

“What Does 13 Look Like?”
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What does 13 look like? 13 can be a tumultuous time in life. Entering the teenage years and leaving the security of childhood can be fearful and frightening. Teens’ eyes are opened to adult realities. They face physically maturing bodies, body image issues, school pressure, peer pressure, life pressure. They witness life on the web where parental screens can no longer keep out the harsh words of social media and they see life on the streets where parents cannot cover their teen’s eyes to harsh realities and enticements that could easily lead one down a detrimental path.

What should 13 look like? In Judaism, 13 is a monumental milestone. It is the age of Bar and Bat Mitzvah – an age I know well. Almost every Saturday for the past 20 years, I have officiated at the ceremony of one or two 13 year olds leading a service on their own. Almost every week, I study and talk with several of them. I even have my own 13 year old son in my home. In Judaism, 13 is a time of responsibility. 13 marks the beginning of Jewish adulthood. 13 is an age of being able to make moral choices, of being able to make positive choices.

Anne Frank received a gift on her 13th birthday from her father. She received a diary in which she recorded words of hope and inspiration amidst the Nazi occupation of Amsterdam during the most horrific time in history. She gave it to her father each night to keep in his briefcase.

At the age of 4, Anne Frank was forced to flee her home of Frankfurt, Germany, and move to the Netherlands. In 1942, at the age of 13, just after receiving her diary, Anne lived in hiding with her family for two years until they were found and deported to concentration camps. She ultimately died in Bergen Belsen.

That gift of a diary would provide an outlet for Anne Frank’s creativity and enable the world, for the sixty years following her death, to see the Nazi occupation through the eyes of an adolescent. In the worst of times, her creativity would enable all of us to have faith in a brighter future.

Anne Frank aspired to become a journalist but questioned her capability. In 1944, after almost two year of hiding she wrote: “I finally realized that I must do my schoolwork to keep from being ignorant, to get on in life, to become a journalist, because that's what I want! I know I can write, but it remains to be seen whether I really have talent... And if I don't have the talent to write books or newspaper articles, I can always write for myself.”

Anne Frank wrote for all of us. Even though she was a most acclaimed adolescent author, like most young teenagers, she was on one hand plagued by self-doubt and on the other buoyed by idealism: "I must uphold my ideals," she wrote, "for perhaps the time will come when I shall be able to carry them out."

We, as adults, must help our community's thirteen year olds to embrace that idealism by serving as a mirror for their strengths and for their beautiful souls. We must nurture them to see and be their best.

13 year olds have unlimited potential. As adults, we must help our community's youth to actualize their God-given gifts by giving them the tools to unlock their potential – the canvas and paint, the keyboard and guitar, the stage and microphone, the paper and pen.

The Mint Museum, Behailu, an arts afterschool academy, the Council for Children's Rights, all help teens to excel in life, to expand their horizons, to fulfill their potential.

Anne Frank lived in the 1930's and 1940's of Nazi Occupied Europe. We live today.

What does 13 look like? This past Spring Break, in March of 2015, another caring father gave his brave 13 year old a gift -- the opportunity to climb a mountain, not only metaphorically but physically.

A girl name Ashima Shiraishi from New York City traveled on her Spring Break three months ago to Santa Linya, Spain, and ascended a notably rough rock climb called the "Open Your Mind Direct" route. At the age of 13, she was the first woman and the youngest male or female to climb a route with that difficulty grade.

Ashima told The Huffington Post via Skype following her success that she was surprised by how quickly she scaled the route after days of practice and planning.

"For every hard climb, the hardest part is the mental game," she says. "I've worked through all the moves, I know I can do each move. But doing each move all together [is a lot harder]."

Strategy, creativity, laying out options, planning moves, practicing, put it all together, and most of all, supportive adults to help teens along the way, all set the stage for success.

No matter what hardships 13 year olds face, from the Holocaust to the hardest cliffs to climb, with the right tools and the right mentors they can succeed and make the most of the canvas of life and challenges before them.

What does thirteen look like? What can thirteen look like? What should thirteen look like? And what is our role in making that happen for the teens in our community?

Our role is to offer options, to offer direction, to offer creative outlets to make a difference. Our role, like that of the Council for Children's Rights, the Mint Museum and Bahailu, is to provide a palette of possibilities for our kids' futures.

The 48,000 kids living in poverty in Charlotte-Mecklenburg face limited options: single parents, parents working two jobs to make ends meet, adults struggling to put food on the table for their families, homelessness, and other challenges of poverty leave very limited resources.

Marion Wright Edelman, the Founder and the President of the Children's Defense Fund opens her book called *The Sea is So Wide and My Boat is So Small* with a prayer

“God, we have pushed so many of our children into the tumultuous sea of life in small and leaky boats without survival gear and compass.

Forgive us and help them to forgive us.

Help us now to give all our children the anchors of faith and love,

The rudders of purpose and hope,

The sails of health and education, and the paddles of family and community,

To keep them safe and strong when life's sea gets rough.”

Our role is to give as many teens in our community as we can the tools and the mentoring they need to succeed.

I am thankful to Whitney and Mitchell Feld for planning and for inviting me to this wonderful event. I am awed by their volunteerism and their generosity of time and talent. At our meeting to plan this event, they told me about the inspirational story of Wes Moore.

There were actually two people named Wes Moore who grew up not far from one another in Baltimore, Maryland. One was an investment banker, a decorated veteran, a Rhodes Scholar, a former aide to Condoleeza Rice, a business leader. The other was wanted for killing a police officer and was sentenced to life in prison. The book written by the former seeks to understand how both boys named Wes Moore, raised in fatherless families and in underprivileged neighborhoods, could end up following such difference paths. And his conclusion -- it was the impact of relatives, mentors, and expectations that made a difference.

“Having a vision for your life matters,” author Wes Moore shares. “Your life can always go in different directions. Had it not been the folks who ushered me into manhood in the way that they did, things would have gone very differently. The biggest gap we have in society in our society is not necessarily the education gap [nor] the technology gap but the expectation gap. How do we help people think differently about their lives?”

Today, it is the impact of a community, of all of you who care that can make a difference.

Through the arts, we can help our teens have a different perspective -- to see the colors differently, to hear music differently, to see themselves, their lives and their future differently.

Like every Bar and Bat Mitzvah students who weekly stands on our pulpit, may we help our teens reach amazing goals.

Like Anne Frank, may we help our teens capture their tough realities and articulate and maintain their hopes and ideals.

Like Ashima Shiraishi, may we allow our teens to dream, to climb, and to become their best (if not the best).

Like the former Wes Moore who made it to the top of his field, may we set the bar high for our teens and provide the mentoring for them to get there.

What does thirteen look like? I can't wait to see... for with our help to the teens in Charlotte, their drawings, their paintings, their photographs, their words, their music, their positive choices, their shining souls and their successes will continue to inspire us and sustain us.