

Who Is Entitled to Pray?

“Praying With Lior,” which won the Audience Award for Best Documentary in the Boston and Washington Jewish Film Festivals, has just come into commercial release. Lior Liebling, a boy with Down Syndrome, has a remarkable relationship with prayer and God. Award-winning documentary filmmaker and television producer Ilana Trachtman (also a Lilith author) brings the audience into Lior’s home and heart, as he prepares for the highlight of his life to date—his Bar Mitzvah.

LILITH: *Children like Lior are not seen in most of our synagogues. How do you propose we work to become more spiritually complete?*

ILANA TRACHTMAN: The first thing we need to do is to look around and think about who’s missing. The reason the disabled are not in our synagogues is because they’re not reached out to and they don’t know they’ll be welcome. It’s also about progressive morality. 100 years ago we didn’t see a lot of women in our synagogues because the notion was that they didn’t have much

with a great deal of integrity. For Lior, he has a genius for comic timing. I didn’t realize how crucial it was to making this movie work. There is such a stigma around disability—people are afraid to talk about it and they expect a film about this topic to be depressing. But because Lior laughs so easily and intelligently, that gives everyone permission to treat him like a regular kid; to laugh with him and his family, and at them. And that’s what prevents it from being a movie that’s sad, sappy and filled with pity.

LILITH: *There’s been loss and grief for Lior and his family. How does his stepmom, Lynne, play a role?*

IT: What I really admired was the grace with which they were able to remember Devorah [Lior’s late mother], and also love and accept Lynne, making room for both mothers in their home. Lior refers Mama Lynne and Mommy Devorah.

LILITH: *How did you choose what to include?*

IT: Devorah’s the only person who couldn’t consent to being part of the movie. I didn’t want to exploit the pain of losing her. To ex-



From left: Lior and his older brother, Yoni; Lior; filmmaker Trachtman

to contribute. Now half of our rabbinical schools are filled with women. We shouldn’t be making our synagogues more acceptable and inclusive because it’s the right thing to do, but because it’s better for all of us. Our spirituality will be richer for it.

LILITH: *Is one reason disabled people are excluded is because of the pressures for Jewish perfectionism and scholarly advancement?*

IT: In modern Jewish society, there’s such a competitive premium on intellectual achievements. Disability becomes a source of shame. It’s not part of the mainstream Jewish cultural value. Ironically, in the Bible, we have a long history of disabled heroes—Leah may be blind, Isaac would’ve probably been diagnosed as being ADHD, Jacob walked with a limp, Moshe had a speech impediment. We are intimately connected with these patriarchs and matriarchs whose names we invoke every Shabbat. And yet there is no sign of anyone with disabilities in our own synagogues.

LILITH: *Yet Lior can react with humor.*

IT: The whole family has a highly developed sense of black humor. On film, it really translates their experience as authentic and strong,

clude the clips would have felt like too big an omission in her role in shaping Lior and the family. I chose footage that represented her relationship with Lior, and so we see her idealized.

When I read the article she wrote about Lior, I was really moved by the line “I wonder what his Bar Mitzvah will be like... if there’ll be a place in this community for him.” In essence, Devorah was asking for this movie eight years before I met Lior.

LILITH: *What’s your hope for the future of this film?*

IT: I don’t want people to go home having just seen a good movie and get on with their lives. I admire and look to a film like “Trembling Before G-d” to really change awareness.

I’m working on an interactive website about having Bar/Bat Mitzvahs for disabled children, with streaming video. And an anthology of disabled kids’ Bar/Bat Mitzvah stories. I hope this is the beginning of this type of change—of seeing and perceiving people with disabilities. I want every clergy to see the film; ordaining institutes to do workshops; synagogues to have inclusion committees—and then the inclusion committees should become obsolete!

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