

Opinion

## Learning From Lior About Prayer And Inclusion

by Ilana Trachtman

I once thought about rabbinical school — the opportunity to lead, teach, do public service, inspire social action. But leading all those services, that was the kicker. Truth is, I'm not really into praying, I just can't relate to the text in the prayer book. Instead, I became a documentary filmmaker, one who goes to synagogue but with a constant internal kvetch.

In the fall of 2003, I took a sabbatical from the traditional Rosh HaShanah service and headed for a Jewish retreat in the Catskills. I was looking for an alternative prayer experience, a hipper approach to celebrating the Jewish New Year. Two hours in and counting the pages, I recognized a voice — off key, well-taught, modulating only between enthusiasm and extreme enthusiasm.

A voice that could pray. When I turned around and faced its source, I was surprised to see a child with Down syndrome.

Lior Liebling was 12 when I met him, and he could have prayed alongside chasidic rabbis. He had down the Hebrew, the shukeling, (a kind of consistent swaying and bowing,) and the love of God. I saw him raise his fist on certain words, beseech the heavens. I felt Lior was talking to God.

The curiosity set in. Why could a child with a "disability" do what I can't? Why must I struggle for divine connection, while he connects passionately and effortlessly? And what does it mean that I find myself envious of a person with mental retardation?

Those questions provoked a journey that would include making a feature-length documentary film, the award-winning "Praying With Lior."

But the story of Lior, and of the family and community nourishing him, is not my focus here. Meeting Lior, I searched for the connection between disability and spirituality, and I searched for other people like him. But my pursuit was pre-empted by the absence of people like Lior in most synagogues and churches. Where were they?

I thought about my experience: I grew up in a large, wealthy syna-

gogue, and I never saw someone with a visible disability pray. Nor have most people, I suspect. Most faith communities, for all their teachings about charity and compassion, do not welcome people with disabilities.

As it turns out, not all God's children have a place in the choir. There are 54 million people in this country who identify as disabled, according to the National Organization on Disability. Yet less than half of all our houses of worship are handicapped accessible. And we're just talking about wheelchairs. A loophole in the Americans with Disabilities Act frees houses of worship from building the ramps and elevators required of every library, school, and grocery store.

Houses of worship, the places where people should feel the most comfortable, are more often than not exclusive, inhospitable, and even shunning. In my journey to find more Liors, I met parents who brought their children with cerebral palsy to church, only to be told, "Your child doesn't belong here. Please don't bring him back."

I heard about priests who wouldn't offer communion to a person with Down syndrome, and rabbis who say that there's no point in having a bar mitzvah for a person with an IQ of 60. There are faith groups that believe that disability is punishment for sin, in this life or a past one.

There are congregations reaching out to those with special needs, but not enough. I've met spiritual leaders who proudly list the one or two ceremonies they've performed for members with a disability, as if they're off the hook. But just because someone isn't in our midst doesn't mean that we don't have an obligation to serve him or her. As "religious" people, we should be asking ourselves where they are.

Starting with the special needs of our spiritual ancestors, we might ask ourselves: would Isaac, who became blind, be able to find his way around our churches or synagogues? Once inside, would he find a Braille prayer book? Would Jacob, with his serious limp, be able to climb to the pulpit? Would Moses, who needed his brother to speak for him, receive the patience of the community as he stuttered through a sermon?

If making this film has taught me anything it's that it's time for a new awareness. The secret I learned from Lior is that inclusion is not about charity. Including Lior allows me, with my own praying "disability," to pray alongside an inspiring model, one who demonstrates that intellectual engagement with the text isn't the whole story. The amazing gift of Lior is that he enhances everyone's spiritual experience. His community regularly uses words like "little rebbe" and "spiritual genius" to describe him. They talk about feeling closer to God by praying with Lior. If we accept the idea that we are all created in the image of God, then it also makes sense that our communities are more holy when they are more whole. ■



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Ilana Trachtman, a filmmaker, is the director of "Praying With Lior."