

SARAH IMHOFF: THE UNEXPECTED ZIONIST

(Begin audio)

[music]

Joshua Holo: Welcome to the College Commons Podcast and our Acclaimed Author Series, a partnership between HUC Connect, the online learning platform of the Hebrew Union College, and the Jewish Book Council, featuring conversations with authors recognized by the National Jewish Book Awards. My name is Joshua Holo, your host.

[music]

JH: Welcome to this episode of the College Commons Podcast, and our conversation with Professor Sarah Imhoff. Sarah Imhoff is Jay and Jeanie Schottenstein Chair in Jewish Studies, and professor in the Department of Religious Studies in the Borns Jewish Studies Program at Indiana University. She's also founding co-editor of the Journal of American Religion. She authored *Masculinity and the Making of American Judaism* in 2017 and *The Lives of Jessie Sampter: Queer, Disabled, Zionist*, which won a National Jewish Book Award in 2022. Sarah Imhoff, welcome to the College Commons Podcast and thank you for joining us.

Sarah Imhoff: Thank you so much, Josh. It's a pleasure to be here.

JH: The premise of your book is that early 20th-century Zionist thinker and author Jessie Sampter seems to represent contradictions between her personal condition and the ideology that she not only espoused but also promoted. Before we get into those contradictions or tensions, give us the skinny on who Jessie Sampter was.

SI: She was born in 1889 to acculturated German Jewish New Yorkers, and she had a sister, and their family growing up was actually part of the Ethical Culture Movement rather than a more traditional Jewish community. And while her sister stayed part of the Ethical Culture Movement, Jessie Sampter went on to think about a lot of different religious ideas and communities. She came to Zionism as a young adult, befriended Henrietta Szold, and interestingly through Zionism came to Judaism. In 1919 she moved to Palestine. She had a year-long contract writing Zionist materials for people back in the United States but ultimately stayed in Palestine. In 1934, she and her friend who she had lived with most of the time she had

been in Palestine, made the move to Kibbutz Givat Brenner, and she lived there for the rest of her life. She died in 1938.

JH: Let's get into those contradictions that really constitute the heart of your book. What are some of the primary ones in Sampter's life and personality that particularly drew your attention?

SI: A couple of them are a little surprising but not quite contradictions, like the kind of family she came from is not the kind of family we imagine was a Zionist hotbed. We associate Zionists in the US often with Eastern European immigrants, with socialism, and less so with very educated English-speaking fairly well-to-do families. But there were also things in her life that were more than just a little surprising and actually seemed to me like they might be contradictions. For example, she had polio as a child, and so when she was 12 and 13, her life changed. She had been labeled as a sickly child before that, but after that, she had lasting effects on her back, on her hands. And I think given what I know about her, that it's fair to say she struggled with post-polio syndrome for the rest of her life. She reported a lot of weakness and pain and inability to do kind of extended physical things or very difficult physical things.

SI: The other piece that I think has some significant tension with the ideals of Zionism is that she did not marry a man and have Jewish children. We know the pronatalist Zionism takes off a little bit later, but we can even see it in this time period. Instead, she has a relationship with a woman named Leah Berlin. I don't know that this was a sexual relationship, but I think it's very fair to call it a kinship relationship. The two of them lived together, knew each other's families. Sampter also adopted a Yemenite toddler who had been in an orphanage, Tamar Sampter, and Tamar was three when Jessie adopted her, and Leah also functioned as another kind of parent figure. We can also even see some of that tension when Leah and Jessie are interested in joining Givat Brenner.

SI: The Kibbutz members are a little bit hesitant. They say, "What are we gonna do with these older ladies? What are we gonna do with these?" And it's implied this at least one woman who can't physically pull her weight as we might expect on a Kibbutz. And that really signals that piece of Zionism that valorizes the strong body, the able body, the idea that the land of Palestine is a place that's going to regenerate Jews physically. And of course, that was not gonna happen for Sampter. And yet she fell in love with Zionism and wanted others to fall in love with it too.

JH: So let's drill down a little bit on this physical aspect of Zionism, its really ideological emphasis on physical and bodily strength. It's an emphasis that feels a bit, I think, foreign to many of us today certainly in the Zionist lexicon. You don't hear it on a day-to-day basis. Help us understand how important that aspect of Zionism was in the early 20th century so that we can understand the importance of Sampter's self-understanding as disabled or somehow limited in relation to it.

SI: I think you're right that it's easy for us today to say, "Well, this isn't a part of the Zionism that we see around us," or if it is, it's a small part and we can say, "Oh yes, we see it in Israeli soldiers," for example. But lots of American Jews can make Aliyah and nobody bats an eye at somebody who's 70-years-old who says, "I want to go." But if we were in the late 19th or early

20th century, that wouldn't be the case. There is the ideological frame that there's something emasculating about diaspora. So living apart from the land has made Jews puny. And I say "emasculating" intentionally. A lot of this rhetoric is focused on men even when it doesn't say it is. The idea is that living away from the land has made Jews weak in their bodies, and maybe they've lost the desire to be strong. So there's the idea that Zionism might make Jews both politically strong and physically strong.

SI: We also can see some of this rhetoric in some of the practical aspects of Jewish culture as it's growing in Mandate Palestine. We can see some people who are espousing something like eugenics, and some of them do espouse eugenics and suggest that there isn't really a place for Jews we would consider disabled. A lot of Zionists hope that a really robust Zionism would do away with disability entirely. And that's quite different from a woman who has polio and can't walk long distances, let alone plow the field or make the desert bloom. And I think we can see it in other ways too that she's really attuned to that. She sometimes feels inadequate and that she can't contribute to the Zionist 'cause the way that she would like. But she also notes the way other people we might think of as disabled should belong in the Zionist movement. She's very interested in making sure that deaf children are educated and can become real members of the Jewish society that's growing in Palestine.

JH: The contradictions or the tensions that you enumerate include religious ones, not just coming up in a relatively cultured context, but also her Jewish identity in the context of her personality as a seeker. You call that development in her personality "religious recombination." Tell us what you mean by religious recombination and how it played out in her life, but also in her relationships with some really major figures who were similarly religiously recombinant, I guess. [chuckle]

SI: Yeah. So I struggled with what to call this because I think when we in our contemporary world say someone is a seeker, there's a little bit of a sneer when we say it, right? We're a little bit like, "Well, that person, they're a little woo-woo, or they're like one religion today and another religion tomorrow. They're not very serious." And that's not a way to describe Sampter. Even before she fully came to Judaism, she was very interested in reading a variety of religious texts, and thought that they contained wisdom even when she didn't necessarily think that any of them was perfectly divine or something like that.

SI: So in this way, she's not unlike some of the American Transcendentalists who are interested in Hinduism. And in fact, she becomes interested in some kinds of Hinduism too. Later in her life, she translates some of the work of Jiddu Krishnamurti into Hebrew, for example. In her early life, one of the first books she publishes is called *The Seekers*, and it's actually an account of six teenagers, and she's instructing them. They're reading together some religious texts. They're learning from one another and they think about big questions. And when that book gets published, the philosopher Josiah Royce writes the introduction to it. And really throughout her life, she continues this. At one point, she writes to her sister and she's writing about the conflict between Jews and non-Jewish Arabs. And she says, "You know, I don't have a copy of the Quran. I haven't read it very well. Can you send it to me?" It's very typical of her. She's interested in other religions.

SI: That's not really likely for most Zionists. Most Zionists think, you're Jewish or you're not Jewish. And if you're Jewish, you should read Jewish texts. And if you're not Jewish, go head and do whatever you'd like to do. But it's not very common in Zionist circles to say like, "Yeah, we should also read the New Testament, and we should think about what it means that Christian Science is a growing movement," and those are things that she thinks about. So she's not a typical Zionist in that way either.

[music]

JH: The College Commons Podcast belongs to HUC Connect, the online platform for continuing education from the Hebrew Union College. HUC Connect includes webinars, syllabi for community learning, and masterclasses for HUC alumni, with interviews, expert panels and classroom materials on topics ranging from the arts to civil society, Israel, and much more. Check us out at huc.edu/hucconnect. Now, back to our interview.

[music]

JH: Zooming out a little bit, talking about contradictions as part of the human experience. In your introduction, you wonder if such contradictions as these illumine what you call an invisible aspect of the human condition that our embodied selves do not always neatly line up with our religious or political ideals. Since you open up the door for these grand thoughts on the human condition and our internal contradictions, I wonder, do you walk away from this book feeling kind of like Walt Whitman who famously wrote of internal contradiction, "I am large, I contain multitudes?" Meaning, do you walk away from this book feeling that our internal contradictions simply constitute our complexity? Or alternatively, do you walk away from this book feeling that individual contradictions themselves bear specific meaning and communicate specific items of the human condition?

SI: I certainly think for Sampter it's the second one. It's not merely, "I think Jiddu Krishnamurti has wise things to say, and I'm a Zionist and I sometimes can't finish pruning my plants, and I believe in the upbuilding of a seed in Palestine." She thinks about those tensions and they are a spur for her to decide what's really important, what's really meaningful. That's not to say that she notices every time there's a contradiction or every time there's a tension, but I think for her that those tensions aren't just containing multitudes. It's how those multitudes interact with one another. I think that leading that kind of examined life is more like a choice and a practice, and so maybe many of us don't do so much of that.

SI: So I'm not sure that it's a requirement that those tensions become constituting parts of who we are. Because sometimes it's possible and perfectly reasonable to say, "You know what? I'm really just not gonna explore that tension right now," or, "I'm gonna be this person with my kids and I'm gonna be this person at work, and I'm not gonna worry about how those things might have friction between them. I'm gonna vote this way and advocate for this cause, but I'm not always gonna sit with the difficulty that that might cause." And I say that without judgment. I think there's space for both of those kinds of lives, but I think it would be a very uncommon life

that had no tensions between religious and political ideologies and the way an embodied life is lived.

JH: In an interview with Sacred Matters Magazine about your previous book, you made a very trenchant point that I'd like to plumb a bit. You write, "I tried not to define religion at all. I was more interested in the unexpected places that people talked about religion." Do you think that the power of religion in today's world lies precisely in the places it inhabits but does not explicitly preside? And can we pigeonhole and bracket explicitly religious expression in the house of worship and thereby set it aside a little bit while we're actually more subject to its tacit or implied influence in our everyday lives outside of church, synagogue, and mosque?

SI: I think it's a mistake to imagine that religion is what happens in houses of worship, or what happens when groups write amicus briefs to the Supreme Court. Of course it is those things, but I don't think that those things shape our lives nearly as significantly as all of the other ambient stuff, all of the other places that we see it and do it in our lives, and also the ways we don't even see it but are interacting with it all the time.

SI: I just read something that was really an interesting scholarly piece, and this piece referred to secular Jewish masculinity, and yet the piece still evoked Talmudic study and the ways that that shaped men. And I thought, "You know, I'm not sure that for my money, there is any fully secular Jewish masculinity." I think Jewish masculinity, even for Jews who wouldn't be caught dead in shul, has to do with religion. And I think as a scholar and as a scholar of religion, that I see the world better when I don't go into something imagining that I know where religion is gonna be and where it's not gonna be, because it does show up in surprising places if we're open to thinking about it.

SI: The other thing that I want to push against as a scholar is the impetus to suggest that when people evoke religion, it's just a strategy. People often imagine, "Oh, this is just a political strategy to get some other end. They can't really believe that thing. They can't really be a part of that community that does those things." And I think that usually we're going to miss out on part of what's happening, even if it does seem surprising. "I can't believe people would advocate for that. They must just be using religion as an excuse." I would always encourage us to keep looking because I think it's relatively rare that religion is actually just an excuse.

SI: It might be one strategy among many like, "I am a Christian or whatever who believes these things, and so I will claim my Christianity when I make this statement." But then that's also just back into our earlier point, that religion can be a powerful force especially in US culture, and it can be one way to make, say, for example, political claims; to claim them as religious claims whereas that can still be true alongside other motivations. So yes, I do think religion is in a lot of spaces and unexpected ones, and we do our best learning when we try not to decide in advance where we're going to see it and where not.

JH: And when we at least presumptively give the benefit of the doubt that people speak of religion from sincerity, it keeps the door open to actually speak to them instead of just speaking about them, which is probably something we need more of I think in the world today, I suspect.

SI: Yes, I would agree.

JH: Interestingly and really thoughtfully and in a very spelled out explicit fashion, you make a point of bringing yourself into this biography as a point of reference and as an explicit self-aware interpreter of Sampter. What single thing did you most identify with in her personality or her life?

SI: Fascinating. I think gardening. I have a garden at home. I grow a few vegetables, a bunch of flowers, and other plants. The way that she writes about plants, and the frustration when things don't quite go right but the genuine joy in watching something grow and tending to it, and not feeling like you are the author of that thing or the cause for that thing, but that your care has been what makes it become what it is, to flower or to grow or to look beautiful. I found myself quite taken by that idea. And especially for someone who has to choose carefully about how her physical energy will be expended, she often chose gardening and I think I can relate to that.

JH: Is it possible that it was also for her, a kind of microcosm of the Zionist impulse to agriculture, and since she couldn't be an agri-coltore in a mass way, she could nevertheless grow food?

SI: Yeah, I think that's exactly it. It's the, "Well, if I can't make the desert bloom by hoeing and planting, I can at least make this little corner of it bloom."

JH: Well, Sarah Imhoff, thank you so much for taking the time to discuss your new book with congratulations on your recognition, and it was a real pleasure to spend some time with you.

SI: Thank you so much, Josh. It's been great to talk to you.

[music]

JH: We hope you've enjoyed this episode of the College Commons Podcast, available wherever you listen to your podcasts. And check out HUC Connect, compelling conversations at the forefront of Jewish learning. For more information about all that HUC Connect has to offer, visit huc.edu/hucconnect.

[music]

(End of audio)