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Getting Reel On Disabilities

New cinema focuses attention on overlooked part of community.

by Carolyn Slutsky

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Lior Liebling, 12 years old and anticipating his bar mitzvah, perches at the top of the jungle gym in his backyard, praying fervently. A stickler for propriety, Lior comes to a certain part of the text and says to his nonexistent congregation, “Please rise.” He stands with his head almost touching the canvas top of the swing set, a funny and touching scene, a young boy totally at home in his prayer.

But underlying that comfort and ease is a sense that the small playhouse will not contain Lior forever, that eventually he will have to climb down and face the world.

“Praying with Lior,” a new documentary, is the story of Lior’s engagement with that world. Lior is a first-rate pray-er, hailed by some in his Reconstructionist community as a “spiritual genius.” He is also a boy with Down’s syndrome. From the time he was a baby he loved Jewish song and text, and his parents, both rabbis, worked hard to provide him with a full Jewish education. His family, liberal Jews, sent Lior to an Orthodox yeshiva since it was the one place where his love of Judaism could grow and thrive.

While the documentary — brilliantly, lovingly made by Ilana Trachtman — touches on family dynamics, adolescence, cancer and other themes, Lior’s connection to his Jewish community is the central focus. We see Lior’s interactions with his family at the Shabbat

table, the deep acceptance shown to him by the boys in his yeshiva classroom, and ultimately, his moving bar mitzvah. And we come away with a deep sense of how a Jewish community can be enhanced by the addition of people who think and look and pray differently, how, as Trachtman put it, “when we have communities that are whole, everybody is enriched.”

“Praying with Lior” is the latest in a growing number of films that explore the role of disability and difference in the Jewish community, and talk about how inclusion is a good idea not just for individuals with disabilities but for the community as a whole.

The first of these films, according to observers, was “Best Boy,” a documentary about Philly Wohl, a Jewish man with a developmental disability who spent his first 50 years at home with his parents. The film, which won an Academy Award for best documentary in 1979 and was made by Philly’s cousin Ira Wohl, follows Philly as he learns increasing independence, eventually moving to a group home, where he thrives. A follow-up film,



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

“Best Man,” made 20 years later, includes more Jewish themes, specifically telling the story of Philly’s bar mitzvah at the age of 70.

At a Passover seder just before the bar mitzvah, a guest speaks about her work with the Shoah Foundation, which collects testimonies from Holocaust survivors. Someone asks if anyone is turned away from telling their stories for posterity.

“No,” she says, “even the most inarticulate voice can be heard,” and the camera lingers knowingly on Philly as he enjoys his charoset at the seder table.

Another film in this genre is “The Collector of Bedford Street” (2001) directed by Alice Elliott. “The Collector” is Larry Selman, a mentally retarded man in his 60s who connects deeply with his neighborhood and community by collecting money for charity, despite his own impoverishment. Selman is the quintessential New York character and is essentially adopted by his block association in Greenwich Village, which sets up a trust for him through UJA-Federation so that when his uncle, his only surviving relative, dies, his future will be ensured.

While some films have come to fruition and can be seen by audiences, others are still in production, waiting for funding and other support to be finished. One

notable example is “Nobody Should Know,” a film by Andrea Eisenman that explores cystic fibrosis in the Orthodox community, and the pressures many people feel to keep their diagnoses hidden.

Faye Ginsburg, a professor of anthropology and director of the graduate program in culture and media at New York University, said that the increase in the numbers of these films, beyond the relative ease of using today’s cameras, and the prominence of sites like YouTube that support all manner of video, can be attributed to a shift in the culture in the area of perception of disability.

“There’s a sea change in terms of public acceptance of disability in the Jewish community,” she said. “It’s an issue we need to take on.”

“This kind of filmmaking talks about stories generally not told that need to be told, that feel very urgent to the people who live with them and feel hidden or hushed,” Ginsburg continued. “Film’s a way to talk back, to say these are important issues.”

Both Trachtman and Ginsburg pointed to the fact that disability can affect anyone at any time, something that terrifies people.

“There’s a lot of heartbreak with families like Lior’s because they don’t have a place to go,” said Trachtman.



Ilana Trachtman’s “Praying with Lior” follows the journey of Lior Liebling, who has Down’s syndrome, to his moving bar mitzvah.

Still, said Ginsburg, it is important for people to engage with people with all disabilities, to be able to stare and question.

“Watching a movie is a much safer way to encounter these experiences,” she noted.

Anita Altman of UJA-Federation of New York’s government relations and external affairs department has been involved with the philanthropy’s Task Force on People With Disabilities for more than 10 years. She said that film is a powerful vehicle for addressing issues around difference in Jewish life and for humanizing the experience of living with disabilities.

“I feel like we’re riding the crest of a wave,” said Altman of the surge of films being made on these topics. “This is all part and parcel of trying to change societal attitudes about people with disabilities, trying to open up not only the Jewish community but the larger community to realize people have a lot to contribute, whatever their level of ability.”

As an outgrowth of “Praying with Lior,” UJA-Federation, together with the JCC of Manhattan, is planning a disability film festival for later this year that will screen various films that deal with disability. Altman hopes various agencies in the UJA network will be able to show the films via satellite, in order to gain the largest exposure possible.

The deeper awareness of the power and potential of such films can be felt across the Jewish community. Rabbi Mayer Waxman, assistant director at Yachad, the National Jewish Council for Disabilities, said his group’s mission has always been inclusion, but that with more films and chances to engage with difference, Yachad’s staff and the Jewish community as a whole can talk about disability from a more informed place.

“Oftentimes people don’t have a clear understanding of what it is to work with people with developmental disabilities, they’re scared and so when you see the context of how his family and community interacts with Lior, it helps teach,” said Rabbi Waxman.

“That’s the strength of the media, video and film, it encapsulates something instead of just having it summarized verbally.”

Jason Lieberman, a disability advocate who himself has cerebral palsy and uses a wheelchair, said films like “Praying with Lior” have the potential to get people from disparate factions of the Jewish community together in a room to talk about their shared experiences, since disability is something that affects everyone. “What keeps happening with disability is we keep crossing denominational lines,” said Lieberman.

“And since working on “Praying with Lior,” the film’s director calls herself an “accidental activist,” spurred to advocate for people with disabilities and impassioned to teach others about how connections can be made.

“Disability is the one topic where it doesn’t matter.”

Sometimes film can create change even on a personal level. Ginsburg’s daughter, Samantha Myers, has Familial Dysautonomia, a rare Jewish genetic disease. At 10, Sam’s greatest desire was to go on television and talk to other children about FD. Through Nick News she was able to embark on projects using film to portray her unique worldview. She has since become an advocate herself, and has starred in a number of films she has made with her family.

And since working on “Praying with Lior,” the film’s director calls herself an “accidental activist,” spurred to advocate for people with disabilities and impassioned to teach others about how connections can be made. Trachtman first encountered Lior and his family at a Rosh HaShanah service, and was impressed with the intensity of his prayer. She had never seen anyone with an obvious disability praying in synagogue before, and realized that her experience was the norm, while Lior’s community’s inclusion of him was exceptional.

“I feel like everyone’s missing out [on] the community’s chance to become more whole,” Trachtman told The Jewish Week at a recent screening of her film for local rabbis, of the many communities that struggle with inclusion. “It’s not tzedakah, [his community] isn’t welcoming him because it’s the right thing to do but because they believe praying with Lior gives them a deeper experience.”

In the film Lior’s father, Rabbi Mordechai Liebling, talks about how his son is regarded by some in their community as superhuman because of his prayer.

“People project too much onto him,” says Rabbi Liebling. “He is not a rebbe, not a conscious spiritual leader. He’s a loving child.”

“Praying with Lior” opens theatrically on Feb. 1 at Cinema Village, 22 E. 12th St., (212) 924 3363.

The “Toward Inclusion” series thus far has reported on the community’s increased funding for autism and other disabilities and efforts to address the growing needs of families with autistic children.