

PRAYING WITH LIOR

A film by Ilana Trachtman

88 minutes, Color, Video, 1.73:1 letterboxed, 2007, USA



First Run Features
630 Ninth Avenue, Suite 1213
New York, NY 10036
(212) 243-0600/Fax (212) 989-7649
email: Info@firstrunfeatures.com

www.firstrunfeatures.com

PRAYING WITH LIOR – 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.

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. Zelda's 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 film 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 Kissenger, 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.