

VARIETY®

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S.F. Jewish

Praying With Lior (Documentary)

By DENNIS HARVEY

A Ruby Pictures production. Produced by Ilana Trachtman. Co-producer, Roberta Morris Purdee. Directed by Ilana Trachtman.

Amid an escalating U.S. trend toward commercial entertainment that earnestly or exploitatively taps religious demographics, "Praying With Lior" explores a rather extraordinary instance of real-world faith, sans condescension or proselytizing. Fascinating documentary focuses on the phenomenon of rabbi's son Lior Liebling, a boy with Down syndrome considered a "spiritual genius" for his boundless enthusiasm for prayer and professed close communication with God. What makes this involving beyond its subject's slightly freakish fascination is helmer Ilana Trachtman's capturing of a complex family dynamic in which Lior isn't the only intriguing personality. Fest, broadcast and possible limited theatrical play are signaled.

Present here in poignant homemovies and diary excerpts, Devorah Bartnoff Liebling was a mother of four and, like her husband, a rabbi.

She died of cancer in 1997, when Lior was 6 years old. Since then, Mordechai Liebling has remarried, giving the kids a dedicated stepmom in Lynne Iser. But the somewhat hard-driving dad seems to expect everyone to help parent Lior, who does need a lot of caretaking. Eldest Reena (now at college) was a surrogate mom and babysitter after Devorah's death. High schooler Yoni philosophically acknowledges the responsibility of being Lior's "best friend" means he will likely go to college – and even spend his whole adult life – within commuting distance of little bro. (Another Liebling son, Ben, does not appear here.)

The family's self-sacrifice is admirable. Still, it's refreshing when youngest child Anna frankly complains that Lior's "specialness" means she never gets to be the center of attention.

Lior is indeed special, as an exceptionally high-functioning Down syndrome child -- quick-witted, cheerful, a jokester, at times unusually wise for his age. Yet he's also stubborn, speech-defected (his words are subtitled) and otherwise clearly disabled. What has made him unusual even among similarly better-abled Down kids is a love of "davening" (prayer), which has made him an inspiring leader -- in spoken word and bellowingly atonal song -- to both Hebrew school classmates (who grudgingly accept him as an inept teammate in sports) and synagogue members. He seems to palpably feel God's presence, though he refuses to answer direct questions about what that is like.

One community member, not unkindly, suggests the "beaming faces" that greeted Lior's vocal religious expressions from an early age are their real cause. Yet Lior doesn't seem capable of calculation. (He can, however, be rather cruel in his frank assessments of others.) Early on, Yoni says, "I don't know if there's a God, but if there is, Lior is closer to Him than anyone I know," which sums things up nicely.

Narrative momentum is provided by all the preparations for Lior's bar mitzvah. It's attended by 300, with Mordechai almost levitating with pride in the front row as Lior "really rises to the occasion" at the podium. Still, one might well judge most powerfully sympathetic figures here to be Lynne and Yoni, patient background players whose generosity is deeply affecting. Closing-credits seg is a crowd-pleasing delight.

These people are so interesting, and Trachtman's handling so intimate and involving, that it would be very welcome if she revisited the family every so often, "Up"-style. Zelda Greenstein's deft editing and Andy Statman's klezmer-influenced acoustic score are package standouts.

Camera (color, DigiBeta), Slawomir Grunberg, Ari Haberberg; editor, Zelda Greenstein; music, Andy Statman; sound, Bill Markle, Tom Gnaldek. Reviewed on DVD, San Francisco, Aug. 1, 2007. (In San Francisco Jewish Film Festival.) Running time: 87 MIN.