

Urging faith communities to be more welcoming of special-needs people

BY: CYNTHIA DETTELBACH

Editor

New York filmmaker Ilana Trachtman was hoping to reinvigorate her Jewish spiritual life when she attended a “hippy, dippy retreat” in Upstate New York in 2004. She found that missing spirituality, she says, in Lior Liebling, identifiable at first as a voice rising insistently above all others at a prayer service.

“I was surprised that the source of that off-key voice was Lior and that he had Down syndrome,” she says. She also learned that he was about to become a bar mitzvah.

In an “impulsive moment,” recalls Trachtman, she decided to make a film about the youngster. Her first as an independent filmmaker. (Prior to that she had produced and directed documentaries for TV.) The result of Trachtman’s impulsiveness was the award-winning “Praying with Lior,” which I reviewed in this column on Sept.19.

Lior’s obsession, the one thing in the world that engages him physically, emotionally and spiritually, is davening, praying with kavanah (dedicated intent and fervor). Those who pray in his presence are likewise energized and spiritually uplifted, Trachtman maintains.

After securing permission from Lior’s family to make the film,

Trachtman learned that when Lior was 5-1/2, his mother, Rabbi Dvora Bartnoff, had written an article for the Exponent, Philadelphia’s Jewish newspaper, headlined “Praying with Lior.”

“I’m mystified why Lior loves to pray so much,” wrote his mother. “Can you imagine what his bar mitzvah will be like?” (Bartnoff died of breast cancer

shortly after that article appeared.)

Trachtman sees her film, also called “Praying with Lior,” as “a continuation” of that work.” She chronicles that very special bar mitzvah, as well as the months leading up to it.

The filmmaker shot her documentary from January to May 2004, then went back two years later for the epilogue. Ever since, she has stayed in touch with the family.

Making that film forever changed Trachtman. She admits that special-needs children and adults “weren’t on my radar before; it was not something I thought about.”

Now, as Trachtman travels around the country with “Praying with Lior,” she has become an activist on behalf of people with disabilities in faith communities. Fifty-four million people in this country have disabilities, yet most people “don’t know they exist,” she says. Worse yet, if they come into contact with such individuals, their instinct is to exclude them.

Trachtman has heard unbelievable stories, she says, where people are told, “Please don’t come back. We can’t accommodate your kind.” The lack of inclusion in the Jewish community is “our dirty little secret.”

Lior is blessed by being happily included within his Reconstructionist congregation in Philadelphia. His story “makes the case that inclusion is not a matter of tzedakah. It’s not a ‘despite his ... we did this,’” explains Trachtman. “Lior’s presence enhances the life of the community. People feel they have a richer experience for associating with him.”

Dr. Jeffrey Schein, professor of Jewish Education at Siegal College, is a longtime friend of the Lieblings. Ordained at the Reconstructionist College, as were Lior's parents, Schein established a Jewish family camp together with Lior's mother Dvora. Schein, who has prayed with Lior, believes "he reminds us of our own inner resources and spirituality."

Following a showing of the film here to educators and the general public (some 300 attended), Schein hopes local groups like Etgar, SEGULA and Upside of Downs, all of which work with children with disabilities, will be "energized and confirmed" about their mission. "We're doing a lot in this community" with special-needs children," he says, "but not everything."

For educators, he adds, "it's easy in the crunch of things to think of kids as learning machines (needing) to master content to be part of the Jewish people. The film reminds us that kids like Lior have a neshamah or soul" that also needs nurturing.

I spoke again this week with Schein, who reports

that about 25 people at the college's two film showings registered an interest in attending a class on Judaism and disabilities; it is tentatively scheduled for late fall or winter at the college. Also, following a suggestion I initially made, several rabbis and educators are now considering screening "Praying with Lior" to all youngsters preparing for their b'nai mitzvah.

I'd go still further and make this film available to all middle-school and high-school children, Jew and non-Jew alike. These are the peers that the Liors of this world need and so desperately want to be accepted by.

It would go toward fulfilling

Trachtman's goal for the film and the accompanying outreach campaign: "To create a sea change in the way we as a society value each individual." In particular, she wants to change the way people with disabilities are perceived and received by faith communities ... "the places where they should receive the most welcome and derive the most comfort."