

arts & culture

Learning from Lior

By JONATHAN KRIEGER
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“I don’t have Down Syndrome, I have up syndrome,” Lior Liebling exclaims during the documentary about himself, *Praying with Lior*. The interviewer begins to express her surprise when Liebling shouts with glee, “April Fools!” as his trademark, glowing smile spreads across his face.

For Liebling, the line was a joke, but for those who know him, it rings true. Despite being born with Down Syndrome and losing his mother to cancer at an early age, Lior Liebling is an excitable boy who is almost always smiling or praying. *Praying with Lior* follows Liebling’s surrounding family and community as they confront his condition and how others perceive him, all the while being lifted up by his enthusiasm for life and spiritualism as he marches toward his bar mitzva.

The documentary has been playing at film festivals, racking up awards, selling out venues and prompting standing ovations. *Praying with Lior* made its

American theatrical debut on February 1, when the film screened at Cinema Village in New York City.

Director Ilana Trachtman met Lior and his family when she was at a prayer retreat for Rosh Hashana. At the time, she was having trouble with services and had reached a point where she described herself as “anti-prayer.” As she explained it, “I was counting pages and wondering what was for lunch” when she heard Liebling praying next to her.

As demonstrated in the film, when Liebling prays, he does it

with uninhibited excitement, shouting the Hebrew words at the top of his lungs. Trachtman was jealous of Liebling’s devotion to his prayer. Someone pointed out that Liebling’s story could be a movie, and she approached the Liebling family who told her they had been thinking the same thing.

TRACHTMAN SPENT the next three-and-a-half years on the project. In an extensive career of directing and producing that has included work for PBS, HBO Family, Showtime and ABC-TV, this was



UPS AND DOWNS. In the documentary, Lior’s brother Yoni says, ‘If there is a God, then Lior is definitely closer to God than anybody else I know.’

Photo: Courtesy

Trachtman's first independent film. And while it may not be the last, it will be a hard one to top. "I don't know if I'll ever do a project like this," she says. "I don't know if I'll ever care this much."

Throughout the film, viewers meet people who at first seem obligated to help or look out for Liebling. But as the film progresses, these same people are drawn in by Liebling's warmth and caring nature. They end up loving and needing Liebling just as much as he loves and needs them. The same people also express wonder at the way Liebling prays, admiring that his doubt never wavers and his whole spirit is always behind the words he sings. His brother Yoni echoes a popular sentiment when he says, "If there is a God, then Lior is definitely closer to God than anybody else I know."

It is a touching story that Trachtman thinks a lot of Jewish communities do not allow themselves to experience. She's met many families whose rabbis say there is no point in their disabled child even having a bar mitzva, or they will have one,

but it will be on a Thursday so as not to detract from Shabbat services.

She believes it is part of a general trend in which many religious communities overlook the disabled. She is quick to point out that over half the houses of worship in America are not wheelchair accessible, noting that even supermarkets are more wheelchair accessible than synagogues.

BUT THE community has responded to her movie. Screenings are consistently met with standing ovations, and the film has won audience awards at Jewish film festivals in Boston and Washington DC. Even Christian communities have taken to the film. Trachtman talks of screening the piece to a group of Christians who afterward started referring to the synagogue as a church and making other similar substitutions in a way that demonstrated they had taken Liebling's story into their own world.

She feels that communities are already open minded, but that the film gives them a context to discuss how they can better

embrace the disabled.

The characters in the movie also serve as an inspiration to other families raising children under similar circumstances. At one point in the film, Lior's younger sister Anna says, "Since I'm the youngest, people would think I would get the most attention. But since Lior has Down Syndrome, he basically gets the most attention. So it's kind of annoying." She goes on to say, "Sometimes Lior's really embarrassing."

While these words may not be easy to hear, they reflect the feelings of many children who feel overlooked by their parents and in competition with their siblings' disabilities. Some of the warmest e-mails Trachtman has gotten are from people encouraged by what Anna was able to admit on film.

And Trachtman herself has had her own faith in Jewish communities reaffirmed. While she doesn't feel any more religious, she does acknowledge a stronger attachment to Judaism as a whole, saying, "I feel proud to be part of a community that's capable of raising Lior."



Lior Liebling and brother Yoni as seen in "Praying With Lior," a film by Ilana Trachtman.