

Israeli astronaut's widow carries on after tragedy

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In this Feb. 10, 2003 file photo, Rona Ramon, right, and Assaf Ramon, left, widow and eldest son of Israel's first astronaut Ilan Ramon, pay their respects beside his coffin during a memorial service at Ben Gurion International Airport outside Tel Aviv. Ten years after the loss of her husband followed by the loss of her son Assaf six years later, Ramon, 48, said she has slowly tried to rebuild her life, leading a foundation formed in memory of her husband and son and counseling others who are coping with tragedy. (AP Photo/ Paul Hanna, Pool, File)

(AP)—It's a day Israelis will never forget: Feb. 1, 2003, when national pride abruptly turned to national tragedy.

People gathered around their TV screens to watch the anticipated return of Israel's first astronaut, Ilan Ramon, from a 16-day journey in space aboard the American Columbia shuttle. A hero's welcome awaited, but as people watched the live broadcast, unbelieving, the shuttle craft disintegrated upon re-entering the atmosphere, killing Ramon and his six crewmates.

For Ramon's widow, Rona, it was the first in a pair of cruel blows. Six years later, her oldest son, Asaf, who had followed in his father's footsteps to become an Israeli air force fighter pilot, was killed in a training accident.

Ramon, 48, is still unable to discuss the loss of her son. "I live that every moment, but at the same time try to still look for meaning in life," Ramon said in a phone interview.

She said she has slowly tried to recover, leading a foundation formed in memory of her husband and son and counseling others who are coping with tragedy.

As the country's first astronaut, Ilan Ramon was a national hero, and Israelis closely followed his accomplishments. Ramon's image while floating in space, a big smile on his face, was shown repeatedly on [TV broadcasts](#).

Though he was not religious, Ramon, who was 48 when he was killed, insisted on keeping Jewish kosher dietary laws in space, since he saw himself a representative of the Jewish people. He consulted a rabbi on

how to observe his faith in orbit.

A son of a Holocaust survivor, he also took several meaningful items into space, including a pencil sketch of the moon drawn by a young Jew who later perished at the Nazi Auschwitz death camp. Ramon also took a miniature Torah scroll rescued from the Holocaust, along with other religious items.

Ten years later, the memory of the Columbia accident is still strong in Israel. Though the country is accustomed to national tragedies, the Columbia disaster was especially painful. An uplifting journey had captivated a nation and elicited great hope and promise, yet in a minute it turned into an outpouring of grief.

"What I remember most from that day was the expectation, the joy and the longing to see him return. The great loss that followed left me heartbroken," Ramon told The Associated Press. With the families of the other [astronauts](#), she was at the Florida landing site, waiting for the shuttle. "I remember the moment we realized what had happened, and they removed us from the landing site. I just looked up at the sky and said 'God, bring him back to me.'"

Ilan Ramon, a fighter pilot who took part in Israel's bombing of an Iraqi nuclear reactor in 1981, has become a national icon. Dozens of schools and other institutions are named after him. Each year, NASA sends a delegation to a space conference held in his honor. This year's is in progress now.

Rona Ramon largely stayed out of the public eye for years following his death, trying to make sense of her loss. "Realizing in a moment that your life has changed forever is a huge shock," she said. But on Sept. 13, 2009, she was forced back into the spotlight by the death of their oldest son.

Capt. Asaf Ramon, who was 21, was killed when his F-16 warplane crashed in a routine training flight. Inspired by his father, he had excelled in his training and was awarded his pilot's wings by President Shimon Peres. Asaf had expressed hope that he, too, would one day become an astronaut.

The pair of tragedies inspired Rona Ramon to earn an M.A. in holistic health from Lesley University in Massachusetts. She has branched out to psycho-spiritual coaching in hopes of better helping others cope with personal tragedies.

"The decision to go study emerged from the crisis I went through," she said. "Only by directly facing it could I cope."

Her studies have helped her recognize that she is now coping with "anniversary grief."

"Time is tricky. Over time you lose objectivity," she said. "Sometimes it feels like it happened ages ago and sometimes it feels like it just happened."

Over the past few years she has found comfort in her work at The Ramon Foundation, a nonprofit she established that promotes personal and social excellence through space, flight, science and technology. She also gives speeches across Israel and offers grief counseling to others.

She has three surviving children. One son is studying music in college. The other, with her consent, is a combat soldier in the army and her daughter is in high school.

Ilan's parents, who also became well-known figures in Israel during the Columbia mission, have since passed away.

On her way to Tuesday's opening of the Annual International Ilan Ramon Space Conference, hosting 14 heads of space agencies from around the world, including NASA Administrator Charles Bolden, Rona Ramon said Tuesday that she mostly felt pride in her family.

"I'm surrounded by so many friends and so much support," she said. "When I think of Ilan, the first thing I think about is his smile. That is his legacy."

More information: Online: www.ramonfoundation.org.il/en/

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