, the doctor spoke to Sampter in English so that the girl could not understand:

We have found a place for Shoshanna. She is going to ‘work’ for a childless woman who contemplates something like adoption. She can’t be sent back to her real mother who is an irresponsible nervous invalid. Later her ‘employer’, who will pay her parents, by the way, for the privilege of keeping her, intends to send her to school or have her taught. We think that if Shoshanna gets a little bit of the milk of human kindness she will not try again to drink poison.

I’m sure the story made Hadassah readers feel good about the work of the hospital. And yet the doctor’s words demonstrate a number of common exclusionary assumptions of Ashkenazi Zionists in Palestine. First, he claims that the Sephardi mother is an unfit mother. She does not care for her children using “modern” or “scientific” methods, and her child becomes ill because of it. Second, and related, he suggests that a different woman will be a better mother and may “adopt” Shoshanna, even though we have no indication that her parents are willing to give her up. Third, he hints that Sephardi ways of having an older child work instead of go to school is culturally backward. It certainly is not “human kindness.” There is no space in his ideal society for a “nervous invalid” as a mother—and particularly not one who is also Sephardi.

Although Sampter does not speak back to the doctor or challenge his Orientalist ideas about Shoshanna’s mother, her essay nevertheless undermines some common Zionist

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assumptions. At the most basic level, Sampter’s story makes a space for a girl with depression as part of the society. She will contribute both through her own education and her labor. Her depression is not an obstacle to her inclusion in a Zionist project; the only obstacles recognized are the material ones of labor, economics, and bad parenting.

A crippled Zionism would recognize the interconnection of the body, mind, and soul, and would see value in each—not a value limited to production or ability to work the land, but value of a “daring spirit” and willingness to sacrifice for the new society. But, as “Bed Number Five” suggests, it was still a Zionism that allowed Orientalist stereotypes. Sampter’s approach to Yemenite Jews shows how her simultaneous Orientalism coexisted with deep commitment to inclusion.

_Yemenites, the “Orient,” and Zionist Society_

When Sampter visited the settlement of Rehoboth for the first time, she remarked on its Yemenite Jews: “All had their own gardens of vegetables and fruit. We conversed in Hebrew with these different Jews, these Arab Jews so separate from us. Can we not overcome that barrier?” Her answer was yes, undoubtedly, that barrier could be overcome. Yemenite Jews already embodied a lot of her Zionist ideals: “They are a thrifty, sturdy folk, inured to hardship, learned and pious, and speaking a pure Sephardic Hebrew.” But her solution for overcoming the barrier made clear a lopsided power dynamic: Western Ashkenazi Jews would do the teaching, and Yemenites would have to do most of the changing. In order to become equal participants in the project for a Jewish society in Palestine, Yemenite Jews should adopt western ways—

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“Speaking Heart, 345
education, gender roles, science, medicine, and rational religion.

Yemenite Jews had come to Palestine for both religious and political reasons. Most believed that Jews would return to the land during the messianic age, and so Palestine had a spiritual appeal. More materially, political instability in Yemen, which was then part of the Ottoman Empire, pushed many to move. Most Yemenite Jews had immigrated to Palestine since 1882—within just a couple of generations before Sampter’s arrival. They spoke Arabic and Hebrew, and their religious practices were neither Sephardi nor Ashkenazi; today scholars put them under the heading “Mizrahi,” literally, Eastern. Though at the time, the idea of a Mizrahi identity had not yet coalesced: Jews were Yemenite Jews, Moroccan Jews, or Egyptian Jews, rather than all members of a single group called Mizrahim.

Sampter was one of the few, and the most prodigious, writers about Yemenite Jews for an American audience. The vast majority of American Zionists largely ignored the presence of Yemenites in Palestine, unless it was to mention how western Zionists should help them out of the persecution in Yemen, or had helped uplift them from poor health or superstition. Others also saw Sampter in this model of noblesse oblige, as author Marion Rubinstein wrote in *Adventuring in Palestine*, a book for both older children and adults: “The nursery was so fine that tourists came to visit it. It had been built with the help of an American writer, Jessie Sampter, who lived among the Yemenites and saw their straw-thatched homes where in one room the entire family lived with their sheep, goats, chickens, and donkey. ‘Gveret Sampter went to America to ask all the people there to give money to build this nursery. Now she teaches us

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53 Max Heller and Judah Magnes, for example, submitted a resolution to the 1912 FAZ conference to help Yemenite Jews emigrate to Palestine. See *Maccabaean* 22.1 (July 1912): 8. The FAZ sent a similar appeal to “all American Zionists” in November of the same year *Maccabaean* 22.5 (Nov 1912): 163.

54 Add example here.

how to live like Americans. I dress my little girl like an American,’ Laya said very proudly.”

Sampter was doing a good thing by teaching these Yemenites culture, in Rubinstein’s picture, even though that was not Sampter’s own goal.

Unlike most of her contemporaries, Sampter wrote about Yemenite customs, culture, and people – and not merely as a reason for fundraising or self-congratulation. Her 1920 article about Jerusalem during the arrival of the British explained how each community celebrated this “redeeming” of the land. She discussed a Yemenite celebration as just another part of the list: “Old men sang, and little children. The men danced solos. Then the people came up and brought their offerings. … a month’s savings, a year’s savings. Men brought a shilling to whom a shilling means more than a million dollars to Mr. Schiff.” She called the dancing “weird and beautiful,” differentiating Yemenites from the more upscale neighborhood celebrations she described—though one of those upscale celebrations did include a goat standing on a piano, so by comparison the Yemenites looked rather normal to her readers after all.

She also brought Yemenite Jews into her vision of Zionism for children. The Key, a short story Sampter wrote for American children, celebrated Jewish settlement of the land (a common theme of Zionist propaganda) but it also foregrounded the equality of Ashkenazi and Yemenite Jews (a far less common theme). After Shama, a Yemenite Jewish girl, loses the key to the chicken coop she is tending, the Ashkenazi Akiba helps her out. “I am a Jewish boy,’ answered Akiba, ‘and you are a Jewish girl. I think in Palestine it is time we understood that we are all Jews and Jews are all brothers. Only I wish you didn’t have to cry about losing the key to someone else’s chicken house. I wish you had your own, as I have in Nahalal,” the agricultural

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settlement where he lived with his family.” Sampter also dedicated her time to organizing schooling for Yemenite children, especially girls.

But Sampter’s love and good will did not mean she was exempt from Orientalism. And, like other orientalist attitudes, hers had both positive and negative aspects. After complaining about how the elite Jewish set used Yemenites “as a cheap servant class,” she turned around to romanticize them: “Oh, these beautiful Yemenites! The large-eyed, dark children, the prophetic men, the little, quaint women in headed kerchiefs; I like them; I like their crisp, Arabian Hebrew. Their ignorance, their spooky superstition.”

Sampter loved much of Yemenite culture, but saw them as needing uplift in Palestinian society. She saw aspects of Yemenite Jewish culture as premodern – in both romantic and negative ways. In her view, they needed three key things: first, education for girls; second, modern medicine; and third, fairer wage practices.

The first of these problems seemed like a problem that the Yemenite community would have to fix by changing its ideas about gender. “Education is given only to boys, whose only study is the Bible and its commentaries,” Sampter explained in Modern Palestine. Women and children working while men studied was patriarchal:

They have not yet developed public spirit and their attitude toward women and children is a possessive one. Girls are sent to do housework in the village homes when they are but eight or nine years old. They used to be married by contract at eleven or twelve, but now marriages under sixteen are rare. Polygamy, permitted by their customs, is also gradually disappearing under the pressure of social environment. Women, many of whom work as scrubwomen, washerwomen or in the fields, give all their wages to their husbands.

She wanted to spare Yemenite girls from the “benevolent slavery of domestic service.”

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“Sampter, The Key 30.
“Speaking Heart, 297.
“Sampter, Modern Palestine: A Symposium (New York: Hadassah, 1933), 103
“Modern Palestine, 103
Yemenite communities should change these antiquated ideas about women’s educational and economic subservience to men, Sampter thought.

During the late 1920s, Sampter tried to support a kindergarten for Yemenite children in Rehovot, and some night classes for adults. They were always woefully underfunded, but she helped them keep going as long as she lived in Rehovot. “It is important that Yemenite youth should finally be assimilated with the rest of Jewish youth, although this must be effected without losing their distinctive values or respect for their own traditions” – they should be allowed to attend school with others, as some of the Yemenite fathers have done with their daughters in Rehovot.

And yet she also recognized that Ashkenazi Jews were also contributing to the problem. (This recognition, to Sampter’s credit, was quite unusual. I haven’t found another person making this critique in such a pointed way.) She was critical of those who would exclude Yemenite children from village schools, whether by decree or just by social exclusion: “The teachers admitted to me… that the fault lay not altogether with the Yemenites and that the causes were social as well as economic. The Yemenite children would probably not be welcome in the school in Rehoboth.”

Sampter went along with general Hadassah maternalistic (and paternalistic) idea of the inferiority of folk medicine. She lamented Yemenites’ continuing belief in “the superstition of the evil eye,” fetishizing of “neighborly advice,” and “faith in magic cures.” If they would adopt western medical norms, childbirth would be easier, women would be healthier, and they would have a better and truer understanding of the world. And yet, Sampter was also charmed by their continuing faith in magic. In her novel, a Yemenite woman awed by snow: “‘Sugar! Salt from

\[\text{\textquoteleft Modern Palestine, 104.}\]
\[\text{\textquoteleft Sampter, “Oasis,” Menorah (April 1922): 87.}\]
heaven!’ she murmured. ‘God is sending us a sign!’”

Though Sampter wanted to westernize Yemenite care, she was far from the harshest critic. One Hadassah nurse wrote of “the rubbish of medievalism that still prevails in Eastern countries” and another derided “superstitious and foolish customs.” Nutrition, including eating vegetables, was unknown to many, Hadassah materials complained. While Sampter tempered her language, she too thought that Yemenite communities needed to abandon their health-related customs in favor of Western medicine.

The third key need for uplift, however, demonstrated that integrating Yemenites into a Zionist society was not only a job for the Yemenites themselves. Sampter also took Ashkenazi Jews to task for exploiting Yemenite labor. Modern Palestine’s “Social Justice in the Jewish State” chapter explained this gently to its American audience: “The problem of the Yemenite or Arabian Jews, whose standard of living approaches that of the native Arabs, and who are therefore contented to accept wages which are nowhere near a living wage for the Russian Jewish workman.” In the next edition she would put this more bluntly: “Yemenite Jews were workers from the beginning, but they were exploited, receiving little more pay than the Arabs and less than the Ashkenazic Jew.” If Zionism wanted a democratic and collectivist society, Sampter averred, it was going to need to do better with respect to the economic treatment of Yemenites.

Thus, even though she trafficked in Orientalist stereotypes, she still saw Yemenites as an essential part of the Jewish community and as partners in Zionism. Sometimes she could even do

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66 In The Beginning, 171.
70 Sampter, Guide to Zionism, 133.
71 Sampter, Modern Palestine, 100.
both in the same breath. She wrote about the “tragic tenderness of Jewish eyes, the sensitive nostrils. Medieval as those of the older Sephardic and Ashkenazic immigration, and more primitive, there is yet something new and different in these Arabian Jews…The Yemenite definitely belongs to the New Settlement.” And in another article in the American Jewish Menorah journal: “For my part, this simple people with its Oriental folk ways attracts me strongly. I could gladly live in the Yemenite colony. And I have no doubt that the growing respect for labor and the power of labor will bring this people into its own and unify us in our own land.” Sampter’s Zionism included Yemenite Jews, though it suggested should still make certain cultural advancements. But her Zionism had less space for non-Jewish Arabs.

Exclusion from Democracy: Arabs

How could Jews and Arabs could live together? The question occupied Sampter from the earliest weeks in Palestine until her death. “I believe the burden of noblesse oblige lies upon us, and that we can solve this problem,” she wrote to Henrietta Szold about the “anti-Zionist Arab press” and its objection to Hebrew as the official language. Though her experience with the situation deepened throughout the years, that sentiment could fairly characterize her life-long stance: she thought that Jews and Arabs could and should live together as equals, but that Arab culture had not yet advanced to the level of Jewish culture, and so Jews would need to help them get there.

Before Zionists settled in Palestine, it was not “a neglected and deserted country.” It was

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JS to Henrietta Szold, Oct 13, 1919 CZA folder 41
not, as Mark Twain would have it, a “waste of limitless desolation.” Nor, as Zionist leader Theodor Herzl imagined in *Altneuland*, would Arabs celebrate Jewish arrival because of the cultural improvements it would bring. These myths resonated with many American Zionists, including a young Sampter who wrote “Forty years ago the will of the Jewish People broke into the barren waste of Palestine.” When she arrived in Palestine, however, she would feel quite differently.

Sampter’s Zionism centered on creating a Jewish society in Palestine. Though she wanted to upbuild the land as a Jew, she vehemently rejected the idea of a Jewish state. In an unpublished piece originally entitled “Nationalism,” and then changed to “Arab,” Sampter wrote about her hopes for the future of Palestine: “I want no special government; only that which is good for us all. I surely want no such anachronistic idol as a Jewish state, a racial state!” Nationalism could poison societies. World War I had proven that for the pacifist Sampter, and Palestine should not follow down a similar path. “I want the Arabs to drop their outworn romantic nationalism as I have dropped mine. I want Jews to drop theirs, and—with all westerners—their silly airs of superiority.” “Superior and inferior,” she wrote, “is merely my taste against yours.” For Sampter, the goals of Zionism were “to re-settle Palestine with Jews,” many of whom would work the land. And part of this resettlement was designed to help “make life for the Arabs and other inhabitants a richer, cleaner, more exciting experience.” Though she never expected Arab gratitude for Jewish settlement—she recognized that Zionists impinged on their lives and livelihoods—Sampter insisted that a good Jewish Zionist was a good neighbor.

Like her admiring gaze toward Yemenites, Sampter’s view of non-Jewish Arabs

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“Mark Twain, *Innocents Abroad* 606-607.


““Arab,” CZA, A219\1.”
combined aesthetic pleasure with cultural denigration: “the Arab peasant is wonderfully picturesque and attractive, and utterly ignorant, dirty, and uncivilized,” she wrote to her brother-in-law Edgar. “For his sake, too, we are needed. For we are kin. Jewish civilization and agriculture would be shared by him.” Her visit to Rehovot left her utterly charmed, in no small part because of the nearby Arab settlements. “The Arabs about here are very primitive, picturesque and friendly,” she wrote to her sister. Her letter described their work ethic, their crops, and their work in the village.

In her autobiography, she wrote candidly of this push and pull:

In my own land, in the land of Jew and Arab, I do not know the Arab. That is because I cannot speak his language. To me he is a structure, a moving, living statue, something which I hear and read and so form opinions. But his inwardness I cannot discover. I have an instinctive liking for the Arabs; Palestine without their folk beauty, their Bedouin tents, their wild, gypsy-like children, their free, vigorous barbaric men, their straight-backed light-stepping, gay-robed women, would lose half its charm. Without Arabs and camels, is east east? Their loud voices, their nasal monotonous songs, their pipings lure me. I try to picture the mind of a bare-footed, blue-robed young woman from an Arab village, filthy and wild, who carries a wide basket full of grapes on her head. She smiles and says ‘saida’ or even the Jewish greeting, ‘shalom’; her white teeth glisten. I know she cannot read or write. Who is her God?

In spite of her decades-long commitment to being a “seeker” and a “great adventurer” in terms of religion, Sampter knew little about the Islam of her neighbors. “Do you know or have you read any good books on Islam?” she wrote to Elvie in 1933. “Curiously, I know less about it, from the intellectual and spiritual side, than any of the other religions, and living in the midst of its influence, I ought to understand it more.” She later clarified: “About a book on Islam, I know the history, that is, the origins. What I don’t understand is the philosophy, the beliefs, the sects, the ideology. I want to get a sympathetic aspect of Islam, and I find all the presentations repellent.

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"JS to Edgar Wachenheim, Sr., Oct 30, 1919 folder 41.
"JS to EW, Apr 30, 1920
"Speaking Heart, 324-5
"JS to EW, Jan 3, 1933
and written from an unsympathetic point of view.” Sampter wanted to know about the religion of her Arab neighbors from a sympathetic point of view—and yet, in fifteen years of living in Palestine, this is the first that she brought it up with her sister, who was her usual source of books and magazines. Arabs were a central concern for her and other Zionists, and yet their lives remained opaque, a matter of sympathetic curiosity at best.

Sampter’s ideas about non-Jewish Arabs had much in common with her views of Yemenite Jews, though she found non-Jewish Arabs harder to understand. The similarities in her views about these two groups—a strong romanticism, accompanied by a sense that her own culture was nevertheless more advanced—shouldn’t surprise us since they are textbook Orientalism. And yet Sampter also saw them as quite different: Yemenite Jews, by virtue of their being Jewish, seemed both closer to her and more important to integrate into Zionist culture in Palestine.

If non-Jewish Arabs were “kin” and neighbors, but their ways were “uncivilized,” what should be their role in a democracy? “Democracy is a bold faith. It says: we deny that men may use each other as they use animals. There are no inferior races. … There are perhaps no inferior races but there are race in inferior conditions. We cannot deal with them as equals, though we must deal with them as an end in themselves.” A diluted Kantianism underpinned her commitment to treat Arabs as humans but not give them full civil rights. And yet she still recognized that non-Jewish Arabs could have a communal goal parallel to the Jewish goal: “Nationalism is the expression of freedom. Each wants it for himself. Why not for his neighbor?” Though she was not ready to give Arabs full participation in a democracy, she was

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" JS to EW, Mar 21, 1933
" Speaking Heart, 409
" Speaking Heart, 310
very much in favor of more paternalistic kinds of help: “Give the Arab work, sanitation and education. Then you can build a Jewish homeland here, and make a good neighbor.”

Some of this may have seem naïve to her Zionist readers when riots broke out in Jerusalem in 1920. The violence to a bloody toll on the Jewish community there, as Sampter reported: “old men and women, little boys, stabbed in the back beaten on the head… young men, dead and dying… an old woman with her ear cut off. A girl of fifteen violated…one hundred and seventy-five wounded Jews and a half-dozen dead.” The riots inspired some to double down on Jewish defense, and even secret paramilitary organizations, but Sampter held fast to her pacifism.

In fact, after the riots she demonstrated an unusual commitment to the Zionist project—by 1926, she was a citizen of Palestine under the British Mandate. And, unlike other American Zionists in the yishuv, she also gave up her US citizenship. “I ought to resign myself to all the consequences of Palestinian citizenship,” she wrote, in a rare moment of humor, when she was down to her last roll of fine American toilet paper. She gave up something else too, something more precious than toilet paper: her right to vote. Mandatory Palestine did not allow women to vote until shortly after she became a citizen.

In August 1929, non-Jewish Arabs killed 67 Jews in Hebron, in the culmination of a summer of violence and tensions. The formerly tranquil city, the centuries’ old home to Sephardi Jews and Arabs, erupted in bloodshed. A group of Arabs killed both Ashkenazi yeshiva students and long-time Sephardi residents. She was horrified about the violence, and saw it as her role to get whatever information she could past the British censors. “It is a sacred duty to use this opportunity of writing freely of the events of the last ten days in Palestine and sending my testimony with a personal messenger, an American citizen who is sailing. All mails are censored.

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" Speaking Heart, 409
JS to EW, Jan 2, 1930.
But indignation and horror and mental and emotional exhaustion are almost as great a barrier against words.”“ She blamed the British for allowing the Hebron massacre to happen, and, she thought, the world should know.

Though Sampter was shaken, she reiterated her commitment to society in Palestine to the exclusion of American citizenship.

The American citizens in Jewish Palestine sent a cable to Washington asking the Government to protect against the criminal negligence of the local administration which, among other horrors, is responsible for the piecemeal butchery --- to be precise --- of eight American boys, defenceless [sic] students in the Academy at Hebron. Although I contributed a word or two to the cable, I was not able to sign it because I am no longer an American citizen but a Palestinian. Never was I glad as now of this change of citizenship. I have a right to the protection of my own government in my own country and I do not want to ask for special privileges."

At first glance, these seems like an odd time to be glad that she was no longer an American citizen. Why take pleasure in a lack of support and safety? The answer lies in Sampter’s commitment to the collectivism of a Palestinian Jewish identity. If she were still a US citizen, then she would have an out; she would be a part of the Zionist settlement, but she would also be exceptional. She wanted full inclusion without exception. Sampter sought a Jewish society that would deal with its own problems in its own ways, rather than relying on other nations.

Sampter saw this particular problem as one of Arab, Jewish, and British making. She traced the violence back to a dispute about the Western Wall, during which she faulted non-Jewish Arabs for having an irrational religious commitment, but she also faulted Jews for dragging themselves into the issue on those same irrational terms: “How debasing for us to find ourselves involved in a ‘religious war’ on a superstitious issue that levels us with our still-medieval neighbors!”“ She also blamed Jews for their conduct at the Western Wall as one reason

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““Testimony,” 1.
““Testimony,” 2(?).
““Testimony,” 4.
for the buildup to the Hebron massacre: “There is an irenic connection as of unintended cause and effect between the procession of these radical youths on the streets of Jerusalem and the flesh and blood of these other orthodox youths in the streets of Hebron left to the mercy of stray dogs and cats.”

Yet the most blameworthy group, in Sampter’s view, was not the Arabs, but the British. “Not that one can compare this censure [of the Arabs] with what should be dealt to the playful British officials in Palestine who constitute our present government. Call us the canary-bird, not over-wise, and the Arabs the cat, only normally cruel. What of the boy whose pet was the bird and who after letting the cat into the cage is careful to grant them equal freedom”? After the 1920 Jerusalem riots, she had written about non-Jewish Arabs: “These people are not our foes.” The British and the effendi were the real perpetrators: “Our foe is the foe of humanity, imperialism, dirty politics, militarism, pulling the strings for the farce, the tragedy that has been enacted in Jerusalem. The Arab hoodlum is only the unconscious dummy.” More than just turning away, the British were almost orchestrating this violence, and that was unforgivable.

And yet, though she was unrelentingly critical of the British Mandatory forces, her own position also bordered on the colonial:

During these terrible days, there has been time for thought. I have completed my readjustment. But for striking individual exceptions in both groups, I see the Palestinian Arabs as in a lower stage of culture and civilization from that of the Jews, which makes it impossible for them at present to understand our conceptions of national or personal ethics. We must live with them, or rather side by side with them, and be careful to maintain our level despite the natural inclination of all things – not only water – to the lowest mean level… But part of that job and the last test of our ability is to deal with them in friendliness and mutual helpfulness, in honesty and in co-operation.

If the Arab objects to my diagnosis, he cannot improve it by murdering me or even by refuting me. There is only one answer he can give, and that may take time.

And as for our present answer to him, it can be only one, a three-fold one: More

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“Testimony,” 5.
Speaking Heart, 325, 339
Jewish immigrants, more Jewish land and more Jewish constructive and creative work for our country."

More immigrants on more land could surely sound like a colonial project. Was a Jewish colonization project necessarily colonialism? What if it created a Jewish society where Arabs lived? Sampter never quite confronted these questions head-on.

"Is Zionism anti-Arab?" Sampter asked herself in the 1920s. "I try to answer frankly. It is hard, for on that answer our life depends. Zionism may be anti-Arab; it need not be so. My Zionism is not anti-Arab. Nor is the Zionism professed by the Zionist Organization," she declared, perhaps with a willful naïveté. Sampter desperately wanted to have a society that was both democratic and Jewish, but she could never quite get beyond the unsatisfactory compromise of what historian Rafael Medoff calls “delayed democracy,” in which non-Jewish Arabs would be fully included in democracy only once they were sufficiently civilized—or sufficiently on board with the Zionist project.

After Rosh Hashanah, the Jewish new year, in 1931, Henrietta Szold wrote to Sampter: "May the new year bring enlightenment toward the solution of “the Arab problem, our problem. As the months go by I realize increasingly that we stand and fall with it. If we fail to solve it, we are lost, because we shall have denied our whole past and its aspirations; if we succeed we shall have vindicated the Zionist condition that Judaism is still an active, productive force of supernal value." Neither Szold nor Sampter ever solved “our” problem.

*Gender Ideals and Real Inequalities*

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"“Testimony,” 13.
" Speaking Heart, 325
" Medoff, *Zionists and the Arabs*
" Henrietta Szold to JS, Sept 20, 1931. CZA A219/39
In the summer of 2017, travelers leaving Ben Gurion, Israel’s major airport, passed an exhibit on the wall beside the electronic people movers shuttling people toward the gates. “120 Years of Zionism” celebrated the history of the Zionist movement seamlessly with the history of the state of Israel. It began: “The Zionist movement was one of the first national movements in history to give women the right to vote. Starting with the elections to the Zionist Congress in 1898, women enjoyed the equal right to vote and to be elected to public office. By comparison, women’s suffrage was introduced in England only in 1918, in the United States in 1920, and in France in 1944.” And later: “Since the first waves of immigration, women have been fully integrated into the activities and leadership of the Zionist enterprise. Female kindergarten and elementary school teachers and educators played a central role in reviving the Hebrew language,” it explained in Hebrew and English. “Women served alongside men in the early security and defense forces, Hashomer, Haganah, Palmach, Irgun, and Lechi,” it claimed. “This story of women’s equality is a popular one—and for good reason. It fits contemporary ideas about the proper political place of women as citizens, voters, and leaders. It is a story that, if true, a country would want to celebrate. But there is a problem: it’s not really a true story. Women Zionist pioneers certainly did work the land, and many men and women wanted gender equality in politics, economics, and family life in the new society they were building. But the fact of the matter is that they didn’t achieve it. Women could not vote at the First Zionist Congress in 1897, and at the second congress, they were seated at a special “women’s caucus” held before the Congress itself.” Only a handful of women attended the early

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“Also in Haaretz and scholarly histories. See, for example: David B. Green, “This Day in Jewish History: 1897: The First Zionist Council Convenes,” Aug 29, 2016. Available at: http://www.haaretz.com/jewish/this-day-in-jewish-history/.premium-1.739074

Zionist congresses, and even fewer ever spoke. (When I did an internet search for the terms “women” and “Zionist Congress,” several of the first hits appeared with the appropriate addendum: “Missing: women.”) During the First Aliyah, the name for the wave of Zionist immigration from 1882 to 1903, women could not participate in local governing councils or administrative bodies in moshavot. Women also could not vote in Palestine until 1926, when the Union of Hebrew Women along with many individual women finally won their decade-long fight for women’s suffrage. And though women were crucial in the revival of the Hebrew language, to suggest, as the exhibit does, that “kindergarten and elementary school teachers” are positions of political leadership and power is a profound misreading. These women in the educational field played essential roles, but they did not see themselves as part of the “leadership of the Zionist enterprise.” Nor were they seen in that way by either the Zionist leaders or the larger Jewish culture in Palestine. As one historian writes, “discrimination against women in public life has been a component of Israeli identity from the start.”

And military ones too: defense organizations routinely excluded from participating in some of the ways men participated. The Haganah, the underground Jewish defense force officially included women only beginning in 1925, and the Tel Aviv branch tended to allow only one woman per platoon of men, though women worked with it from its inception in 1920. When she remembered recruitment for the Jewish battalions of World War I, Rachel Janaitth wrote: “For the men there was the front—and for the women, again, disappointment. There were hundreds of women who reported for duty with the [Jewish] Legion, just like men. Of course, they were not taken. That rebuff left us flat and wearied; we were not to participate in that great

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102 Lisa Fishbayn Joffe, forward to Margalit Shilo, Girls of Liberty: The Struggle for Suffrage in Mandatory Palestine (Waltham, MA: Brandeis University Press, 2016), x
Women had to fight for inclusion in economic spheres as well as political ones. “I went to the employment bureau of the colony to look for work. I was told that there were only three colonists who were prepared to take women workers, and none of them had a special place for me,” wrote Techiah Liberson of her experience in the first decade of the 1900s. When she explained that she didn’t want “ladies’ work” and she had come because she had heard workers were needed, Judith Edelman was told: “I don’t know. The colonists don’t want girls.” Rebecca Danith remembered, “It was with the utmost difficulty that I, a woman, could persuade the comrades to take me along [on a contract road work job for which she had been hired]. There were all sorts of objections. The work was too much for a girl; it wasn’t nice for a Jewish girl to be working on the open road. There was even one comrade who believed that it would be a national crime!” Miriam Schlimowitz remembered of her time in a kevutzah in the Galilee: “I was bitterly disappointed when I perceived how small the role was which the woman played, how weak their influence on the common system.” Married women joined the Federation of Labor as the “wife of Comrade So-and-So,” rather than as primary members. Women’s fight for recognition and inclusion in work was about more than symbolism or idealism; it was about livelihood too. This aspect of the issue was highlighted when, in the midst of the economic crisis during World War I, the unemployed Miriam Greenfeld killed herself.

All these women lived in Palestine at the same time as Jessie Sampter. They recalled their experiences, and they described a burgeoning culture that Sampter was a part of too. Especially

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those who were involved in communal living or working – these people in particular tended to be more likely to have aspirations for gender equality. Although lots of these people wanted their new culture to be equal for both sexes, their good intentions and lofty ideals did not always translate into reality.

Sampter held high hopes for the promise of a new society in Palestine especially the communal living on kibbutzim and kvutzot. In 1925, Sampter wrote for the Jewish National Fund a small book designed as propaganda for children (They even used the word “propaganda” when they pitched the project to Sampter and in many internal communications.\textsuperscript{110} The Key promoted the Jewish National Fund as it told a didactic story of the unjust social inequality among Ashkenazi colonists and Yemenite Jews and the excellence of kibbutz society. One Ashkenazi boy explained his kibbutz life:

‘We have to help at home with the cows and chickens—I always milk the cows—and of course we have a school garden and in vacation time we work with the grown folks in the field. Even the kindergarten teacher goes out with the little children to show them how to work. You should see my little brother Simon, who is only four years old, handle a hoe. There is nothing soft about us.’ Akiba did not look soft. Though only thirteen years old, he was almost as tall as Dad, he had strong muscles, his blond hair and his bare legs—for he wore breeches almost up to his thighs and sandals without stockings—were sunburnt the color of his khaki suit.\textsuperscript{111}

When she told this story for American Jewish children, the kibbutz was a place of strong muscles, health, and working the land. Idealism also characterized her writing for adults. The kibbutz was to bring “the ambitions of the communal settlements in Palestine—a new life and a nobler life,” she and her co-author and fellow kibbutznik Dorothy Ruth Kahn wrote in their volume about Kibbutz Givat Brenner.\textsuperscript{112}

\textsuperscript{110} See, for example, “Propaganda Among Children” (nd) and “Children’s Propaganda” (Feb 27, 1925) CZA KKL51132.
\textsuperscript{111} Jessie Sampter, \textit{The Key} (Jerusalem: Azriel Press, 1925), 16.
\textsuperscript{112} Jessie Sampter and Dorothy Ruth Kahn, \textit{Collective} (unpublished book manuscript), 1. CZA 219 folder 17
The kibbutz had 280 adult members, 50 children, 30 cows, and hundreds of chickens when she and Leah joined. Tamar spent much of her time away at school, but she also joined the community. Sampter and Berlin had decided together that they would like to live the rest of their lives on the kibbutz. Sampter pledged her money (apart from a small sum for Tamar’s schooling and other needs) to build a vegetarian rest home for workers who were ill, disabled, or otherwise needed a rest. Living on the kibbutz brought Sampter back to her earlier experiments in collective living: “It reminds me of my settlement and YMHA days,” she wrote to her sister fondly. But life on the kibbutz was even better than those past communalist experiments because of the integration of body and soul at the heart of the kibbutz enterprise, she thought. “Everyone works. One could not live and not work; it would be a spiritual impossibility.”

She wrote to her sister shortly after she and Leah had finally been able to move onto the kibbutz. “Yes, all work is done without remuneration. All pay to individual workers goes to the common fund. Leah just got a pair of sandals which cost her a walk to our shoemaker’s, behind the dining hall.” Sampter was very much in favor of a communalist project, though she recognized that the real did not always fully match the ideal.

Life here is very free, and there is a great deal of personal consideration. Each is treated according to his needs. In that sense, there is not equality because needs, health, and strength differ. The ideal which guides us is, as far as possible, to give to each according to his needs an get from each whatever he can give. As you say, it does not always work out so well. Still I should decidedly call this experiment a great success, not in relation to the ideal, but in comparison with life in other places.

As Sampter suggested, reality was more complicated than some utopic communalist vision. Yes, they were communal, and so cooperation and helping others were central to their ethic. But despite their aim at “a nobler life,” they could not escape the reality of conflict. Givat Brenner
itself was founded in 1928 and named after the writer Yosef Haim Brenner, who was killed in May 1921 in the Jaffa riots. So in this sense, even the name of the communalist kibbutz evoked a history of conflict, violence, and land disputes.

Even the ideal of collectivism was not entirely inclusive. Jessie was both of the kibbutz and not of it. Sampter’s primary contributions were monetary and literary. She founded the rest home for workers, and she wrote for the kibbutz newsletter while others worked with their hands. For example, one day in 1934, Leah bought materials for couch cushions in Tel Aviv, and she sewed them the next day.117 During these two days, Sampter was quite weak and unable to do much apart from a small amount of typing. These days were not atypical, and Sampter never manually labored on the kibbutz. Ruth Kahn wrote after Sampter’s death: “Jesse never knew kibbutz life in its entirety, in its simple reality. She was not really familiar with that hard life movement which turns quite a few among us into cogs in the machine.”118 In addition to signaling Sampter’s partial exclusion from the heart of the kibbutz, she also suggested that the collectivist producer ethic was not all it was cracked up to be. Like capitalism, it too could make people feel reduced to their ability to work.

And, as Sampter wrote about in a widely translated article (including Hungarian!), gender equality was not yet a reality. “Married Women in Kvutzot” explained: “Women, for lack of training, are still weak on the public and administrative side; and in the completely democratic government of the kvutzah, where the town meeting is the responsible body, women are not yet taking their share of public work.”119 She also expressed her displeasure when women had to cook instead of work the fields: “It's a pity/ The girls who cook had learnt no skill abroad/ Hard

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117 JS to EW, July 6, 1934
119 Sampter, “Married Women in Kevutzot” CZA 219\1.
to cook in huge cauldrons for a hundred/ With nothing good to choose from, and a longing/ To plow and plant the earth.”” During the Arab Revolt in 1936, she wrote: “Shall half the community protect the other half? Shall half lie on the floor while the other half is facing shots? What will our children say? What will our daughters say when they grow up and are differentiated from the little boys with whom they now share everything?” In “Married Women in Kevutzot,” she also lamented that fewer women than men entered leadership positions, and that women often voted for men rather than other women during these elections. Yet she was hopeful for the future: “The younger the group, the more active the women are in public affairs,” and so the next generation would do better. A kibbutz was a place where traditional gender roles should not be followed, Sampter insisted, but it would sometimes be a struggle to live up to those norms.

**Conclusion: Reflection**

This chapter raises a question for me: how do we choose the people we write about? Should it be that we write about good people? Interesting people? What happens when we write about sympathetic people with some unethical commitments? And how does the present matter to the past?

We come to know our subjects intimately. I know Jessie Sampter—her family, her politics, her religious ideas, her aches and pains. I followed her garden. When she planted portulaca, I remembered my grandmother’s portulaca, as I do every year I plant my own. I thought about her nasturtiums, and how she wondered with her sister if the nasturtiums in

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* Jessie Sampter, “Holy Days in the Holy City,” CZA, A219 1
* “Married Women in Kevutzot,” 3.
Palestine were different from those in the US. When mine looked awful, I wondered if the ones from Palestine were more drought tolerant. I sympathized when she felt like the work in the garden was never done.

But her gardening was also different from mine. Though she had always loved plants, in Palestine her gardening took on a new meaning. She gardened as part of a project to build nation, “to make the desert bloom,” as a popular Zionist slogan would have it. My backyard will never be a political project the way her garden was.

Jewish nationalists wanted their own land and their own right of self-determination. Palestine was their ancestral land according to religious texts. And in 1917, Britain “gave” it to them via the Balfour Declaration. A Zionist victory.

Except herein lies part of the complication: the desert was not deserted before Sampter or even the earliest wave of Zionist immigrants got there. Though small Jewish communities also lived there throughout history, before the Zionist immigration movements of the late nineteenth century, the majority of the inhabitants of the land were non-Jewish Arabs. Some of them were nomadic, so they didn’t have the same relationship to land ownership that arriving Zionists did, but much of the land of Palestine was their land.

This, alongside certain British governing styles and policies, set the stage for conflict between Jews and Arabs in Palestine. Sampter herself often defended “the Arabs.” I’ve recently heard her described as a binationalist. I think there are valuable aspects of her Zionism that are worth considering, even though (or especially because) they are roads not taken. But she also readily trafficked in Orientalist stereotypes, and she wanted a homeland for Jews even if it cost Arab communities.

This, then, is not merely a recovery project or an endorsement that Sampter got Zionism
right. It is the tale of a fascinating and flawed life, a life marked by seeming contradiction, and for all these reasons, a life worth our consideration.