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‘Praying with Lior,’ a painful and uplifting experience

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Editor

On its simplest level, Ilana Trachtman’s award-winning documentary “Praying with Lior” is the story of a high-functioning Down syndrome youngster preparing for his bar mitzvah.

But that description does little justice to the poignant and sometimes painful insights it gives the viewer not only of Lior, but of his family, his schoolmates, and the Reconstructionist congregation in Philadelphia that has embraced and nurtured him.

The film is having its Cleveland premiere at Siegal College on Sept. 22 and 24. (See box.)

Unself-conscious, endearing, and disarmingly funny, Lior Liebling is the true linchpin of this 88-minute film. He is rarely without a smile, and he hugs and kisses those he cares about as naturally as he breathes.

Individuals with Down syndrome often obsess on but Lior’s obsession is rather unique. His “thing” is davening and praying fervently.

We first meet Lior, 12, in white yarmulke and blazer sitting above the slide in his backyard jungle gym, siddur in hand, davening. Aware of the offscreen camera, he sweetly urges the filmmaker to move a bit and give him the space he needs to finish his animated, full-throated praying.

Cut next to 10 years earlier (1994) with scenes taken from a grainy home video. Toddler Lior, clutching a soft toy Torah, rocks in the arms of his mother, Rabbi Devora Bartnoff. She offers to sing with him, and he reacts to none of the usual kids’ song titles until she suggests “Shalom Aleichem.”

Bartnoff, the mother of four, including a daughter a year younger than Lior, is battling breast cancer. And while she admits the chemo is exhausting her, she says wouldn’t miss going to shul every Shabbat morning so she can see Lior in his element: davening.

“Could you imagine what his bar mitzvah will be like?” she marvels. “I pray I will live to be part of that day.”

That prayer, tragically, is not answered.

We next meet Lior in 1998, when he sits with the men in his synagogue pounding in rhythm on the table and, as his late mother once described him, “pouring his heart out to God.”

Lior’s father, Rabbi Mordechai Liebling, worries about Lior. He confides to a friend that he’s not sure when he’s pushing too hard or not pushing hard enough in dealing with his Down syndrome son. Except for a scene at the Little League field where his frustration with Lior’s lack of athleticism is clearly evident, Liebling appears a model of patience. How he lovingly cajoles and teases out of Lior some comments the child can use for a d’var Torah at his bar mitzvah is quite remarkable.

Yoni, Lior’s older brother and his “best friend,” is a patient mentor to Lior, while Anna, the youngest, is understandably resentful of the attention lavished on her special-needs sibling. “You’d think I’d get the most attention,” she pouts. “But Lior does.”

You also get hints of the impatience and occasional resentment Lior’s other siblings feel in dealing with Lior and in having to act sometimes as his surrogate parent and “crutch.”

But Lior’s unconditional love for them and for his patient stepmother Lynne Isler tends to melt their hearts as it will yours. Also infectious is Lior’s

positive attitude: "I don't have Down syndrome," he protests. "I have Up syndrome."

Some of the most interesting conversations take place between the winsome Lior and the unseen filmmaker. For example, Trachtman asks Lior to tell her the hardest part about preparing for his bar mitzvah. "This is my first bar mitzvah without a mother," he says simply.

In one of the film's most emotional scenes, Lior and his dad visit Devora Bartnoff's grave, where both break down in tears.

Beyond family, it has taken a community in particular, the Orthodox Jewish day school Lior attends and the synagogue (Mishkan Shalom) where he davens in to ease Lior's way in the world.

Lior may not understand the fine point of a tractate in Talmud his teacher is discussing, but when prayer time comes, Lior confidently takes his place at the head of the class. His voice rings out loud, off-key,

impassioned.

"He just davens. That's what he does," offers one of his classmates. Another, more philosophic youngster adds, "When Hashem made Lior with Down syndrome, it's a test for us." A test they all seem to pass with compassionate colors.

A congregant at Lior's shul points out how Lior inspires her. Whenever her mind strays from prayer, she admits, she looks at Lior and "gets focused again."

The culminating event in Lior's life, his bar mitzvah day, is a joy to watch. It will bring tears to your eyes, as it did to everyone in the synagogue that sweltering May morning. (The synagogue gave special permission to have the service filmed on Shabbat.)

The high-spirited party that evening is likewise a joy to watch until Lior wisely announces, "Let's go; the camera's getting tired."