

Film Festival '08

Lior's prayers

Documentary raises awareness of disabled people's place in the Jewish community

JOHANNA GINSBERG
NJN Staff Writer

Ilana Trachtman never planned on making an independent film — until she heard Lior.

It was Rosh Hashana, and she was at Elat Chayyim, a Jewish retreat center in New England. She had gone seeking refuge, feeling “estranged” from Jewish liturgy and traditional services.

Lior Liebling was behind her, “praying the way I wished I could,” Trachtman said in a telephone interview with NJN. “He was incredibly focused and full of joy. The voice was off-key, a kid’s voice. I turned around and was surprised to see that it was a kid with Down Syndrome. I was mesmerized.”



Ilana Trachtman's goal in making *Praying with Lior* was to raise consciousness about bringing people with disabilities into the larger Jewish community.

She asked herself, “Why is it that he can do this and I can’t, when he supposedly has a disability? Then I heard he was having a bar mitzva. I thought — Someone should make a movie.”

And then she had the epiphany: “Oh, that’s what I do for a living.”

A film about prayer, spirituality, and disability, *Praying with Lior* has garnered audience awards at Jewish film festivals, including in Boston and Washington, since its premiere at the San Francisco Jewish Film Festival last summer. When it was shown at NYC’s Cinema Village in February, it was the highest-grossing independent film to open that weekend. “Industry experts were scratching their heads over that one,” Trachtman said.

An Emmy Award-winning filmmaker and director, Trachtman attributes the work’s success, in part, to the warmth of family, as well as to her editor, Zelda Greenstein, and camera man, Slawomir Grunberg. It probably also has to do with her own skill and passion, in equal doses.

She had never made an independent film before, preferring the security of being commissioned by companies like HBO, Showtime, Lifetime, and WNET/Thirteen. “I always thought of independent filmmakers as brave and masochistic,” she said. When she approached Lior’s father, Rabbi Mordechai Liebling, with her idea, the project took on a life of its own. “He said, ‘Oh, we always wanted someone to make a film about Lior’s bar mitzva.’”

Trachtman said the “open-heartedness and knee-jerk warmth” the rabbi showed her then “is how the family has treated me to this day.”

The Lieblings welcomed her into their lives and held back little, enabling her to offer a revealing, intimate portrait of the family: of Lior; his father, former director of the Jewish

Reconstructionist Federation; his stepmother, Lynne Iser; and his three siblings. Their mother, Rabbi Devorah Bartoff, died of breast cancer in 1997, seven years before Lior’s bar mitzva. She nevertheless appears in the film, in home movies made with Lior before her death.

The film captures lighthearted moments similar to those in any other family, like a wrestling match between Lior and his older brother. But Trachtman’s camera is privy to candid discussions of more serious issues, from a younger sister’s lament over the loss of attention usually accorded the baby of the family, to an older sister’s discussion of her longtime role as a kind of surrogate mother to Lior, to the older brother’s understanding that he will always choose to live his life close to his younger brother.

And that doesn’t begin to cover the conversations Lior has with his father about his upcoming bar mitzva or how classmates interact with him in school.

Viewers come away with a deep appreciation not only for the intensity of Lior’s spirited davening but also for his unusual family. And it doesn’t hurt that Lior has an incredible sense of comic timing.

Transformative moments

In making the film, Trachtman gave up the little conveniences in filmmaking she had always taken for granted.

Her office was her kitchen. There were no office supplies, no assistants, no direction, and no budget. “I was incredibly stupid and naive,” she said, looking back. “Suddenly, I was going out and holding my hand out, asking for money, making the case for why my film should be made. I was asking for hundreds of thousands of dollars.”

She also let go of the professional distance she normally maintains with her subjects, a move that she thinks helped her capture some of the more complex pieces of the film. “I really liked [the Lieblings] as people, and I think they knew they were in good hands. I wasn’t just coming in as a director to suck this story out of them and not give anything in return. They’re my friends. As much as I’m a witness to their story, I shared my life with them,” she said.

Making the film also had a lasting impact on her approach to prayer. “Spending time with Lior and his community gave me some alternate definitions of ‘good’ davening,” she said. “I certainly became liberated from the words.” Raised in a Reform family in Maryland, she lives in Manhattan and regularly attends Congregation B’nai Jeshurun there.

At one screening, she said, a moviegoer sug-

gested that the film is her prayer. Her response: “Wow, I’ll take that.”

Trachtman’s goal in making the film was not only to tell Lior’s story in an artful way but also to raise consciousness about bringing people with disabilities into the larger Jewish community. “I don’t want people to see this move and go home. I want people to ask, where are our Liors?” She realized that she never saw anyone with a disability in her synagogue growing up. Since the film has come out, she said, she has received numerous e-mails from families telling her their stories.

She said, “It’s a shameful part of community coming out — the pain and rejection when people approach their synagogues and are turned away.”

But when communities hold b’nei mitzva for these 13-year-olds, she said, they become “transformative moments in the community.” She said, “It’s a shame they do not happen more often.”

To help bring about more such moments, she’s assembling an anthology, collecting b’nei mitzva stories and speeches from disabled teens, to be used as a guide for congregations.

As for her life as an independent filmmaker, she said, “There’s no way you can make a living doing independent films. It’s a way to get into really big debt.” So during the last six months, she’s been at work on a film for the Sundance Channel on environmental innovators. On the other hand, it seems she may have fallen hard for the indie world. She’s also working, with partners, on a second independent film about an entirely different subculture: Mexican-American teenagers, through the lens of competitive high school mariachi bands.

Oh, and when you go to see *Praying With Lior*, bring your tissues. “One reason the film succeeds is because Lior gives everyone permission to laugh,” said Trachtman. “And once we can laugh, we can also cry.”

Davening with Down syndrome

REBECCA WOLFSON
JTA

test to us — how we treat Lior, if we do things with Lior.”

Politz was able to accommodate Lior in part because of Orot, a special-education initiative that places children with disabilities in Philadelphia’s Jewish day schools. Orot participants typically begin in a secluded learning environment, and in time they experiment with integrated classrooms.

Rabbi Dan Grossman, who spoke on a panel that followed a screening of the film in January at the New York Jewish Film Festival, said he has worked to make his Reconstructionist synagogue, Adath Israel of Lawrenceville, welcoming by offering seeing-eye dogs, a wheelchair-accessible *bima*, and half-a-dozen reserved wheelchair spots in the pews — and not in the back of the sanctuary.

A welcoming physical environment is only half the battle, said Grossman, whose hearing impairment made it a struggle for him to become a rabbi.

“Whoever takes the lead role in the congregation needs to take the position that this is important to the identity of the community,” Grossman said of accommodating special-needs members. “Moses stuttered, Isaac was blind, David was probably hyperactive,” he said.

While the Jewish community has made progress accommodating special-needs children, as Lior’s community did for his bar mitzva, Lior’s father, Mordechai Liebling, who is a Reconstructionist rabbi, worries that his son will face a tougher environment as he becomes an adult.

Judaism places a high value on scholarship and education, Liebling said, but it’s equally important to value people with other abilities.

“I really have a lot of hope,” he said, “that the community will take responsibility and do the right thing.”

Lior Liebling davens everywhere: in the backyard, in school, and on the swing set. Some congregants at his Philadelphia synagogue, Mishkan Shalom, call him the “little rebbe.”

“The *Zohar* tells stories of miracle children who were spiritual geniuses,” one synagogue member said. “Well, that’s what Lior is.”

Lior is the 13-year-old featured in the new documentary *Praying with Lior*, which highlights the bar mitzva of a Jewish child with Down syndrome. The character study of this charming boy tells how his community successfully integrates him into communal life, a challenge many Jewish communities face with mentally and physically disabled members.

Praying follows the teenager from his pre-bar mitzva haircut to the *bima* and beyond, checking back with him two years later. Though he struggles with baseball and schoolwork, Lior is able to pray with sincerity, a feat encouraged by those close to him.

Like members of Lior’s Reconstructionist community, the children and teachers at his Orthodox day school admire and accept him.

“There is no such thing as a disabled soul,” said Besie Katz, the principal of Politz Hebrew Academy, who said the students accepted Lior because they understood that while that he had certain limitations, he also had strengths.

“God makes every person with a different test in this world,” one of Lior’s classmates says in the film. “We don’t know what God’s doing. When God made it that Lior has Down syndrome, it also became a



Lior Liebling, whose bar mitzva is celebrated in *Praying with Lior*
Photos courtesy First Run Features