

# PRAYING WITH LIOR

A film by Ilana Trachtman

88 minutes, color, 2007



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## **SYNOPSIS**

An engrossing, wrenching and tender documentary film, *PRAYING WITH LIOR* introduces Lior Liebling, also called "the little rebbe." Lior has Down syndrome, and has spent his entire life praying with utter abandon. Is he a "spiritual genius" as many around him say? Or simply the vessel that contains everyone's unfulfilled wishes and expectations? Lior – whose name means "my light" — lost his mother at age six, and her words and spirit hover over the film. While everyone agrees Lior is closer to God, he's also a burden, a best friend, an inspiration, and an embarrassment, depending on which family member is speaking. As Lior approaches Bar Mitzvah, the Jewish coming-of-age ceremony different characters provides a window into life spent "praying with Lior." The movie poses difficult questions such as what is "disability" and who really talks to God? Told with intimacy and humor, *PRAYING WITH LIOR* is a family story, a triumph story, a grief story, a divinely-inspired story.

*"If there is a God, Lior is definitely closer to God than anyone else I know."  
-- Yoni Liebling, Lior's brother*

*PRAYING WITH LIOR* is not just a documentary film for diverse audiences. It's also the centerpiece of an ambitious outreach campaign to change the way people with disabilities are perceived and received by faith communities.

Over 54 million Americans are disabled. Less than half of our houses of worship are handicapped accessible. This number alone speaks to the abandonment of the disabled in faith communities.

In a society that literally "worships" perfection and same-ness, individuals with physical and cognitive disabilities are dismissed and discriminated against everywhere. In the place where they should receive the most welcome and derive the most comfort -- their faith communities -- parents of children with special needs often hear "your child shouldn't be here."

Describing Lior's Bar Mitzvah, an editorial in the Philadelphia Inquirer stated, "pre-conceived notions joyously explode."

Our goal for this film and outreach campaign is to create a sea change in the way we as a society value each individual. Lior's story presents a dramatic opportunity to demonstrate the contribution that every individual can make, no matter how "special." While society may view inclusion as the *right* or *nice* thing to do, Lior's example shows us that his presence actually *enhances* everyone else's religious experience. Lior's Bar Mitzvah is wonderful for him, but really, as one synagogue member says, "it's for us."

Each person, and each community, deserve the opportunity to spiritually connect, grow, and shine to the highest rung of their potential. We believe that this is most possible when our communities are truly whole, that is, open to everyone.

Almost nothing in our current culture has the power of film. In this climate, a film with humor, pathos, mysticism, and love about the impact of one youngster's spirituality, *combined with a powerful outreach strategy* can provide the impetus for enormous strides in understanding and systemic change.

## **DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT**

I was not looking for a film subject, and I wasn't particularly interested in disability. I'm not sure I ever thought about disability. What I was doing had no connection to my career as a producer/ director of TV documentaries. I was actually trying to pray.

Searching for spiritual inspiration outside the stale synagogue experience of my childhood, I attended a retreat for the Jewish New Year. As I sat in the service, anxious, distracted, counting the pages until I'd be free, I heard Lior's unabashed, off-key, ecstatic voice. When I turned to look at the source of this sound, I was struck to see a boy with Down syndrome. And I was surprised to find myself envious of this "disabled" child, who could pray as I wished I could.

Over the course of this retreat, I stalked Lior, looking for the secret to his prayer. When I heard he was having a Bar Mitzvah, I pictured the movie version. And then I realized that I could make it.

Soon after, I read "Praying with Lior," the article Lior's late mother had written 7 years earlier, about her 5 year-old son who had Down syndrome and could pray like nobody's business. Devora ended the article wondering what Lior's Bar Mitzvah would be like, wondering if she would live to see it. Reading that prophetic question, and knowing that she died, I felt compelled to tell the story where the article left off.

The keys to the telling of Lior's story only revealed themselves to me later - Lior's dynamic, honest, and expressive family; his gifted comic timing; and a series of unpredictable story twists that make documentary filmmaking so rewarding. While I've been making films about captivating people for fifteen years, *Praying with Lior* affected me in profound ways, recalibrating my notions of community, family, ability, and spirituality.

I didn't anticipate the passionate intensity of the audience response - the standing ovations, extended runs, rave reviews. While it's true that this film is about a Jewish child with a disability, it's the representation of unconditional love that affects people, inspiring them to write to me from around the world, each person also wanting a little bit of what Lior has.

## **BIOS**

### **ILANA TRACHTMAN - PRODUCER/ DIRECTOR**

Ilana Trachtman is an award-winning documentary and children's television producer. She has produced and directed programs in both English and Spanish for PBS, HBO FAMILY, ABC-TV, SHOWTIME, LIFETIME, DISCOVERY, TRIO, A&E, THIRTEEN/ WNET, THE BIOGRAPHY CHANNEL, and SESAME WORKSHOP.

Ilana is especially interested in character-driven cinema verite. She recently directed two episodes of *Texas Ranch House*, the PBS reality/documentary series set in 1867. Other favorite projects include the film *Our Heroes, Ourselves* (Lifetime,) a documentary special hosted by Marlo Thomas, which profiles four grassroots women heroes with the goal of empowering viewers to become heroes in their own lives. The program won a Cine Golden Eagle, a Telly Award, and the Woody Harrelson Environmental Award. For *Biography*, Ilana produced, directed, and wrote specials on Sylvia Plath and Bram Stoker, and for the Trio Network, she directed the series *24 w/*, a highly stylized "day in the life" program capturing

some of pop culture's most interesting icons (including Vera Wang, Damon Dash, and Tina Brown.)

Ilana also has an extensive background in producing and directing programs for children. She recently produced the Spanish version of Sesame Street's *Talk, Listen, Connect: Helping Military Families Cope with Deployment*. For HBO Family, she conceived and co-produced *My Favorite Book*, a 60-episode children's series in which 5 - 7 year olds tell their own versions of classic picture books. The series includes interviews with over 500 children. Other credits include *What's Going On: Child Poverty in America* for Showtime, profiling hunger and homelessness in the lives of Appalachian and urban children. For ABC-TV, she produced and directed two editions of *ABC Children First*, a magazine-style documentary series for parents. Her program, *The Arts Advantage*, about daring arts education programs around the country, received a Telly Award and an award from Media Rights, the on-line companion to the Human Rights Watch Film Festival.

During two years on the staff of Thirteen/ WNET's *City Arts* (now called *Egg: The Arts Show* on PBS,) Ilana received three New York Emmys and many nominations. She produced the special *Working Actors*, co-produced the special *Tales from the Book Trade*, and developed stories for over 100 documentary segments about the contemporary art world. *PRAYING WITH LIOR* is her first independent film.

#### **ZELDA GREENSTEIN - EDITOR**

Zelda Greenstein is an acclaimed documentary editor. Her work has been screened at almost every Jewish film festival in the world. Zeldais editing credits include: *Hiding and Seeking: Faith and Tolerance after the Holocaust* (Winner of the 2004 Jewish Image Award for Documentary; Best Documentary, 2004 North America Interfaith Film Festival; Opening film for the New York Jewish Film Festival, and to be broadcast on POV in 2005), *Divan* (international theatrical release,) *90 Miles* (2001 International Human Rights Watch Film Festival.) Other celebrated work includes *Women of the Wall; Enemy of the People; and An American Love Story*. Her early work included assistant editing on the landmark film *Partisans of Vilna*.

#### **SLAWOMIR GRUNBERG - CINEMATOGRAPHER**

[Slawomir Grunberg](#) is an Emmy Award Winning and Oscar Nominated documentary producer, director, cameraman, and editor born in Lublin, Poland. He is a graduate of the Polish Film School in Lodz, where he studied cinematography and directing. He emigrated to the US in 1981, and has since directed and produced over 50 television documentaries. Slawomir has received international awards and recognition for his commitment to documentary filmmaking, including a Guggenheim Fellowship, and a Soros Justice Media Fellowship.

Recent films he directed and/or shot include *School Prayer: A Community at War* (PBS), *Fenceline: A Company Town Divided* (PBS,) *The Legacy of Jedabne, Portraits of Emotion, Legacy* (Oscar nomination for best documentary), *Sister Rose's Passion* (nominated for an Oscar for best documentary short,) *Borderline: People vs. Eunice Baker; Chelyabinsk: The Most Contaminated Place on the Planet*. He has garnered awards at films festivals all over the world. Slawomir has also been a contributing director of photography and editor for the PBS series *Frontline*, *AIDS Quarterly*, *American Masters*, *NOVA*, *Health Quarterly*, *Inside Gorbachev's USSR* with Hendrick Smith, and *People's Century*, as well as for Lifetime and HBO.

### **ARI HABERBERG - CINEMATOGRAPHER**

Ari Haberberg has been a documentary cinematographer for fifteen years. He has won several Emmy awards for his work on PBS and episodes of the children's show Reading Rainbow as well as several industry and film festival awards for his commercial and independent film work. His work has taken him to the Amazon rain forest, the tundra of Arctic Canada, the highest, and the lowest points on earth and he has, to date, interviewed nearly two thousand wide ranging subjects including Paul Newman, Bill Clinton, Ethan Hawke, Brittany Spears, Henry Kissinger, Arthur Miller, and Uta Hagen.

### **ROBERTA MORRIS PURDEE - LINE PRODUCER**

Roberta Morris Purdee began her career working with actress/director Lee Grant, on a stage production of Plaza Suite, filmed by HBO. In the past twenty years they have worked together on than more than a dozen films. Notable projects include Academy Award winning documentary *Down and Out In America*, Emmy winners, *Nobody's Child* for which Marlo Thomas won an Emmy, *Wanted: The Perfect Guy for Madeline Kahn*, and *Cindy Eller; A Modern Fairy Tale* for Pearl Bailey.

Documentaries for Lifetime Television include *Our Heroes, Ourselves* with Marlo Thomas; *Confronting the Crisis; Childcare in America*, hosted by Kyra Sedgwick and *Say It, Fight It, Cure It*, hosted by Rosie O'Donnell. Through her production company, Karmic Release, Ltd., produced the critically acclaimed independent film, *Wallowitch & Ross THIS MOMENT*. For HBO Morris Purdee recently completed *Baghdad ER*, winner of multiple Emmy's and the DuPont Award, and *A Father... A Son... Once Upon A Time in Hollywood*, chronicling the personal and professional lives of Kirk and Michael Douglas.

### **ANDY STATMAN, COMPOSER**

[Andy Statman](#) is widely considered a klezmer and bluegrass virtuoso, a genius on both the clarinet and mandolin, a master of Jewish soul, and one of the most influential acoustic musicians of our time. He has recorded over 20 albums, and played numerous sessions with Bela Fleck, Ricky Skaggs, David Grisman, and Itshak Perlman.

### **AWARDS**

#### **AUDIENCE AWARD, BEST DOCUMENTARY:**

BOSTON JEWISH FILM FESTIVAL, 2007  
WASHINGTON JEWISH FILM FESTIVAL, 2007  
SAN DIEGO JEWISH FILM FESTIVAL, 2008  
VANCOUVER JEWISH FESTIVAL, 2008  
SEATTLE JEWISH FILM FESTIVAL, 2008

### **FESTIVALS**

San Francisco Jewish Film Festival, 7/07  
Boston Jewish Film Festival, 10/07  
Margaret Mead Film Festival, 11/07  
Washington DC Jewish Film Festival, 12/07  
New York Jewish Film Festival, 1/08  
Atlanta Jewish Film Festival, 1/08  
Denver Jewish Film Festival 2/08

Caracas Jewish Film Festival, 2/08  
San Diego Jewish Film Festival, 2/08  
Denver Jewish Film Festival, 2/08  
Caracas Jewish Film Festival, 2/08  
New Jersey Jewish Film Festival, 3/08  
Hartford Jewish Film Festival, 3/08  
Tampa Jewish Film Festival, 3/08  
Minneapolis Jewish Film Festival, 3/08  
Sarasota Film Festival, 4/08  
New Jersey Jewish Film Festival, 4/08  
Pioneer Valley Jewish Film Festival, 4/08  
Pacific Jewish Film Festival, 4/08  
Rockland Jewish Film Festival, 4/08  
Vancouver Jewish Film Festival, 4/08  
Winnipeg Jewish Film Festival, 4/08  
Seattle Jewish Film Festival, 4/08  
Pittsburgh Israeli-Jewish Film Festival, 4/08  
Jewish Film Festival of Grand Rapids, 5/08  
Toronto Jewish Film Festival, 5/08  
Detroit Jewish Film Festival, 5/08  
St. Louis Jewish Film Festival, 6/08  
Rochester Jewish Film Festival, 7/08  
Youngstown Area Jewish Film Festival, 9/08  
Sun Valley Spiritual Film Festival, 9/08  
Harrisburg Jewish Film Festival, 9/08  
Haifa International FF, 10/08  
Beth Tzedec Calgary JFF, 11/08  
Rutgers New Jersey JFF, 11/08

### **THEATRICAL RUNS**

NEW YORK – Cinema Village  
PHILADELPHIA – Bala Theater, Bryn Mawr Film Center, Ambler Theater, Hiway Theater  
LOS ANGELES – Laemmle Music Hall & Town Center  
WASHINGTON DC – Avalon Theatre  
BOSTON – West Newton Cinema  
CHICAGO – Facets Cinematheque

Limited engagements:

PORTLAND, MILWAUKEE, ARKANSAS, FT. LAUDERDALE, WILMINGTON;  
WASHINGTON, GA; WICHITA, ST. PAUL, OMAHA, DALLAS, COLUMBIA, SC;  
TALLAHASSEE, CHANDLER, AZ; and BLACKSBURG, VA.

### **CREDITS**

PRODUCED AND DIRECTED BY  
Ilana Trachtman

EDITOR  
Zelda Greenstein

CINEMATOGRAPHERS

Slawomir Grunberg

And Ari Haberberg

LINE PRODUCER

Roberta Morris Purdee

COMPOSER

Andy Statman

SOUND DESIGN AND MIX

Bill Markle

SOUND RECORDIST

Tom Gnaidek

ONLINE EDITOR AND COLORIST

Charles Gelber/ GTV

TITLE ANIMATION

Gerry Katzban / GKdesign

ASSISTANT EDITORS

Rosie Nakamura

Lem Huntington

Jeremy Minton

Erica Freed

Steven Swiller

Gabe Tanenhaus

Rachel Cower

ASSISTANT PRODUCER

Erin Edeiken

MUSIC RECORDER AND MIXER

Brian Deming at Duotone Audio Group

MUSICIANS

Andy Statman Trio

Andy Statman – mandolin, clarinet

Larry Eagle – percussion

Jim Whitney – base

Jerry O'Sullivan – wooden flute

DEVORA BARTNOFF'S ARTICLE READ BY:

Donna Isaacs

HOME VIDEO FOOTAGE  
Rabbi Mordechai Liebling and Lynne Iser  
Rabbi David Azen

**DIRECTOR'S FILMOGRAPHY**

PRAYING WITH LIOR  
PRODUCER/DIRECTOR, RUBY PICTURES, 2007

BIG IDEAS FOR A SMALL PLANET  
SUPERVISING PRODUCER, (SCOUT PRODUCTIONS), SUNDANCE CHANNEL, 2008

REAL SIMPLE TV  
CO-EXECUTIVE PRODUCER (TIME WARNER INC), PBS, 2006

TEXAS RANCHHOUSE  
DIRECTOR, (WALL TO WALL MEDIA), PBS, 2006

SESAME STEET: TALK, LISTEN, CONNECT: HELPING FAMILIES COPE WITH  
DEPLOYMENT SPANISH VERSION  
PRODUCER, (EDUCATIONAL, DISTRIBUTED TO 100,000 MILITARY FAMILIES  
AND BROADCAST ON PBS), SESAME WORKSHOP, 2006

SESAME STEET: YOU CAN ASK! SPANISH VERSION  
PRODUCER, (EDUCATIONAL), SESAME WORKSHOP, 2004

BIOGRAPHY: SYLVIA PLATH  
PRODUCER, DIRECTOR, WRITER (WORKING DOG PRODUCTIONS), A&E/  
BIOGRAPHY CHANNEL, 2004

BIOGRAPHY: BRAM STOKER  
PRODUCER, DIRECTOR, WRITER (WORKING DOG PRODUCTIONS), A&E/  
BIOGRAPHY CHANNEL, 2004

24 W/ SERIES  
DIRECTOR, (SCOUT PRODUCTIONS), TRIO NETWORK, 2003

WHAT'S GOING ON?  
PRODUCER, (RCN ENTERTAINMENT), SHOWTIME, 2003

OUR HEROES, OURSELVES  
PRODUCER, DIRECTOR, (TUPELO-HONEY), LIFETIME, 2002

MY FAVORITE BOOK  
CO-PRODUCER, (HBO), HBO FAMILY, 2001

ABC CHILDREN FIRST: THE ARTS ADVANTAGE  
PRODUCER, (GLOBALVISION), ABC-TV, 2000

ABC CHILDREN FIRST MILLENNIUM SPECIAL: THE FUTURE IS HERE



PRODUCER, (GLOBALVISION), ABC-TV, 2000

CITY ARTS SPECIAL: WORKING ACTORS  
PRODUCER, (THIRTEEN - WNET), THIRTEEN/ PBS, 1999

CITY ARTS SPECIAL: TALES FROM THE BOOK TRADE  
CO-PRODUCER, (THIRTEEN – WNET), THIRTEEN/ PBS, 1998

FACTOIDS  
PRODUCER, (LANCIT MEDIA), DISCOVERY CHANNEL KIDS, 1997

### **PRAISE**

“Warm-hearted and mesmerizing, made with equal parts admiration and astonishment. It discards the clichés and condescension of so many mainstream religious films to help us see the power of faith in action.” –*New York Sun*

**Critic’s Pick!** “Beautiful....This triumphant little movie leaps from good to great....a small miracle! ” –**Rachel Beckman, *Washington Post***

“Captivating! One of the more uplifting true-life tales you're likely to see ... (Lior) makes believers of us all.” –**Gary Goldstein, *Los Angeles Times***

**Critic’s Pick!** “The extraordinary life of Lior Liebling ...touching!”  
–**Jeanette Catsoulis, *New York Times***

“Intriguing, profound, deceptively simple portrait of how a young man's faith illuminates his family and community.” –**Carrie Rickey, *Philadelphia Inquirer***

**Critic’s Pick!** “Engages us on so many levels it transcends its middle-class Jewish milieu... It depicts a warm and nurturing community that gathers around Lior, both to protect him and to be transformed by his miraculous presence. It’s about cruel limitations and sudden, blessed freedoms. –**David Edelstein, *New York Magazine***

“Fascinating documentary...explores a rather extraordinary instance of real-world faith, sans condescension or proselytizing...refreshing, intimate and involving ...powerfully sympathetic ...a crowd-pleasing delight.” –**Variety**

“Heart wrenching...A gentle, tender-hearted portrait.” – **NY Newsday**

“Intimate, moving documentary ... refreshingly down-to-earth.” –**Onion AV Club**

“There have been a number of very popular documentaries about religion in recent years, but *Praying with Lior* stands out as one of the most heartfelt and touching.” –**ABC News**

“Funny and touching, brilliantly and lovingly made!” –**Jewish Week**

“Trachtman creates a deep sense of intimacy...Lior is an irrepressible character as he works a room, doing exactly what a bar mitzvah boy should: challenging, instructing, and, in his own way, healing the world.” –**Andrea Gronvall, *Chicago Reader***

“If you can watch *Praying With Lior* without shedding a tear, it’s time for an emotional checkup... uplifting ...raises fundamental questions about the meaning of human existence.” –***Box Office Magazine***

“At turns inspiring, heartbreaking.” –***Jewish Daily Forward***

“A moving and dramatic portrayal of a family ...unsentimental, powerful.” –***Tikkun***

“Exceptional ... earns every single bittersweet tear its audience sheds.” –***Film Forward***

Tender, assured ...both hopeful and pragmatic.” –***Indiewire***

“Irresistible...this film about making his bar mitzvah will deepen your understanding both of the “handicapped” and of prayer.

–**Kevin Doherty and Joseph Cunneen, *National Catholic Reporter***

“Charming, warm and thoroughly engrossing documentary.” –***NYC Movie Guru***

“A tender, moving documentary ...triumphant.” –**Rod Pocowatchit, *Wichita Eagle***