



# Lesson in faith from boy with Down syndrome

By Carrie Rickey  
INQUIRER FILM CRITIC

**P**hiladelphia's most radiant movie star is Lior Liebling, subject of the poignant and profound documentary *Praying With Lior*.

On its surface, Ilana Trachtman's film is a deceptively simple portrait of how a young man's faith illuminates his family and community. On reflection, it is also a complex account of difference and acceptance, of the emotionally fraught journey from grief into joy.

To hear Lior tell it, he has "Up Syndrome."

"April Fool's!" laughs the 13-year-old Mount Airy boy on the brink of becoming bar mitzvah, beaming the 500-watt smile that warms everyone in his orbit. In Hebrew, his name means "My light."

Lior has Down syndrome, a difference that has not deterred this son of two rabbis -- Mordechai Liebling and the late Devorah Bartnoff -- from his studies, religious or secular.

Lior's joie de vivre is contagious. Ask his father and stepmother. Ask his brother, Yoni, or sisters Reena and Anna. Ask anyone in his congregation, Mishkan Shalom. For many, this enthusiastic, if off-key, singer is the lens who magnifies their spiritual life.

*"To hear Lior tell it, he has 'Up Syndrome.'"*

Praying was the means Lior communicated with his mother; praying is the means he keeps her alive. Does Lior pray in the mature sense, or parrot the words as a child might?

In home movies taken before she succumbed to breast cancer, Rabbi Bartnoff talks about the joy she got from praying with Lior, also the title of an essay she wrote for the Jewish Exponent.

For Bartnoff, Lior was a spiritual teacher whose lack of self-consciousness meant there were fewer veils between him and God. "If there is a God," says Lior's brother, Yoni, "Lior is definitely closer to God than anyone else I know."

Gently, Trachtman explores this premise, sometimes seeming to penetrate the mystery of belief, sometimes conceding that Lior is a Rorschach on whom people project their spiritual and social needs.

Apart from its intriguing religious implications, the film is also a compelling look at the family, community and congregational pillars that support Lior, now 16. From Lynn Iser, his stepmother who regards him as the glue that binds the family, to the brother Little Leaguers who field and bat with him, to the synagogue

## Praying With Lior

★★★★

Produced and directed by Ilana Trachtman, music by Andy Statman. With Lior Liebling, Mordechai Liebling, Devora Bartnoff, Reena Liebling, Yoni Liebling and Anna Liebling.

**Running time:** 1 hour, 27 mins.

**Parent's guide:** No MPAA rating (nothing inappropriate for children)

**Showing at:** Clearview's Bala Theatre

that embraces him as a "little rebbe," or rabbi, Lior is valued both for who he is and how he teaches others to learn from those who are different.

The film's climactic sequences are of Lior's bar mitzvah. There's not a person in the congregation or in the movie audience who will deny the presence of Lior's late mother in that place of worship. Nor is there any who would deny that Lior is an agent both of social and spiritual change.

Bring tissues.

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