My curiosity about the kinds of questions we can ask of Zionism’s “New Woman” led me to a 1930s series of three Hebrew motherhood guides published in the yishuv (the Jewish community of British Mandate Palestine). I came across these motherhood guides quite by accident, because they are almost completely ignored in the scholarly record—which is rather strange, given that in their time, these guides were widely available and highly praised in the Jewish press. A reviewer in the Hebrew periodical Ofakim (April 1934), holding one of the books in his hands, called it “the most beautiful book ever to be published in the yishuv.” These were indeed substantial books: the first in the series was 275 pages (1933–1934), the second 250 pages (1934–1935), and the third, 150 (1935–1936). The editors, Yosef Meir and Yisrael Rivkai, wrote in the series introduction that the books were designed to be revolutionary in both form and content.

The books highlight two interwoven phenomena in the yishuv of the 1930s: the spectacular growth of the field of sexual health with the immigration of doctors from Central Europe to Palestine, and the recognition on the part of mainstream Zionist leaders in the wake of the 1929 Palestine Arab Riots that they had hit a tipping point with the “Arab Question.” It was time to look closely at realities on the ground, now that hopes for coexistence had dimmed. Although these three motherhood guides rarely feature overt discussion of the Arab Question, we can see how it contoured local Jewish public health campaigns. Women’s bodies were a kind of screen upon which the formative stages of what became the Arab-Israeli conflict played out.

These motherhood guides were published by the central Jewish workers’ organization of Palestine, known as the Histadrut (created in 1920), and its health system, the Kupat Holim. The co-editors of the series were two leading
In the early 20th century, and particularly in the interwar period, “scientific motherhood” enjoyed a worldwide boom. In mass campaigns, through newspapers, books, and traveling health exhibits, health professionals educated women about hygiene, encouraging them to raise babies under the authority of the modern medical system. By the end of the 1930s, the call to teach children the rules of hygiene had clearly become, so to speak, a new sh’má Yisrael, a new watchword of the yishuv.

What I find fascinating about these particular Histadrut motherhood guides is that the editors promote their health messages relying upon the literary and visual arts. Members of the Hebrew cultural elite of the 1930s were no strangers to the blossoming Hebrew hygiene discourse. In the three Histadrut motherhood guides, we find: 1) reprints of poems on motherhood and childhood by such famous writers as Hayim Nachman Bialik and Shaul Tshernichovsky; 2) Talmudic excerpts on everything from child-rearing methods to proper romance; 3) anecdotes about modern Jewish leaders in their youth; and 4) visual imagery ranging from ancient Greek and Renaissance masterpieces to modern Jewish paintings to photographs of Zionist children.

There are many ways to make our way through the pages of these guides. Sometimes we can discern an underlying logic connecting various elements on the page; at other times we can read against the text with the benefit of hindsight to extract unintended messages.

This sample page, top left, (from the second book in the series) is titled “Psychology of Mothers Among Us.” The text in these guides incorporates the vowels, to help newcomers to the Hebrew language read the words more easily. The Hebrew reader might have begun with the right-hand column, a folk poem by the Zionist poet Yehuda Karni (1884–1949), “A Woman’s Prayer in the Homeland,” featuring

men of the yishuv, the pedagogue Dr. Yisrael Rivkai, and the head of the Kupat Holim, Dr. Yosef Meir. As Jewish immigration patterns in Palestine shifted, the Histadrut began to pay more attention to the needs of mothers; in the 1930s, more women were immigrating to the yishuv than ever before, and more were urban housewives. The housewives formed the Organization of Working Mothers in 1934, a faction of the Histadrut women’s council that fairly quickly took over the council. It is in this environment that the Histadrut’s healthcare system published these motherhood guides.
a pregnant woman who feels very close to the Land of Israel.

The next stage — with the woman who has given birth becoming a mother — appears in the center of the page as an embodiment of the ideal mother-child bond. The image is the sculpture “Motherhood” by the Jewish artist Arnold Zadikow (1884–1943). Little could the publication’s editors know that Zadikow’s “Motherhood” would be destroyed by the Nazis in the early 1940s, and that the sculptor would perish in Theresienstadt.

The left-hand column of the page features the story of a mother whose child has grown older, an anecdote about one of the founding fathers of Hebrew socialism, Aharon Shmuel Lieberman (1845–1880). We learn that once, in his youth, Lieberman heard his mother lamenting that children grow up and leave the nest, abandoning family for distant locales. The boy Lieberman tells a joke that dismisses his mother’s concerns. To modern readers this joke sounds rather harsh, but in the context of a Zionist text, it lauds an ethos in which children separate from their mothers to accomplish great national goals, including aliyah. One must note that Lieberman, although an accomplished public Jewish figure, was neither a model father nor husband (an unacknowledged characteristic that plagues a number of the people featured in these guides). He ignored his own wife and child as he went about his work, and then fell in love with a married woman who ultimately rejected his overtures.

Finally, we reach the bottom of the page, and see data from a small survey of “working women” in the yishuv. The data, which continues onto the next page, shows that Jewish women are not sufficiently maximizing their fertility. They wait a number of years after marriage before having a child (if they have one at all), and if they have a second child, they wait again. Why the delays? According to the study, it is because women want to be active in public community matters. The message conveyed throughout these guides to mothers is: yes, family planning is laudable, but, the sacrifices you make as a mother are worthwhile, your nation needs you, you should strive to be an ideal mother, and staying home with your child is a form of Zionist socialist community activism.

Zionists knew that they were not going to win the “competition” of who would birth the most babies. In the early 1930s, Arabs made up approximately 80 percent of Palestine’s population, and Arab women’s birthrates in Palestine far exceeded those of Jews. Moreover, Jews did not really want to win the competition over family size. Birthing six, seven, eight children per family was not palatable to those who had been exposed to the notion that small families signified modern, Western hygiene. The key was not only to bring Zionist infant mortality rates down, but also to raise children who would be healthy in both mind and body.

These motherhood guides are a unique attempt to influence women’s pregnancy and childrearing decisions. What is fascinating beyond the particular political and historical context of these texts is that, by combining the resources of medicine, pedagogy, and the humanities, these guides were an early precursor to the kind of interdisciplinary work being done today to privilege the role of the arts in women’s health, early childhood education, and public health.