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## Generations Special Issue

### Discovering blessings

BASYA LAYE

Parents have the best of intentions when they seek to provide every possible support for their children's endeavors and to shield them from the challenges of growing up and the dangers in the world around them. Unfortunately, too often, in the interest of protecting them and producing high-achievers, parents spend their energy micromanaging their children's time and energies, and fail to recognize that the very things that make teenagers challenging (bad attitude, narcissism, recklessness, bursts of anger, etc.), for example, may be the very traits that could help move them into healthy adulthood, blessings instead of curses. The author of two best-selling parenting books, *The Blessing of a Skinned Knee* and its follow up *The Blessing of a B Minus*, Dr. Wendy Mogel will talk about Using Jewish Teaching to Raise Self-Reliant, Optimistic, Grateful Children in a Nervous World, on Tuesday, Nov. 12, 7 p.m., at Temple Shalom.

Mogel has been a practising clinical psychologist for 35 years, but became interested in child development and parenting issues as a college student after a summer job working with emotionally disturbed children. By phone from her Los Angeles office, Mogel told the *Independent* that it was these kids' unique "way of looking at things" that piqued her interest. "I started to think about the whole range of normal, and that so many of the child behaviors that we call psychopathology, or see as a problem, come from the expectations of the culture or from parents who are confused about how to respond to their children. Parents," she said, "either tend to be too kind or too firm, or a combination of what I call 'nice, nice, nice, nice, furious.'"

Parenting issues vary from culture to culture, but some areas of concern are consistent, at least in the contemporary North American context.

"We now have the idea that we would like kids to skip adolescence entirely because it's too



Dr. Wendy Mogel

dangerous and we have a 'one false move' view of teenage life, because we are displacing our anxiety about a rapidly changing world and a possibly melting planet and a fluctuating economy and a highly sensationalized media, or a media that likes to promote the sensational but low-probability dangers. We displace that all onto our children and then we overprotect them, overindulge them and overschedule them and expect them to be perfect in every single area, except what I call 'family citizenship,' which is helping out at home and being responsible and doing things when you've been told once, instead of five times. So yes, we don't expect them to be good family citizens and we allow them to exchange good grades, popularity, athletic prowess and a good college admissions placement with character."

Academic success, like a high grade point average, for example, can be a fair predictor of a student's wellbeing, but can't be relied upon, particularly in more privileged environments. Looking at GPA, however, can lead to interesting conclusions about the intersections of race and class in school-aged children.

"What I see in my practice,

Please see **ACADEMIC** on page 9

### Escape to cinema for week of VJFF

CYNTHIA RAMSAY

Travel the world. Meet interesting people. Learn something, or simply escape. All from the comfort of your seat at the Fifth Avenue Cinemas during the 25th annual Vancouver Jewish Film Festival.

The festival opens on Nov. 7, 7:30 p.m., with *The Zigzag Kid*. Based on a David Grossman novel, it is a charming, fun movie. The story centres on Nono, the son of "the best inspector" in Holland. Nono aspires to be as good a detective as his father and he soaks up everything that his father teaches him about surveillance, how to handcuff a suspect, etc. The one thing his father can't bring himself to share with Nono, however, is what Nono really most wants to know: more about his mother, who died when he was only one year old.

While Gaby, his father's "secretary," understands that aspect of Nono, whose bar mitzvah is impending, his father seems oblivious. But then, as Nono is on the train to his uncle's – punishment for yet another exploit that went perfectly as planned in Nono's head, but not so much in reality – he finds a letter hidden within the wrapper of his chocolate bar. Ostensibly from his father, it sends Nono on a mission that connects him to his father's nemesis, the great criminal Felix Glick, from whom Nono hopes not only to learn how to become the best detective, but also to find out more about his mother. With only a photo to go on, Nono and Glick travel to the French Riviera, engaging in many an adventure, including Nono's introduction to, not-so-coincidentally, Gaby's favorite singer, Lola Ciperola, who Glick just happens to know.

Director Vincent Bal keeps things light and moving along, all in a colorful, stylized fashion, while not shying away from the story's serious themes, good versus evil, knowing oneself, and the importance of family among them. The cast includes a wonderful debut performance by Thomas Simon as Nono, as well as strong performances by a very likable Jessica Zeylmaker as Gaby, Fedja van Huêt as the perfect TV-type

Thomas Simon makes his debut in *The Zigzag Kid*, which opens the Vancouver Jewish Film Festival on Nov. 7.



cop/Nono's dad, Burghart Klaussner as the grandfatherly master criminal/teacher and veteran actress Isabella Rossellini as Lola; Camille De Pazzis as a seductive, temperamental mystery woman rounds out the lead roles.

*The Zigzag Kid* – in Dutch, English and French with English subtitles – is recommended for viewers 8 and up. To see the trailer for the multiple-award-winning film, visit [meneshafilms.com/zigzag-kid](http://meneshafilms.com/zigzag-kid).

The next film on the VJFF lineup is *Oma & Bella*, on Nov. 8, 1 p.m. A documentary, *Oma & Bella* is perhaps unexpectedly remarkable. Oma is Regina Karolinski, filmmaker Alexa Karolinski's grandmother, and Bella Katz is Oma's best friend. Bella has moved in temporarily with Oma, who has had a hip replacement, but the two interact and move in Oma's small apartment with the ease of people who have known each other for a very long time and still enjoy each other's company, even if it's just silently cooking a meal together.

The documentary mostly takes place in the kitchen, where the audience witnesses these two feisty women cooking up a storm of traditional Jewish (non-vegetarian) food. However, among other places, we also join them on a trip to the market, an appointment at the hairdresser and a visit to the cemetery, where many of the people they knew have been buried. Holocaust survivors, Oma and Bella share with Alexa, and the audience, not only some of the happy memories, but also some of the absolutely horrific memories, of their childhoods in Germany, where they still live.

Simply filmed, without any bells

and whistles, *Oma & Bella* successfully communicates the deep friendship between these women and their determination to enjoy life despite its hardships. We get to meet some of the family that they have built, and to be a part of their table. Food plays a large part in their lives and the film, and viewers can actually buy *The Oma & Bella Cookbook* and see a trailer for the documentary, which is in German with English subtitles, at [omabella.com](http://omabella.com).

The American documentary *The Real Inglorious Bastards* (Nov. 10, 2:30 p.m., with director Min Sook Lee in attendance) tells the story of Operation Greenup, one of the most successful missions by the U.S. government's Office of Strategic Services in the Second World War. The operation comprised only three operatives, two Jewish refugees who enlisted in the U.S. army, Hans Wijnberg (whose parents sent him to America from Holland to escape the Nazis) and Fred Mayer (whose family fled Germany as the war was beginning), and a Wehrmacht officer who deserted, prisoner-of-war Franz Weber. The three parachuted into the Austrian Alps, and then headed to Weber's hometown, where his sisters and mother helped the trio monitor Nazi movements and pass along that information to the Allies.

*The Real Inglorious Bas-*

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## ACADEMIC from page 1

working with kids who have very many advantages, is that their GPA may actually be the cause of the lack of their wellbeing because they are so highly stressed, because they can't imagine surpassing their parents' level of achievement and because they believe that in order to be successful, especially the girls, they can't get a single grade below an A, and they need to play on a varsity team and take AP classes and get into one of only 10 colleges. So, we see in those kids an increase in eating disorders, self-injury, in anxiety, in depression," Mogel explained. "And then, on the other hand, the underprivileged kids, deprived of a good educational system and support and parents who know how to guide them into manoeuvring institutions to serve them exactly the way they wish, that those kids face a much more challenging adulthood because they're not provided with the basic skill set that leads to successful adulthood...."

Mogel reminds parents that raising independent, self-reliant and resilient kids might mean allowing them to make some mistakes along the way, and that these decisions, however faulty (barring serious danger) are actually blessings in disguise. Not all of these blessings will be easy to swallow, at least for the helicopter parents out there. One of these "blessings" for teenagers, for example, is "the blessing of a hangover," and Mogel suggests that parents develop a certain level of acceptance of the fact that their kids might experiment with their sexuality or with alcohol or other substances. They might even embrace it. The parents that Mogel meets in her practice and in public don't necessarily raise their eyebrows at this piece of advice, however.

"When we actually talk about it," she explained, "what I say to them is, the kids are going off to college or university where the only person in charge of them is a 19-year-old resident advisor in the dorm. And, in many cases, she just took that job so that she could have a single room instead of a double room, and she's just one year ahead of your child."

"I give the example of the journey from slavery in Egypt to the Promised Land and that the Promised Land is the Land of Milk and Honey, and the reason that God insisted that Moses lead the people on this incredibly long journey, 40 years, instead of the route that could have taken 40 days – which, apparently, was possible – they needed to get used to, to be prepared for, freedom. And we can compare the Land of Milk and Honey to the 'Land of College,' which is beer pong and co-ed dorms. The amount of grumbling and complaining that the people did in this trip across the desert is huge – they were constantly furious with Moses and constantly complaining and basically wanted

to go back to Egypt, just wanting to go back to 'childhood.' So, it is important for teenagers to make mistakes and then learn from their mistakes instead of being bubble-wrapped and then shipped right off to college without having made any choices on their own. So the hangover is a literal hangover, but it's also a metaphor for independent, mature decision-making." She added, "Good judgment comes from experience and experience comes from a little bit of bad judgment."

Mogel's website offers some of the concrete tools related in her books (as well as group study guides) so that parents have some additional help to navigate the choppy waters of child rearing. In fact, her website ([wendymogel.com](http://wendymogel.com)) even contains a 26-step program "for good parents gone bad," like the tip to "Remember that disappointments are necessary preparation for adult life" and "Before you nag, remind, criticize, advise, chime in, preach or over-explain, say to yourself WAIT or Why Am I Talking? Listen four times more than you talk."

The WAIT acronym (which might be familiar to anyone who has done a 12-step program) is not just for parents. "It's actually a good teaching for these over-chatty kids," she said. "So many kids... I say that we're both afraid for them and afraid of them, and we kind of treat them like handicapped royalty, so we allow them to interrupt adults and go on and on. So, the kids could think about why they're talking, as well."

Understanding the economy of speech and the importance of listening is something that Mogel challenges parents to discover, and she read from a University of Kansas study that showed that "children in families that are receiving government assistance, low-income families, hear approximately 600 words an hour; working-class kids, 1,200 words an hour; children of professionals, 2,100 words an hour." And the children that Mogel works with in her practice? "A lot of the families that I work with, I think, hear four billion words an hour. They just learn not to listen, because the parents are constantly talking at them, giving them advice, solving their problems, nagging them, making decisions for them, and not listening."

With kids – and parents – so busy with multiple responsibilities and commitments, Mogel said that life can start sounding like, "Hurry, hurry, hurry! Get in the car! Let me make you some flashcards for your test tomorrow! Come and eat your dinner! Start studying!"

Even expecting our kids to list the minutiae of their day can be seen as a new parenting expectation. The very assumption that parents are interested in the nitty-gritty detail of what that friend said to the

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## LISTEN from page 9

other friend, or how a teacher responded to an assignment or an interpersonal situation is more indication that parenting has become a hypervigilant extreme sport.

"This is a big part of what my lecture is about that I'll be giving in Vancouver. I say that our parents barely knew what grade we were in off the top of their heads – the dads, they'd say, 'I think, fifth!' Not knowing the names of every single one of your friends and having rank ordered them and rank ordered their parents and knowing how to speak in a secret code to the principal to make sure that your child gets the 'better' as opposed to the 'good' second-grade teacher, and knowing how to speak in a secret code about that so you're talking about 'learning styles' and not that we don't want our child to have her because we've heard that she doesn't like the boys or she's getting too old to teach. You used the word 'minutiae,' psychologists call it enmeshment. And then, the kids go off to college or even summer camp and the parents have parental separation anxiety – the kids are fine!"

Non-parents, like teachers, aunts, uncles and grandparents, also have a role to play, and that role is surprisingly significant, but they should be mindful of how they will be received if criticizing someone else's parenting.

"It's extremely difficult for non-parents to watch this insanity and not step in with horror or advice, and if they do step in with 'horried advice,' advice born of horror, the parents will say, 'You don't understand! The playing field has changed. All of this is necessary.' Because the parents have drunk the Kool-Aid."

There is a role for non-parents, however. "I interview middle schoolers and teenagers all the time and I ask them a set of questions. I ask them what their parents worry about that they don't need to worry about; what they should worry about that they don't; what sweetest things their parents do that their parents might not realize they appreciate; what they like to do with their parents; the difference between their parents' teenage years and theirs; what their parents don't understand about texting," she said. "Then I ask them what non-parent person in their life is an inspirational adult, is someone that they turn to, either because they wish to emulate or for guidance, or because the person is so much more chilled out than their parents. And they answer in one second, it's incredible. I've never run into a child who didn't answer in one second, and it's everybody: it's an aunt, it's a teacher, it's a coach, it's a neighbor, it's a slightly older child, a young adult. I just did this in Boston. It's so fast, it's stunning, that every single one of these kids not only has someone like that but doesn't even have to think for a minute to figure out who it is," she continued, re-

trieving the list so that she could read the responses: "Camp counselor. My mom's best friend. My babysitter. My cousins in Sweden. My ballet teacher. My family friend. My aunt. My granny.... The older kid who taught me how to sing because he led the choir."

"So, yes, giant role! A giant counter-balancing role because the parents drank the Kool-Aid, [they] are so worried for the future and, when I say this, this is good intentions; loving, devoted parents. These are parents who only want the best for their kids but their kids desperately need these, as the kids always put it to me, more 'chilled out' adults. The answers to all these questions are so sweet."

It's heartening to hear from kids and teens about these relationships, but there are also surprises when it comes to the kids' responses about what things their parents do that they love most.

"The most surprising, sweetest things that one of the girls in the last set of interviews, this was in New York, said, 'When I was in middle school, my parents stopped tucking me in, but I secretly know that every night before my dad – first she said, 'This is going to sound so dorky!' And this is in groups of eight to 10 kids of mixed grades, and she was one of the younger ones, there were 12th-graders in this group.... And I said, 'Do it, do it, do it!' And she said, 'Every single night, when my dad thinks I'm asleep, he comes into my room and tucks just a little bit.' And she said, 'Now that I'm saying it out loud, it even sounds a little bit creepy, but it's so sweet and I love it so much.' I was so touched that she would say that. And in front of 12th-graders! She turned purple.... One girl said, 'When I get into the car, my mom puts her hand on my arm.' And the other girl said, 'Does she kind of stroke it up and down?' And the girl said, 'Yes, she does. But I have to make her stop because she's driving!' I was miming it and I realized that your left hand is on the steering wheel if you're stroking your child's arm with your daughter in the passenger seat ... so it's actually kind of dangerous, which made it even more touching."

Those moments inhabit some of the best of parent-child relationships, Mogel said. "It's so important to get the best, because I'm a clinical psychologist, so, in my practice and in my work with my colleagues, I hear lots of the worst, and the disasters, and there is so much robust beauty between teenagers and their parents, but everybody's keeping it a secret!"

*Dr. Wendy Mogel's visit is sponsored by Vancouver Talmud Torah, King David High School, Richmond Jewish Day School, Jewish Federation of Greater Vancouver, Shalhevet Girls High School, Vancouver Hebrew Academy and Pacific Torah Institute. Tickets, \$20, are available at talmudtorah.com.*

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