

When I was ten and a half I went around telling my friends I was born in Canada. Now, I knew full well that I had been born in Jamaica Hospital which, despite its tropical name is in Queens, which itself is part of an island that is located in the Atlantic, not the Caribbean. I don't remember why I made up a story about a Canadian birthplace. I didn't know much of anything about Canada, beyond assuming everyone spoke English there. I'd not visited or learned about Canada in school, only seen the boundary line toward the top of the large U.S. map rolled down over the blackboard for geography. But this was World War II and at some point I must have heard that the Dutch royal princess had fled to Ottawa as the Netherlands was about to be invaded. There she gave birth to a baby girl who was also a royal princess. No doubt I was captivated by the danger and escape story. Maybe allying with this one gave me the chance for a princess-like distinction.

My schoolmates, however, were in no way impressed by my attempt at celebrity via northern birth, and mainly ignored my tale. Of course, I realized I was making things up, but I liked making up stories, and wanted to tell them to an audience. After a while, it occurred to me to make up a story about my best friend, Carol and her dog Skippy. Pleased to hear about herself, Carol stopped and listened. Then, the next summer at sleep-away camp I tried telling stories featuring my bunkmates. After lights out, I'd begin by inventing something about my cousin Joanne who had the bed next to mine, then one by one include the other six girls in the story. Everyone listened for her name in the dark and when I was out of breath we all fell asleep. While I don't remember what my stories were about, I suspect they were snatches of everyday life, or of children's fairy tales, or re-workings of Bible stories – Joseph and his brothers, Ruth and Naomi – that the camp director would read at services every shabbat when she would also warn us to be sure to keep all the commandments so we would get good marks in the Book of Life. It was that summer when first to my puzzled imagination arose the great metaphor of the Book of Life and the blank pages on which each year we would write and be written.

The challenge of blank pages continues. Sometimes in unexpected ways. Two or three years ago, during the days between Rosh Ha-Shanah and Yom Kippur, there was an annoying glitch when I turned on my computer. A blank page that I hadn't accessed appeared on the screen. I deleted it, but the blank page appeared again, so I deleted it a second time, then a third as it kept re-appearing. Even after I'd shut down and re-started the computer the blank page appeared, thrusting itself forward like an unwelcome gift. Or – I thought - like an insistent child. Into my aggravation came old memories of summer camp and learning about the Book of Life with its blank pages during the Days of Awe, the blankness on which we would write and sign our names and take responsibility and look to see what had been written about us. Back then, that seemed not too different from the new notebooks we kids would buy each school year with their lines on which were supposed to write and the red vertical on each page marking off the margin our pens were not supposed to mar.

Now so many years later, can I really start with a blank page? Yom Kippur promises that everyone can. But perhaps my computer glitch was a warning, I thought, against the temptation to believe that I or anyone else can start with a truly blank slate or with nothing scrawled in the margins. It's strange to believe in the possibility of emptiness or true starting over for don't people use what's available or what has worked for them before? Philosophers knew that – even before genetics -- Plato who believed that infants were born empty of thought, but trailing clouds of glory as they retained some memories of what they had learned before birth. Even John Locke, apostle of empiricism, the theory that everything we know comes through experience, even he finally had to admit that no one comes into the world as a tabula rasa, a completely blank slate. Yes, at Yom Kippur, our page is blank. But it shimmers with whiteness and white, as we know, contains all colors. As at Yom Kippur, all is potentiality: for repetition in place, repeating what's we've written before, or for the deepening of familiar forms, or for shaping our days into new designs and new colors.

In a different way, the birth of the royal child years ago in Ottawa also contained both repetition and potentiality for new or renewed designs. After the war, her mother, the princess, later queen, Juliana, sent 25,000 tulip bulbs to the city to which she had fled and yearly since then a gift of 10,000 bulbs arrives. Always tulips, always 10,000. The display is breathtaking. I don't know whether the particular cultivar or the design or color of the tulips change from year to year. Perhaps, they do, and in that way resemble the opportunity and potentiality given to each of us at this season, and to this blessed congregation, for change and for growth.