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SO THE TORAH IS A PARENTING GUIDE?

Enough with the overparenting. Wendy Mogel is a child psychologist who says the key to properly raised kids is Jewish law. And Jews aren't the only ones listening.

BY EMILY BAZELON

In the third century, the rabbis who put together the Talmud instructed fathers to teach their sons to swim. It's safe to say that most American Jews aren't familiar with this directive, whether or not they take their kids to the lake or the pool. But one morning this past summer, a group of mostly non-Jewish parents puzzled over its meaning in a classroom at the Car-

PHOTOGRAPHS BY CATHERINE LEDNER

It takes a Talmud: Wendy Mogel at Temple Israel of Hollywood.

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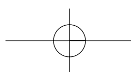

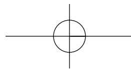

olina Day School, a nonsectarian private school in Asheville, N.C.

These mothers and fathers were accidental students of Judaism. They had come together because they often felt flattened by achieving the modern ideal of successful children. They were seeking relief in a weeklong course based on the book "The Blessing of a Skinned Knee: Using Jewish Teachings to Raise Self-Reliant Children," by a Los Angeles clinical psychologist named Wendy Mogel.

Genevieve Fortuna, a 58-year-old former preschool teacher who has been teaching classes on raising children for 30 years, wrote the Talmudic quote about swimming in blue marker on the classroom's white board. The half-dozen or so parents, dressed in summer-casual shorts and sandals, looked up at her from their seats around two child's-height tables. Fortuna opened her copy of Mogel's book. "Jewish wisdom holds that our children don't belong to us," she read. "They are both a loan and a gift from God, and the gift has strings attached. Our job is to raise our children to leave us. The children's job is to find their own path in life. If they stay carefully protected in the nest of the family, children will become weak and fearful or feel too comfortable to want to leave."

"This is the most difficult part for me," said Marie-Louise Murphy, a mother of three. "My husband is really protective of our girls. Even more so now that they're older, because it's such a critical period for them." Her 14-year-old daughter is eager to baby-sit, Murphy explained, but her husband "is having the hardest time with it."

Increasingly, not being involved in every aspect of a child's life and letting children take risks that used to be a matter of course feels like an act of negligence to many parents. To resist the forces of judgment, internal and external, the parents in Asheville were in search of what every countercultural movement needs — a manifesto. Wendy Mogel's book may seem an unlikely one, with its reliance not only on the Bible but also on the Talmud and other intricate rabbinic texts. Published in 2001 with a print run of 5,000 and little publicity, it went largely unreviewed, and bookstores often shelved it with their bar-mitzvah fare. Yet five years later, "Blessing" has sold about 120,000 copies at a pace of more than 20,000 a year. It's the kind of book that has influence beyond its sales figures. Principals press it into the hands of mothers, who read it and then buy it in bulk to give away as baby presents. If you have children of a certain age, chances are that someone you know will own a copy or have lent one away.

Strikingly, Mogel's book is being used as a text for classes and discussion groups that take place not in Jewish settings but in churches or schools like Carolina Day. Mogel, who gives about a speech a month, has been a keynote speaker at the annual meetings of the National Association of Independent Schools, which represents 1,300 private schools, and the American Camp Association, an umbrella group for 2,600 summer camps and youth groups. This fall, the National Association of Episcopal Schools will give her top billing. Mogel's diagnosis of the ills of middle- and upper-class modern American child-rearing — that children too often don't learn to take care of themselves — resonates with the educators who deal with these families every day. In thinking about this issue, Mogel finds her psychological training useful but insufficient and turns her audience's attention to the laws and teachings of old Jewish texts.

WENDY MOGEL WASN'T to the religious manner born. Her grandfather was the president of his Orthodox synagogue in Brighton Beach, N.Y. But her father fell away from strict observance, and her mother never knew it — "she was as close to a shiksa as he could get," Mogel says. Mogel was raised to know the difference between cherrystone and littleneck clams, not to follow the Jewish proscription against eating shellfish.

At Middlebury College in Vermont, Mogel majored in art history. She spent the summers as a counselor at a camp for emotionally disturbed children, working alongside her husband to be, Michael Tolkin. After marrying, the couple eventually moved to Los Angeles. Tolkin's father wrote for the TV series "All in the Family." Tolkin entered the family business; his best-known movie is "The Player," directed by Robert Altman and based on a novel Tolkin wrote. The sequel, published recently, bears the mark of spousal influence: it creates a world of Hollywood sharks let loose on the process of high-powered private-school admissions.

Mogel has lived in Hollywood for almost 30 years now, and she is of it without being captive to it. At 55, her style is part girlish, part granny. Her hair is unbleached and her skin un-Botoxed; on the night I visited her, she wore a white T-shirt, a pink flowered skirt and low-heeled green sandals. Her voice is commandingly deep and throaty, except when she's excited and lets out a thrilled squeal. ("Me too!" she squeaked when I confessed my poor sense of direction.) Mogel did her doctorate work at the Wright Institute in Los Angeles — "very alternative, Marxist-Feminist," she says — and interned at the "totally mainstream" Cedars-Sinai Medical Center.

Mogel got her license as a clinical psychologist in 1985. She opened a dual practice, doing therapy for children and families and also testing for disorders and disabilities, like dyslexia and attention-deficit disorder. For 15 years, the work was fulfilling. The hard part of Mogel's life lay elsewhere; she and Tolkin struggled for several years to have a child and went through many miscarriages, including the loss of a premature baby born on the way to the hospital. None of this hardship moved Mogel toward religion. When she was 35, Mogel gave birth to a girl, Susanna, and four years later, to a second daughter, Emma.

Mogel continued to practice after her daughters were born, and by 1990, she was seeing a disturbing shift among her clients. Mogel lives in a sumptuous house near Hollywood — the garden features a fountain, a pool and climbing roses — and the kids Mogel was treating came from similarly well-off homes. In the testing part of her practice, Mogel long dreaded telling parents of a diagnosis that could disrupt their high hopes for their children. Now, however, she noticed that many families seemed to want her to find something clinically wrong that could be fixed.

Much of the time, the children didn't have a pathology that she could name and treat. "But my child is suffering!" parents would say. And Mogel tended to agree. Anxiety pervaded her office. "Everyone — parents and children — seemed off course, unmoored and chronically unhappy," she writes in "The Blessing of a Skinned Knee." The kids weren't sick. But their family dynamic was. It wasn't just parents' outsize ambition for their children that was the problem — after all, for generations, children have faced high expectations. It was what parents with means did to protect their investment. Worried about their children's future in an increasingly competitive world, parents would expect everything at school — and then compensate for these inflexible demands by expecting almost nothing at home. The words "I have a test" automatically relieved children of any other obligation, Mogel says. Instead of being left to muddle through — and to learn from adversity and their failures — kids were whisked off to tutors and coaches and extra classes. Pressured in one sphere and pampered and overprotected the rest of the time, their lives were too difficult in one way and too easy in every other. As a result, they often didn't learn to solve problems on their own or gain the strength that comes with independence.

College counselors and deans see these kids so often, Mogel says, that they have come up with terms for them, "teacups" and "krispies": fragile and burned-out undergraduates who crumble once they're away from home. Other psychologists have joined her in charting this territory. Madeline Levine, whose clinical psychology practice is in Marin County, Calif., recommends Mogel's book to her clients and recently published her own

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book on the topic, "The Price of Privilege." She, too, saw many unhappy teenagers who said they felt bored, passive and empty. "Indulged, coddled, pressured and micromanaged on the outside, my young patients appeared to be inadvertently deprived of the opportunity to develop an inside," she writes in her book. "They lack the secure, reliable, welcoming internal structure that we call the 'self.'"

Mogel knew that to help her child clients, she needed to help their parents. But she felt as if her psychological training was failing her. She had been taught to refrain from making judgments, yet she felt increasingly judgmental. She went back into therapy herself. It didn't help. Instead, like the parents trooping into her office, she felt increasingly drained. At home, she wanted to make everything just right for her own daughters. She tore ragged pieces of lettuce off the corners of their sandwiches and woke in the night to fret over their school art projects: did the teacher who sent home a note asking for the cardboard tube from a paper towel roll expect her to make a pile of paper towels to get at the cylinder inside?

Then one night in 1990 on a lark, Mogel accepted a friend's invitation to go to a service for Rosh Hashanah, the Jewish New Year. She thought of the excursion as cultural anthropology: she'd had a good time with her daughter Susanna at an international mask and dance festival; "now we could see how these people, the Jews of West Los Angeles, celebrated their ancient holy day," she writes in "Skinned Knee." But Mogel listened to the prayers and found herself crying.

She went back a second time. Then she decided to go alone to a Friday-night service at a Reform synagogue near her house. By listening to a tape, she started learning the Hebrew prayers and their melodies. She and her husband began celebrating the Jewish Sabbath — first by stumbling through the candle-lighting and going out for Thai food (shrimp included) and gradually adding the full liturgy and a traditional meal. "It was always the same, which was what I loved about it," Susanna, now 19, remembers. Mogel baked challah. Tolkin made poached salmon. Every family member and guest said their "gratefuls," naming the events of the week they felt thankful for.

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The family never took the full leap into Orthodox Judaism, with its restrictions on food and travel on Shabbat and relatively fixed gender roles. But they sent their daughters to schools at Reform synagogues for a good part of elementary school and tried out different L.A. synagogues — from Reform to modern Orthodox to the exploratory Mountaintop Minyan. The rituals were soothing, but Mogel was most moved by Jewish learning. As she began to read the Torah and the Talmud, the massive compendium of rabbinic teachings on Jewish law and commentary on the Bible, she felt she was on the trail of the sort of wisdom she'd been missing.

In 1992, Mogel decided to take a break from her practice for a year and study the old Jewish texts full time. Her office partner was taken aback. So were her parents. But she proceeded even though Jewish study didn't come easily to her — she took basic Judaism and introductory Hebrew three times. Her studies helped to repair her frayed ends. "This is going to sound too pious, but I started thinking about my children in terms of a higher mission," she told me when I met her at her home in June. "I didn't need to be the mom who cut the ends off lettuce leaves. That is idol worship, and it's exactly what Judaism says you shouldn't do." She spent more time with Susanna and Emma and less time worrying about them. She stopped waking up to fret and plan in the middle of the night.

MOGEL MISSED THE regular contact with her clients and their troubles. But when she reopened her practice, she focused on teaching child-rearing classes and working with families rather than just doing traditional psychotherapy with children. And she started using Jewish teachings. "It wasn't that the Jewish texts had a brand new idea that psychology had never come up with," Mogel says. "But they came at it from a different angle." Like the concept of the *yetser hara*, the bad impulse within us that is a source of passion and an impetus to creativity, and the *yetser tov*, the good and proper impulse. "They're very different from the id and the ego and the superego. Psychology textbooks don't typically say that your child's worst trait is also the seed of his best traits."

In her book, which evolved out of a group for parents that she ran for three years out of her office, Mogel relates a Talmudic legend about men from a great synagogue who wanted to kill the wild yetser hara. They captured it and locked it up for three days. But during that time, not a single new egg hatched anywhere in the land. The men understood that the yetser hara was the source of procreation — without it, there could be no creative life force. So they let it go. The yetser hara is *tov me'od*, the rabbinic authors concluded — very good.

Most Orthodox Jewish child-rearing books that Mogel read prescribed devout Judaism as the single path to raising moral children. Mogel wanted to use Jewish teachings to "show you how to raise good people, not just good little Jews," as Genevieve Fortuna put it to her students. To the psychologist, the yetser hara is a way to think about the root of longing and a reminder that passionate desire isn't all bad. "Without it, there would be no marriage, no children conceived, no homes built, no businesses," Mogel writes. So children shouldn't be blamed for their desires. But that doesn't mean they should be placated either, a phenomenon Mogel heard about frequently from parents. The wildness of the yetser hara can't be stamped out, and shouldn't be. But it doesn't get to run the show.

There is also the good impulse of the yetser tov to be cultivated, which means teaching a child to hold herself in check. "As her parent I accept my dual responsibilities: one is to respect her zeal, her yetser hara, and the other is to help her develop a strong yetser tov," Mogel writes. "So I will say a calm and emphatic no to the Beanie Babies and the moon bounce, but I will not criticize her for desiring them, for that is her right." Fortuna read that passage to her parents, and they talked about how to expect generosity from children — like giving away old toys — without blaming them for resisting.

Within Judaism, applying concepts in a time and a place removed from their original context is a respected method. "There is a longstanding tradition of interpreting Talmudic texts not only literally but as symbols for larger constructs or life lessons," says Rabbi Jacob J. Schacter, a professor of Jewish history and thought at Yeshiva University. "The connection she's making is homiletic. It's what rabbis do when they give sermons."

Another way that Mogel uses the Jewish texts in her thinking about child-rearing is to embrace the importance of action as opposed to pure faith — what she calls "deed over creed." In Jewish law, there are hundreds of mitzvahs, or sacred deeds, that Jews have been traditionally encouraged to do, ranging from not taking revenge to saying grace after meals. They are to be performed whether or not one feels moved to. "The hope is that you will have *kavanah*, or deliberate intent, when you do these mitzvahs,"

explains Elazar Muskin, rabbi of the Orthodox Los Angeles congregation Young Israel of Century City. "But at the end of the day, the rabbis say that if a person does the act, then there was some kind of intent. And over time, we hope the kavanah will follow."

Mogel points out that cognitive behavioral therapy shares the same premise: Changed behavior can lead to changed feelings. (Christianity also teaches believers to perform good works but emphasizes the transformative power of faith in Jesus Christ as a means to salvation.) Based on this principle, Mogel urges parents to press children to contribute at home even if they whine and resist. And she discourages long rational-minded explanations about why a child can't have something she covets. "Don't bother talking to the yetser hara," she instructs; instead, be clear about what your kids are entitled to and stick to it. From rules, kids learn their roles in the household, and from chores they learn practical skills — when they go off to college they will know how to do their laundry. And if your children know that their behavior at home matters, they have an opportunity to feel good about themselves that's not tied to academic success.

In her work, Mogel often sees children and teenagers who are petulant and awkward — young people who refuse to extend the simple courtesy of a greeting, or who feel too uncomfortable to respond to adults' well-meaning questions. As a template for reasonable expectations, she looks to the Talmud's instructions on social obligations. The rabbis came up with detailed guidelines for *derekh erets*, a phrase that means "way of the land" and basically describes an ancient version of etiquette. It includes the mitzvah *hakhnasat orkheem*, or hospitality. People receiving guests at their homes should greet them at the door and escort them inside; be cheerful during the visit; offer food and drink; ask the guests about themselves; and escort them to the door when they leave. Mogel urges that teaching children accordingly counters a "culture of narcissism," as she puts it, in which children are encouraged to express their feelings even when the result is a show of bad manners. "The Talmud says the mitzvah of hospitality is as important as Torah study and a way to honor God. That's because all of this trains us in the habit of thinking about other people's feelings," Mogel says. "The rabbis understood how we learn compassion."

AT ST. MATTHEW'S EPISCOPAL church in the Connecticut town of Wilton, Rev. Janet Waggoner, the assistant rector, read "The Blessing of a Skinned Knee" with her Thursday-morning Bible study group last fall. She sandwiched Mogel's book between the Gospel of Mark and the Gospel of Matthew. Waggoner added some New Testament passages about the themes that Mogel discusses but points out that Episcopalians often look outside the denomination for texts. It's part of the church's relatively liberal orientation.

Wilton is an affluent town with a high-performance school system that starts the push toward college as early as first grade. In other words, it's a breeding ground for hyper parents, some of whom, like the parents in Asheville, long to resist. A frequent complaint is the time crunch, Waggoner says — the unending procession of school and work and scheduled events and activities.

Mogel's answer to this is the Jewish Sabbath, which makes the day holy by prohibiting work, broadly defined. The Wilton Episcopalians weren't about to stop driving or answering the phone on Saturday (or Sunday). "We don't have the same structure for the Sabbath," Waggoner says. But in the course of reading "The Blessing of a Skinned Knee," Waggoner realized that St. Matthew's was obstructing a goal that Christians share for the Sabbath: spending time together as a family. The church youth-group meetings had always taken place during the Sunday dinner hour.

TRY THIS AT HOME
Mogel with her older daughter, Susanna, in their house near Hollywood.

Waggoner changed the meeting time to afternoon. It seemed obvious in retrospect — so obvious that Waggoner was rueful that she had to be reminded of a Biblical commandment to come up with a simple scheduling change. But the congregation didn't see it that way. "People said, 'Thank you, thank you,'" she said. "It turned out that was the one night of the week when the whole family could sit down for dinner together."

Mogel says that she originally wanted to call her book "The Blessing of a Broken Leg" in honor of the bone she broke falling off a horse at camp while riding bareback one summer. Her agent talked her out of the harsher title, but her point is that kids need more than tightly controlled doses of risk. That's what the Talmud is trying to teach by requiring parents to teach their children to swim, Mogel argues. The passage has been interpreted as an instruction to pass on the tools of survival. Rabbi Schacter agrees that the larger lesson is that children need to learn to fend for themselves. But that's not an easy or comfortable process. It involves some flailing and swallowing water.

For the professionals who work with children — principals, teachers, camp directors, school psychologists — that lesson is worth the price of Mogel's paperback. "If you ask parents, Do you want your children to learn new things, they all say, 'Of course,'" says Peg Smith, C.E.O. of the American Camp Association. "Well, we can't teach new things without exposing kids to discomfort. We are desperate for parents to understand that." When Mogel broke her leg at camp, she learned after a lot of frustration how to get around on crutches and thought about what it would be like to be handicapped. "That was my best summer in 16 years of camp," she says. These days, it's the rare camp that would let a child ride bareback — a good thing, probably, but also, as Mogel sees it, a loss.

Mogel says that "sometimes I think I wrote the book to remind myself of all the things that I don't want to do that I'm still doing" in raising her children. Now that her daughters are teenagers, that means trusting them to venture into the world on their own, despite the risks involved. Emma

PHOTOGRAPH BY CATHERINE LEDNER FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

baby-sits regularly and spent part of the summer in England. Susanna took off in June to trek through Cambodia, Laos and Thailand and came home and got a job at a jewelry store.

It's been harder for Mogel and her husband to curb expectations of traditional achievement. They sent their older daughter, Susanna, to a public junior high with a program for gifted students. She went on to a highly competitive private Los Angeles high school and is in her sophomore year at Haverford College. Mogel isn't sure that Susanna's high school was the best choice for her daughter. Neither is Susanna. "I might have done better at a more progressive school," she says. "It was a little — I might have been happier." Emma, perhaps, is reaping the benefits of coming second. During eighth grade, she asked her parents if she could leave her high-powered private school the following year. "This was a difficult decision for Michael and me," Mogel says, acknowledging how hard it is for parents to give up the premium academically competitive opportunity for their children. But they decided to respect their daughter's wishes and switched her to a more relaxed school. "I often see parents eager to send their child to the most selective school that will have them. And then I see children who might've flourished wither instead." To help parents keep perspective, Mogel advises them — in her practice and at lectures — to adhere to her 20-minute rule: spend no more than 20 minutes a day "thinking about your child's education or worrying about your child, period." It's a concrete goal, and she finds that it helps some parents control their excesses.

Mogel's attitude toward school is an aspect of her approach that is particularly hard for some parents. If you don't push kids, parents often retort, they sit like lumps and then are sorry later. "I teach math," says Linda Lawson, a college professor who attended the Asheville class and has a 7-year-old son. "I see a lot of kids who don't mature until two or three years into college. If they haven't taken the courses they need to do what they want to do, they're stuck. Parents push kids so they'll have opportunities." Mogel counters that the point is to refrain from pushing a child to excel in an area that's not her strength. "Your child is not your masterpiece," she writes.

It's worth noting, though, that for this view she didn't find much direct support in mainstream Jewish texts. (In the end, the Talmud is bigger on promoting Torah study than swimming lessons.) So Mogel turned to Hasidic Judaism, a movement dating to the 18th century, which rebelled against the idea that only the Torah scholar could be an upstanding Jew. There is a Hasidic saying that Mogel quotes, "If your child has a talent to be a baker, don't ask him to be a doctor." By definition, most children cannot be at the top of the class; value their talents in whatever realm you find them. "When we ignore a child's intrinsic strengths in an effort to push him toward our notion of extraordinary achievement, we are undermining God's plan," Mogel writes.

Mogel also tries to calm the education frenzy by stressing the family as a sphere of influence, arguing that the example parents set at home matters more than stellar schools. But that is ultimately misleading, argues Judith Rich Harris, author of "The Nurture Assumption," a compilation of evidence showing that children take cues from peers far more than parents. Perhaps the most important thing parents can do, Harris concludes, is to send their children to school "with smart, hard-working kids" who will make them want to be smart and hard-working. Harris agrees with Mogel that organized religion is one of the most effective means of instilling an identity that resists the majority culture. But she says that is because religious children mold each other. "Mogel's children behaved like good little Jewish girls even when they were outside the home because they went to school with other children who came from similar homes," Harris wrote in an e-mail message. "Had her children not learned these things at home, their behavior outside the home would have been the same, because they would have picked up the culture from their classmates at school."

Mogel recognizes the importance of Harris's contribution. But she's still convinced that parental influence is profound. Her second book, "The Blessing of a B Minus," which Scribner will publish in 2008, is about everyday ethics for parents of teenagers. One of Mogel's favorite lessons comes from the car-pool drop-off lane at school: When you cheat in line, you signal that you don't care about rules or other people. "And believe me, your kids are watching," she says.

"The Blessing of a Skinned Knee" highlights the value of religious observance, in addition to Jewish wisdom, in raising young children. In her second book, Mogel concedes that outside of insular communities, religious rituals and synagogue (or church or mosque) attendance may not work as well as a structure for family life during adolescence. "It's too difficult," she says of forcing observance on recalcitrant older children. "You get a kind of anguished compliance that can break the bond between parent and adolescent. On this one, you trust them." It is one way to step back and let teenagers find their own path.

MOGEL'S FAMILY NO LONGER attends synagogue regularly. But they still frequently have Shabbat dinner. On a midsummer Friday, I arrived at her house, and Emma opened the door, blue braces lighting up her smile. Her father was away making an episode of a series for ABC, and her sister was off on her East Asian travels. But a small group of family and friends soon arrived. The men put on *kipas*, and everyone took a turn lighting a candle, passing a long match from one person to the next. Then Mogel called together the four girls and women in the room. They bent their heads, and she blessed them in Hebrew with the traditional prayer for daughters: "May God make you like Sarah, Rebekah, Rachel and Leah. May God bless you and watch over you. May God shine his face like a light upon you."

Mogel realized that the unhappy kids in her practice weren't sick, but their family dynamic was. Worried about their children's future, parents would expect everything at school — and compensate by expecting almost nothing at home.

The dinner menu featured halibut and lamb sausages instead of the family's traditional poached salmon. Mogel served up an almond cake she baked that afternoon, breaking off a rose blossom from a nearby vase to set in its center. The teenagers sat at one end of the table and the adults at the other. When Emma started describing a pair of pleather pants to her friends, Mogel broke in. "Pleather?" she asked. It was an irresistible moment for adolescent eye-rolling. But Emma said easily: "Yeah, Mom, plastic and leather. Like the ones in 'The School of Rock.' Susanna bought them for like $2." She added for reassurance, "We just wear them around the house."

After dinner, Mogel prevailed on her brother-in-law to drive Emma to a party in Beverly Hills. That gave her a couple of hours to drink tea, call her husband and breathe in the peace of an empty house. But on this evening, Emma needed an assist — a ride home. There is a time to let teenagers swim on their own. And there is a time to recognize that they're not ready. It's a balancing act, and that night it tipped in favor of making sure Emma got home safely. Mogel waited for her daughter to call. At 1 a.m., she got her summons, headed into the cricket-filled night and drove to Beverly Hills. ■