

Ilan Ramon (1954–2003)

Israel's First Astronaut

Biography

Ilan Ramon, Israel's first astronaut, was born on June 20, 1954, in Ramat Gan, Israel, to Tanya and Eliezer Wolfferman. Eliezer had fled Nazi Germany with his family in 1935 for British Mandate Palestine, while Tanya had survived Auschwitz and moved to Israel with her mother in 1949.

After high school, Ramon joined the Israeli Air Force (IAF) and graduated with honors. He served as a fighter pilot in critical Israeli operations: the 1973 Yom Kippur War, the 1981 Operation Opera attack on Iraq's nuclear reactor, and the First Lebanon War in 1982. After completing his IAF service, Ramon studied computer and electronic engineering at Tel Aviv University. On graduating, he returned to the IAF to work on the development of Israel's Lavi fighter plane, and in 1990, he became the commander of Israel's first F-16 squadron after completing two years of training at Hill Air Force Base in Utah, USA.

Ramon changed his last name from Wolfferman to the more Israeli-sounding Ramon when he joined the IAF. His first name, Ilan, which means tree in Hebrew, reflects his connection to nature. Growing up in Be'er Sheva, not too far from the Ramon Crater in the Negev desert, he chose the last name Ramon to reflect this special place. The Ilan Ramon Memorial and Museum, dedicated in his memory, is located near the crater in Mitzpe Ramon.

In 1994, after accumulating over 4,000 flight hours, Ramon was promoted to the rank of colonel. In 1997, he was selected by NASA to serve as a payload specialist on the Space Shuttle Columbia, and he and his family moved to Houston, Texas, so that he could begin training at NASA's Johnson Space Center. After four years of preparation, on January 16, 2003, Ramon launched into space with six American astronauts.

Although not an observant Jew, Ramon felt that he was representing all Israelis and Jews during his NASA mission to space. He requested kosher meals for his time in space and consulted a rabbi about observing Shabbat while orbiting in space. To honor his family and his heritage, he took a variety of meaningful items with him: a drawing titled "Moon Landscape" by Peter Ginz, a 14-year-old victim of Auschwitz, a mezuzah, a one-dollar bill from the Lubavitcher Rebbe, and a microfiche of all five books of the Torah, gifted to Ramon by Israeli President Moshe Katzav. He also took a family photo and letters from his wife and children to read while in space.

The crew of Columbia completed their 16-day mission, during which they conducted 80 experiments focused on environmental studies, plant growth, and medical research. However, on February 1, 2003, as the shuttle re-entered Earth's atmosphere, it malfunctioned and

exploded, claiming the lives of all seven astronauts aboard. Ilan Ramon left behind his wife, Rona, and four children.

Following his death, Ramon was awarded the Congressional Space Medal of Honor and the NASA Space Flight Medal by the US Congress. In his memory, the Israel Space Agency created several educational programs to inspire young people to pursue careers in aviation, space, science, and technology. They also hold the annual Space Olympics for young students on the anniversary of his death.

Framing

The goal of this session is to learn about Ilan Ramon and his historic trip to space that ended tragically with the disintegration of Space Shuttle Columbia while reentering Earth's atmosphere. Students will learn about the treasures that Ilan Ramon took with him into space, which symbolized the responsibility he felt toward his family, Judaism, the Jewish people, and the State of Israel, and think about what items they would take into space.

Scope

This unit can be completed in 2 classes of 45 minutes each:

- Introduction and Video: 5 minutes
- Activity #1 (Interview with Ilan Ramon): 20 minutes
- Activity #2 (Personal Treasures): 20 minutes
- Activity #3 (Show and Tell): 45 minutes

Printing

- [Interview with Ilan Ramon Worksheet](#), for each student
- [Ilan Ramon's Personal Treasures Worksheet](#), for each student
- [Show and Tell Worksheet](#), for each student

Activity #1: Interview with Ilan Ramon

- Divide the students into pairs and give each student the [Interview with Ilan Ramon Worksheet](#) to formulate 5 interview questions to ask Ilan Ramon during an interview. Three questions are written together with their partner, and two questions are written **independently** without their partner.
 - **Primary Source 1:** [Page from Ilan Ramon's Diary](#): The Space Shuttle Columbia disintegrated while returning to Earth, killing all of the astronauts aboard, including Ilan Ramon. Sections of his diary, which contained personal feelings and descriptions of the historic event, survived the explosion. These surviving sections underwent a complex restoration process and are on extended loan from his family to the NLI.

- Primary Source 2: [Quote from Ilan Ramon's Conversation from the Space Shuttle Columbia with Prime Minister Ariel Sharon](#). While in space, the Columbia astronauts were interviewed by NASA, Israeli and American television stations, and government personalities.
- The students are given new pairs and, using the questions they wrote, they conduct an interview, with one student acting as Ilan Ramon and the other as the interviewer. Then a second round of interviews is conducted with the students switching roles of interviewer and Ilan Ramon. This can be done with the same or new pairs.

Activity #2: Ilan Ramon's Personal Treasures

- Discuss the following questions as a class or in small groups
 - Why do astronauts take personally or culturally important items with them into space?
 - How do objects carry meaning beyond their physical form?
 - Based on what we know about Ilan Ramon, where do his 5 main values (family, responsibility, Israel, the Jewish people, and Judaism) manifest themselves in his story?
- Instruct students (individually, in pairs, or groups) to complete both sides [Ilan Ramon's Personal Treasures Worksheet](#).
- Students share one of the items Ilan Ramon brought to space and which of his values it represents, and what they would bring to space, why they chose that item, and which of Ilan Ramon's values it represents.

Activity #3: Show and Tell

- Students choose an item they would like to bring in to share with the class.
 - The item can be the same or different from the item chosen in Activity #2
 - A picture of the item can be brought in if the item itself can't be brought to school.
- Students complete the [Show and Tell Worksheet](#) with information about their item.
- Students are given 3-5 minutes to present their item to the class using the information on their Show and Tell worksheet. The class is asked to write down one question about each item presented to learn more about the items their classmate shared.

Appendix

- The complete [Ilan Ramon Archive](#) at the National Library.
- The Librarians Blog: [Space Left Behind Ilan Ramon's Diary has Arrived](#)
- The Librarians Blog: [Ilan Ramon, Israel's 1st Astronaut, and the Meaning of Life](#)
- In January 2025, Israel announced that it had entered an agreement with NASA to send a [female Israeli astronaut into space](#).
- The first Jewish American Astronaut in space was Jeffrey Hoffman.
 - In 1985, Jeffrey Hoffman went into space on the Space Shuttle Discovery. He went on four subsequent space missions in 1990, 1992, 1993, and 1996. Like Ilan Ramon, Jeffrey Hoffman wrote a diary documenting his journeys into space and also took Jewish symbols, such as a dreidel and a small Torah scroll into space. In March 2023, Hoffman visited the National Library of Israel and handed over his diary and several other items that are now preserved in a [collection bearing his name](#).
 - [Space Torah](#): a 25-minute movie about Hoffman's time in space and the Jewish treasures he brought with him.