

Movie review: Praying with Lior

★★★★☆☆

by Ben Kenigsberg

An intriguing spiritual premise—might a devout Jewish child with Down syndrome be “closer to God” than those around him, with fewer distractions separating him from prayer—is largely sidelined in *Praying with Lior*, which offers instead a warm and moving portrait of the child and his family as they prepare for his bar mitzvah.

The son of two rabbis, Lior Liebling was immersed in prayer from an early age. His mother, who prayed to live until his bar mitzvah, died of breast cancer when he was six. Lior’s siblings (and eventually a stepmother) helped to fill the parenting gap.

Lots of Jewish men-to-be worry about their Torah portion; in Lior’s case, the most difficult thing is writing and delivering a speech explaining it. Some of the movie’s most

affecting scenes show Lior’s father patiently coaxing out his son’s opinion on the text.

The film suggests that Judaism has provided Lior with a specific educational objective he might

otherwise lack as a child with Down syndrome; at the very least, it’s provided him with an accepting community. Trachtman shows him interacting with his classmates in an ordinary Philadelphia-area yeshiva. (He davens with the best of them. “Some people do batting scores of the Phillies games,” a class-



Lior Liebling, as seen in “Praying with Lior,” a film by Ilana Trachtman.

mate admits. Lior’s peers are less tolerant, unfortunately, when it comes to Little League.) The film’s strategy is to treat extraordinary accomplishment as something ordinary—and it’s all the more moving for it.