

# WJD

## WORLD JEWISH DIGEST

*Confronting Issues Facing Israel and World Jewry*

### ARTS & CULTURE

#### FILM

## Songs of Youth

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There's no mystery why few theatrical films seriously address Jewish religious observance: they can't compete at the box office with, say, movies concerning the Holocaust or comedies about interfaith relationships. Cinema is primarily a commercial medium, and since Jews are a distinct minority, many filmmakers, under pressure to reach the widest possible audience, explore Jewish-themed content within the framework of popular genres like war thrillers or romantic comedies. So it's noteworthy that several movies expressly treating worship, *mitzvos* and *tikkun olam* are in multiplexes this month.

*Praying with Lior* (First Run Features) is the feature documentary debut of TV producer-director Ilana Trachtman (*Our Heroes, Our Selves, What's Going On: Child Poverty in America*). "Lior" means "my light," and her film is as illuminating as her subject, Lior Liebling, an irrepressible Philadelphia-area youngster who refuses to let Down Syndrome get in the way of his bar mitzvah. The third of four children, Lior grew up in a religious household: his father, Mordechai, a rabbi, long headed the Jewish Reform Foundation, and his mother, Devora Bartnoff, also received rabbinic ordination. Early home movies show the toddler hugging a stuffed toy Torah as he

chimes in with Devora singing *Shalom Aleichem*. We learn that she succumbed a few years later (when Lior was 6) to breast cancer and hear about her child's unusually fervent spirituality from a newspaper article she wrote just months before she died.

Those disabled by Down Syndrome suffer mental retardation to varying degrees. Lior is fairly high functioning, but his attention span can be brief and his desire to please frequently leads him to turn conversations into jokes. Mordechai and his second wife, Lior's stepmother Lynne Iser, wisely decided that their son's formative education should take place in a setting where he could thrive by applying himself to what he loves most—learning Torah—and enrolled him in an Orthodox day school.

As the date of his bar mitzvah nears, Lior's Hebrew portion is not as challenging as the requirement to compose his own *d'var Torah* in English. Instead of learning something through repetition and translation, he now must create his own sentences. In prepping with Mordechai, the boy has trouble focusing. But throughout the film, Lior exhibits such willpower and conviction, there's little room for doubt that he'll achieve his goal.

Trachtman first met the Lieblings at a Rosh Hashanah retreat in the Catskills



COURTESY OF FIRST RUN FEATURES

*The documentary film Praying with Lior tells the story of Lior Liebling (left), an irrepressible Philadelphia-area youngster who refuses to let Down Syndrome get in the way of his bar mitzvah. Here, he shares a musical moment with a friend.*

and began filming them shortly afterwards. She financed her documentary as she went along; if the camera work is undistinguished and some scenes (like Mordechai's and Lior's visit to Devora's grave) awkward, Trachtman's passion and agenda help compensate. While doing background research, she discovered that more than 54 million Americans are disabled, and yet, less than half of our country's houses of worship fully accept them. And that doesn't mean just being wheelchair accessible or having a signing interpreter for the hearing challenged; that means extending a sincere, unflinching welcome. In devoting a sizable portion of her film to Lior's remarkably inclusive Reconstructionist synagogue, *Mishkan Shalom*, Trachtman forces us to re-evaluate who is giving more: the able-bodied or the disabled. By the end of *Praying with Lior*, it's clear that the teen is a major asset to his admirable family and his truly egalitarian congregation. He also has developed some visions for his future that should make us think twice next time we're tempted to sell short those we label less fortunate.