

Lior Liebling

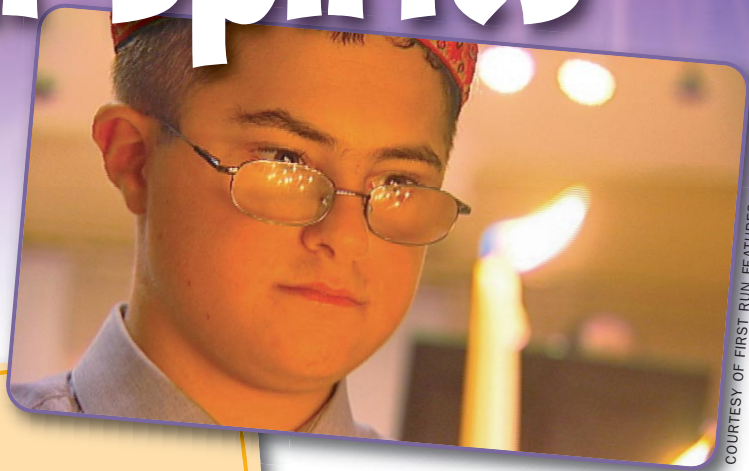
Lifts Our Spirits

BY BETH PANITZ

Ilana Trachtman’s mind wandered in and out of the Rosh Hashanah service, drifting from her *mahzor* to thoughts about her work as a filmmaker. Suddenly—like a *shofar*’s call to prayer—a booming, soulful voice behind her pierced her daydreams and pulled her back to the present. “How many people will pass from the earth and how many will be created,” cried the voice in Hebrew. Though slurred and sung off key, the words of the prayer awakened a yearning for God in Trachtman that she had forgotten existed. Curious about who could be praying with such *kavanah* (religious sincerity), she turned around. What she saw surprised her.

Lior Liebling, a preteen boy with Down syndrome—a genetic condition that causes learning disabilities—swayed rhythmically in his seat, his prayer book held tightly in his hands. *Impossible*, Trachtman thought, but as she watched, Lior continued singing in Hebrew: *וְהַשׁוּבָה וְהַתְּפִלָּה וְהַצְדָּקָה מֵעִבְרִין אֶת רֵעַ הַגִּזְרָה (U’teshuvah, u’tefillah, u’tzedakah ma’avirin et roa hagezeirah, But repentance, prayer, and tzedakah remove the evil of the decree).* As she davened with Lior during those High Holy Days in 2003, Trachtman felt renewed, and she soon learned that others felt the same way.

“I love davening,” says Lior, grinning widely. “It gives me energy; it gives me power, it makes me strong.” Touched by Lior’s spirit, Trachtman approached his family about making a documentary about his upcoming bar mitzvah. The family quickly agreed, and production began on *Praying With Lior*. “We wanted to spread hope to parents of children with disabilities,” says Lior’s dad, Rabbi Mordechai Liebling, who remembers the dark days when he first learned that Lior had Down syndrome. “When we got the diagnosis, my wife and I cried. We were grieving the loss of all the hopes we had for our baby.” But as the days and years passed and Lior grew



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Meet Lior

- Age:** 16
- Siblings:** Anna, 15; Yoni, 20; Reena, 23; Ben, 26
- Just for Fun:** Running, swimming, basketball (played on Special Olympics team), watching the Phillies play baseball
- Favorite Holiday:** Yom Kippur, “because for one day you can’t eat or drink or watch TV or play on the computer. You just go to *shul* and pray.”
- Favorite Course in School:** Math
- Favorite Jewish Book:** *Jews and Baseball* by Burton A. Boxerman and Benita W. Boxerman

Lior, as seen in the movie, *Praying With Lior*

into a sensitive, caring child, his family gained new hope. “People with disabilities can find a place in the Jewish community,” says Lior’s dad. “And it’s not just that we’re being nice to include them; they can be strong contributors.”

Lior, now 16, raises spirits wherever he davenes, whether it’s the synagogue where he became a bar mitzvah or the school he attended until eighth grade. “Sometimes we walk into *shul* and the energy is low; people are dragging,” says Lior’s dad. “Within five minutes of Lior’s davening, the energy level has completely changed.” Lior is always quick to give a hug and a warm Shabbat greeting to his many friends at *shul*.

As a toddler, Lior loved to listen to his mother, Rabbi Devora Bartnoff, sing “*Shalom Aleikhem*” to him. Despite his disability, he learned each precious prayer she joyfully recited with him. But tragedy struck when Lior was 6: His mother died from breast cancer. Lior found that prayer not only connected him to her spirit, but also gave him hope for better days. “My mommy, Devora, is always in my heart, davening with me,” he says. “When I pray, I hope for an easy life. I want to let go of things, like getting angry.”

An avid drummer, Lior loves to daven in his backyard, where he pounds his Middle Eastern dumbek in rhythm to his prayers. “It’s joyful to watch Lior pray, and that joy leads to a sense of hope,” says his father. “For me, to see that Lior is accepted and treated kindly brings me hope that there is justice in the world.”

watch the trailer



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