

שישו ושמחו בשמחת תורה, ותנו כבוד לתורה. This is a splendid and very wonderful story written by R' Chaim Dahan in the Torah Tavlin a number of years ago. You may have heard it before, but it's so beautiful, it's worth repeating. The morning of שמחת תורה, R' Baruch Rabinowitz and his son Nota Shloima, who had Down's syndrome, headed off to their Yeshiva Torah Vodaath to dance, sing, and revel in the completion of yet another cycle of the annual Torah reading. Young Nota Shloima was as happy as they could be. He carried along his own beautiful little ספר תורה made out of paper, which his parents had bought him. It was by no means a real ספר תורה which you could lein from, but to little Nota Shloima, it was as real as could be. After the dancing and singing concluded, it was time to read from the תורה and call each and every individual up for his עליה, as we do on שמחת תורה. Numerous ספרי תורה were now out to be read simultaneously in various sections of the shul. As Nota Shloima looked at all the many ספרי תורה, he began to wonder what would happen with his little ספר תורה. He approached one of the גבאים and he said, "Are you going to read from my ספר תורה?" The גבאי looked at little Nota Shloima, knowing what his answer was but not knowing or not having the heart to tell him, this little paper ספר תורה was beautiful, but you couldn't lein from it. Looking over at Nota Shloima and the גבאי was R' Avraham Pam זצ"ל, the ראש ישיבה of Torah Vodaath. He overheard what Nota Shloima had said and realized what the issue was. Without hesitating, Rav Pam got up and walked over to Nota Shloima who still stood beside the גבאי, waiting for the answers to why his ספר תורה could not be used. Rav Pam bent down and whispered something into Nota Shloima's ear. All that could be heard was Nota Shloima's soft, compliant reply, "Okay." And with that, Nota Shloima quietly went back to his seat. Everyone watched in surprise. Rav Pam had appeared to have said the perfect words to ease Nota Shloima, but no one had any idea what they were. Nota Shloima remained peacefully seated throughout the remainder of the davening, periodically asking his father when everyone would begin going home. By the time davening was over, it was close to two o'clock in the afternoon, as is usual on שמחת תורה. While everyone else began to exit the shul, Rav Pam walked over to Nota Shloima, who was eagerly waiting. "Do you remember what I told you, Nota Shloima?" Rav Pam said. "Now it's your turn." Right then and there, as the many men and women were filing out of the shul, Rav Pam remained with Nota Shloima, dancing and singing. The two of them enjoyed their own little הקפות, and then Nota Shloima was given a make-believe עליה from his תורה. Now everyone understood what Rav Pam had whispered to Nota Shloima. He had said, "Nota Shloima, right now it is the time for the older people in shul to use their ספר תורה. After we finish davening, we'll use your ספר תורה, will receive an עליה, and we will dance together." And that's exactly what they did. The great ראש ישיבה made time for young Nota Shloima and showed him that he mattered and was just as important as everyone else. Such is the true joy of שמחת תורה and the mark of a great תורה leader. That to me is such a wonderful story about שמחת תורה, how we can be sensitive to everybody.

I'm going to tell you a different story about sensitivity, which R' Oelbaum told us right before שופר blowing this last ראש השנה. Many years ago, a plane was hijacked. There were תפילות all over the world for the people on that plane, and Baruch Hashem, this story has a happy ending, they were all released and got out safely. On that particular plane, there was a young woman who got back to New York and was doubly thrilled because her best friend's חתונה was the next day. She came home and told her mother, "I made it; I can be home in time for my friend's חתונה." Her mother responded, "You can't go to that חתונה." The daughter was shocked. "Mom, this is my best friend's חתונה. I made it out in time. Why can't I go?" The mother answered, "If you go to this חתונה, you will be the center of attention. You will be the one who got out of that plane hijacking. This is the כלה's night to be the center of attention. You have to allow her to be the center of attention; you cannot take that away from her."

That is sensitivity. That's exactly the same sensitivity. We could all learn from that. I thought that was a splendid way to start the year. Let us all be sensitive to each other, be a little more caring and concerned about everybody else, relatives and non-relatives alike.

