

The Sun

About A Boy

Movies | Review of: "Praying With Lior"

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The warm-hearted and mesmerizing "Praying With Lior" is a documentary made with equal parts admiration and astonishment, about an unlikely boy who inspires and is inspired by his family and community in a quiet corner of Philadelphia.

In describing the film, one is hesitant to even mention the term "Down syndrome" for fear that the film will immediately be categorized as one about illness, disability, or isolation. Nothing could be further from the truth. "Praying with Lior," which opens today at Cinema Village, is less about the condition with which Lior Liebling lives than it is about the family and the religious community that have rallied around the young boy, who is regarded by many as something of a "spiritual genius."

The son of two rabbis — the demanding Mordechai and Devorah, who died in 1997 when Lior was 6 — this boy seems to have a bottomless enthusiasm for synagogue and prayer, not to mention a professed regular dialogue with God. More than that, he's a cheerful person, whose energy and happiness appear to rub off on everyone he meets. In school, he helps lead prayers and earns the admiration of his classmates. In home movies, we see Lior as a toddler as he tries to sing along with his mother while she leads group prayers in song. When he grows older, Lior seems to lapse into a state comparable to a rapture when he prays, and his spirit is contagious to anyone within earshot.

Throughout the film, in fact, we are made to marvel at Lior's spiritual and human connections at such a young age. As laid out by director Ilana Trachtman, "Praying With Lior" builds up to the day of his bar mitzvah, and when the day finally arrives, it's a jarring reminder of just how green this wise old spirit actually is. "I don't know if there's a God," says Yoni, Lior's brother, during a break from high school. "But if there is, Lior is closer to him than anyone I know."

With unfettered access to the Liebling family, Ms. Trachtman ably develops a rapport with Lior's loved ones

that gives the film a frank, essential third dimension. At one moment, Lior's younger sister concedes some frustration with her brother, that because of his medical condition, she sometimes doesn't get the attention that any youngest would like. Similarly, a member of the community, while exploring her thoughts as to why Lior is so passionate in

his religiosity, suggests that it has something to do with the boy's psychology and surroundings — that when his religious expressions at a young age earned smiles and encouragement, he merely stayed on that path. Were he the son of a musician or a painter, perhaps he would express himself in that fashion, instead.

But regardless of his passion or its origin, the force of Lior's impact on those around him cannot be denied. His older sister, who assumed the function of mother figure after their mother's death, is euphoric when she's reunited with Lior upon returning home from college. Lior's stepmother seems to be boundless in her patience and affection. His older brother, whom Lior calls his best friend, confides to the camera that he will have to choose a college close to home, since he won't be able to live too far from his brother.

In the film's most emotional moment, Lior and his father visit his mother's grave; not only is Lior unable to contain his emotions, but he reaches out to his stoic father, who breaks down as well. For a fleeting instant, it's hard to tell who's leaning on whom. There is something about the boy — something unassuming, expressive, and accepting — that allows those around him to lower their guard.

So it is at his bar mitzvah that the movie's two halves converge. Ms. Trachtman's film is as much about its title subject as it is about the hundreds who gather to celebrate his entry into adulthood. As we watch him jubilantly climb onto the bima, welcomed by smiles, cheers, and tears, "Praying with Lior" does more than offer us a portrait of a special young man. It discards the clichés and condescension of so many mainstream religious films to help us see the power of faith in action.

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