



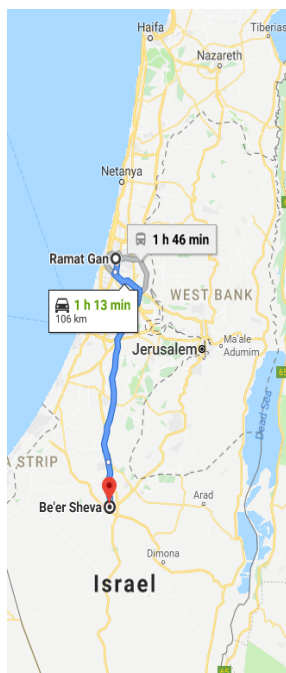
Center for Israel Education

Ilan Ramon

The Leadership Series



CIE
Center for
Israel Education



Map showing
locations of Ramat
Gan and Be'er Sheva

Source: [Google Maps](#)

From 1974-1976, Ilan participated in Basic Training and Operations. He continued to serve in the Air Force until 1983, where he held numerous positions including Squadron Commander. He was the youngest pilot to participate in Operation Opera, which destroyed an Iraqi nuclear reactor. While this operation occurred in 1983, the information was classified and not made public until 2003.

2. University and Returning to the Army

"The quiet that envelops space makes the beauty even more powerful, and I only hope that the quiet can one day spread to my country." -Ilan Ramon



F-16 credited with destroying the Iraqi nuclear

Source: Zachi Evenor, [Wikimedia Commons](#)

Ilan went to college at Tel Aviv University. In 1986, while still at university, he met Rona Bar Simantov. Her family was Turkish but had immigrated to Israel before she was born. Rona studied physical education and alternative medicine. Ilan and Rona got married on October 16, 1986. Ilan graduated with a Bachelor of Science degree in electronics and computer engineering in 1987. After graduating, he returned to the Israeli Air Force as a Deputy Squadron Commander. From 1992-1994, he served as the Head of the Aircraft Branch in the Operations Requirement Department. His experience in the Air Force was incredible; he accumulated over 3,000 flight hours on different aircrafts.



Map of European Russia at the end of the nineteenth century

Source: [public domain](#).

2. Ben-Gurion's Teenage Years

"If an expert says it can't be done, get another expert."

-David Ben-Gurion



Ben-Gurion as volunteer
in Jewish Legion in 1918

Source: Martin Gilbert,
Wikimedia Commons. [public domain](#)
([details](#)).

Ben-Gurion became very interested in Zionism as a teenager, influenced heavily in his home. At the age of 14, together with two friends, he founded a youth club called "Ezra." The club promoted studying Hebrew and emigration to the land of Israel.

He attended college at the University of Warsaw, where he joined the Social-Democratic Jewish Workers' Party (in Hebrew called *Poalei Zion*). During the Russian Revolution of 1905, he was arrested twice.

3. The First Israeli Astronaut

"When I was a kid growing up, nobody in Israel ever dreamed -- well most people wouldn't dream -- of being an astronaut, because it wasn't on the agenda. So I never thought I would have been an astronaut. When I was selected, I really jumped almost to space. I was very excited." -Ilan Ramon



Source: NASA, National Photo Collection

In 1995, United States President Bill Clinton promised Israeli Prime Minister Shimon Peres that Israel would join America's space program. In April 1997, Ilan Ramon received a call from a friend in the Air Force asking if he'd like to become an astronaut. He did not think this his colleague was being serious and he responded, *"Come on, I don't have time for jokes now."* When it became clear that the offer was serious, Ramon told his friend that he had to first talk it through with his wife. He later accepted the position, saying:

"[i]t's a privilege to represent the State of Israel...it's a great honor for me."

Ramon was selected as a payload specialist for a NASA mission. A payload specialist is a technical expert on a space mission that requires 5 years of intensive training. Israelis were very excited at finally been represented in space. In July 1998, Ramon began his training at the Johnson Space Center in Houston, Texas. His wife, Rona, and his four children, aged 2-10, joined him in Texas.

Initially, the Space Shuttle mission Columbia was scheduled for 2001, but the launch date kept on being postponed due to technical problems and bad weather. Although annoyed at the long wait, Ilan commented that *"I'm here to do a mission, and I'll stay until it's finished."*

His children learned to speak English fluently and even with Texas accents! The Ramons were fully engaged with the Jewish community in Houston--attending Hebrew school, synagogues, and Jewish summer camp. Ilan and Rona hoped that the mission would take place soon, wanting to be back in Israel for their son Tal's Bar Mitzvah.

4. Meaningful Artifacts in Space

"I was born in Israel and I'm the proof for my parents and their generation that whatever we've been fighting for in the last century is becoming true."

-Ilan Ramon



Source: National Photo Collection

Ramon felt strongly that he was representing Israelis and Jews in space. Thus, even though he was not religious, he decided that he would want to observe Jewish law, including Shabbat, while in space. He asked for advice from Rabbis on how to keep Shabbat in space, given that days are only 90 minutes long in orbit. He eventually decided to keep Shabbat according to Cape Canaveral time in Florida. He was the first person to request kosher food for a mission.

In his final preparations for his mission, he decided what to bring with him, wanting to bring artifacts that *"emphasize the unity of the people of Israel and the Jewish communities abroad."*

He decided to bring a miniature Torah given to him by a Holocaust survivor of Bergen-Belsen. He also brought a drawing called "Moon Landscape," painted by a young teenager Peter Ginz, who died in Auschwitz in 1944. This painting showed what Peter thought the Earth would look like from the moon. He also brought along a book of Psalms. Lastly, he brought a dollar given to him by the Lubavitcher Rebbe, Rabbi Menachem M. Schneerson. He commented on his decisions as

"symbolic...I thought it would be nice to represent all kinds of Jews, including religious ones."

He even joked about putting a mezuzah up on the shuttle's door but said that this would be the commander's decision.



Peter Ginz's Moon Landscape

Source: [public domain](#).

5. Columbia's Launch into Space

"I'm the son of a Holocaust survivor - I carry on the suffering of the Holocaust generation, and I'm kind of proof that despite all the horror they went through, we're going forward." -Ilan Ramon



Source: NASA (2006)

The Columbia space shuttle, a dedicated science and research mission, took off for space on January 16, 2003. The crew was composed of seven individuals: Rick Husband, commander; William McCool, pilot; Michael Anderson, payload commander; Ilan Ramon, payload specialist; Kalpana Chawla, David Brown, and Laurel Clark, mission specialists. Ramon was the oldest member of the crew, at age 48.

From space, Ramon wrote an email to the Israeli President at the time, Moshe Katzav, saying *"from space I could easily spot Jerusalem, and while looking at Jerusalem our capital I prayed just one short prayer – 'Shema Israel Adonai Elohenou Adonai Echad.'"*

שְׁמַע יִשְׂרָאֵל יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵינוּ יְהוָה אֶחָד

This translates to "Hear, O Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord is One."



Columbia crew in October 2001

Source: NASA

6. Columbia's Tragedy

"The world looks marvelous from up here, so peaceful, so wonderful and so fragile. Everybody, all of us down there, not only in Israel, have to keep it clean and good." -Ilan Ramon

On February 1, 2003, the Columbia shuttle suffered a fatal explosion during reentry into the atmosphere over eastern Texas. All eight members of the crew were killed, including Ramon. The explosion of the shuttle happened just 16 minutes before its scheduled landing in Florida.

Very few of the objects on board survived the crash. However, 37 pages of Ramon's diary he kept while in space survived the crash and were found 2 months later by a Native American. This was miraculous given the speed of Columbia when it disintegrated: almost 6 miles a second. The man who found the diary was originally confused what these pages were. While some of the writing was legible, it was in Hebrew, unfamiliar to him. When identified as Ramon's diary, it was returned to Rona Ramon. She decided to share an excerpt of the diary with the Israeli public in a display at the Israel Museum in Jerusalem.

In his last day of the journal, Ramon wrote:

"Today was the first day that I felt that I am truly living in space. I have become a man who lives and works in space."



Ramon's grave in Nahalal

Source: [public domain](#).

7. Mourning the Loss of Ilan



Source: Ohayon Avi, National Photo Collection

The Israeli government coordinated a special flight for the Ramons' extended family members to come to Florida to mourn their loss together. After memorial services in America, his body was flown back to Israel for a full military funeral. Ilan's children were still very young at the time of his passing, ranging in age from 5-14. Rona helped her children get through this traumatic time, telling them:

"Ilan went in search of a better world...The other crew members were close friends of Ilan's. The only thing that gives me any comfort is that they had such a good time and loved one another. They were simply a group of angels and that's how they will stay."

Many leaders from around the world made statements mourning the loss of Ilan. Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon said:

"[t]hese times strengthen the feeling of common destiny, values and common vision of the American and Israeli nations. Ilan Ramon and his friends on the space shuttle were victims of science, the progress and aspiration of all of us to a better life on Earth. The Israeli nation is mourning in light of this heavy tragedy."

Daniel Ayalon, Israel's Ambassador to the United States said:

"[t]his is a big tragedy for the United States and for Israel and for the families."

8. Awards and Dedications to Ilan

"We have a wonderful country, wonderful youth, marvelous people, a marvelous Tower of Babel of the world's cultures, and there is hope and vision. All we need is a clear direction." -Ilan Ramon



President Shimon Peres meeting with Rona Ramon, widow of Ilan Ramon (2007)

Source: Ohayon Avi, National Photo Collection

Following his passing, Ilan Ramon was awarded the Congressional Space Medal of Honor. Ramon is the only non-US citizen to receive this honor. He was also awarded the NASA Space Flight Medal, as well as the Chief of Staff Medal of Appreciation.

There are many institutions dedicated to Ilan Ramon in both Israel and the U.S. In 2007, the Ben-Gurion University of the Negev dedicated the Youth Physics Center in his name. In 2011, Heschel West in Agoura Hills, California changed its name to Ilan Ramon Day School. In 2013, the Ilan Ramon Memorial opened at the Ramon Crater visitors center.

In 2019, the Ramon Airport opened in southern Israel, in memory of both Ilan and his son Asaaf who died in 2009 when his F-16 jet crashed. Other namesakes of Ilan include the Ilan Ramon elementary schools in Jerusalem, Netanya, and Be'er Ya'akov, as well as high schools, parks, BBYO chapters, and more.



Ilan Ramon Elementary School (Gan Yavne, Israel)

Source: 'ש' ת"ד. This file is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 3.0 Unported license.

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Rona Ramon with Prime Minister Ehud Olmert, young tennis players, and U.S. astronaut

Source: Ohayon Avi, National Photo Collection