

Gems from home and abroad

By **KEVIN DOHERTY** and **JOSEPH CUNNEEN**

March 7, 2008

Section: L. Movies

Praying with Lior is a documentary about a Philadelphia Jewish boy with Down syndrome that should have special appeal to all those who believe in prayer. Lior's mother, Devorah Bartnoff, herself a rabbi, died when Lior was only 6, but she had taught him well by constantly singing to him. Although today he has a strong, caring stepmother, he still feels the loss of his mother, and the scene in which he accompanies his father, Rabbi Mordechai Liebling, to Devorah's grave and kisses her tombstone, will move the most hardhearted spectator. Amazingly, director Ilana Trachtman manages to avoid sentimentality: The love Lior shows for "davening" (prayer), the joy with which

he sings (atonally) and the happiness he shares with those who come to his bar mitzvah are truly irresistible.

Understandably, Lior's father, former director of the Jewish Reconstructionist Federation, is supremely proud of him, and his stepmother, Lynne Iser, and his brothers and sisters have surrounded him with love. Fortunately, they have been able to provide him with a supportive environment and have wisely sent him to a Jewish school that makes ritual a major element in education. The film avoids scenes of inner family tension but includes some honest recognition of the constant pressures of caring for this child. His younger sister Anna complains that Lior's "specialness" means she is never the center of attention. Older brother Yoni sums up the situation: "I don't know if there's a God, but if there is, Lior is closer to him than anyone I know."

The secret behind the boy's confident approach to prayer is revealed in the home movies made by his mother when he was very young, which are used several times during the documentary. A soundtrack composed by the klezmer virtuoso Andy Statman helps create an overall mood, and Lior's dancing serves to sustain it. His stepmother alludes to the limitations later life will impose on Lior, but this film about making his bar mitzvah will deepen your understanding both of the "handicapped" and of prayer.



-First Run Features: Lior Liebling in "Praying with Lior"