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Dan Cohen describes Ilan Ramon, the first and only Israeli astronaut, as "a man used to rising to the occasion."

On Jan. 31 at 9 p.m., Space Shuttle Columbia: Mission of Hope-a documentary directed by Cohen-will air on the Public Broadcasting Service (PBS) to coincide with the 10th anniversary of Ramon's death.

The late Israeli astronaut Ilan Ramon. Photo: NASA.

Israel sent one of its best on NASA's fatal Columbia mission: Israel Air Force (IAF) Colonel Ramon was 46, an engineer (electronics and computers), a pilot, married and a father of four. As a combat pilot, he was an integral part of the 1981 raid on the Iraqi nuclear reactor at Osirak. He trained for Columbia at Houston's Johnson Space Center. Officially designated as a payload specialist, Ramon was described by Commander Mike Anderson as "fully integrated with the crew."

Ramon, one of the mission's seven casualties, is the only non-American to receive the United States Congressional Space Medal of Honor (awarded posthumously). He was chosen to be a NASA astronaut in 1997. By 1998, he had begun a rigorous, five-year training program.

"From the moment he arrived in Houston until he lifted off, Ramon went through a transformational change. He came to understand who he was and what he represented," Cohen told JNS.org.

Ramon considered himself a representative of all Jews and all Israelis. Although a secular Jew, as the first Israeli astronaut he recognized the importance of maintaining Jewish identity and unity.

"I am the son of a Holocaust survivor," he once told Israel Radio. "I carry on the suffering of the Holocaust generation, proof that despite all the horror they went through, we're going forward." Ramon asked Mission Commander Rick Husband to provide kosher meals on board Columbia and received rabbinical guidance for Shabbat observance in space.

Among the topics explored in Cohen's film is what astronauts carry into space. Some carry significant personal items; others bring items with a larger message. Poems and photographs, letters and legacy accompanied Ilan Ramon to space. His wife and children sent personal mementos and letters. Moshe Katsav, then Israel's president, provided a Tanach (Bible) on microfiche. History traveled, too: a pencil drawing called "Moon Landscape" drawn by 14-year-old Peter Ginz, killed at Auschwitz; a kiddush cup; and the flag of the IAF also flew. These things, said then Prime Minister Ariel Sharon at Ramon's memorial service, "touched and excited all Jews" and were "a source of pride and united our hearts."

The Israeli astronaut also carried a miniature Torah scroll saved from the Holocaust. The scroll had been given to a boy who celebrated his bar mitzvah trapped in the horrors of the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp. The rabbi who had smuggled the Torah into the camp did not survive; the boy, the scroll-the rabbi's admonition to tell the world what happened in that place and the boy's promise-did.

Dr. Joachim "Yoya" Joseph, that bar mitzvah boy, became a physicist and was Israel's lead scientist supporting Ramon on the ground. During their work together, Ramon learned the story of the scroll. When he returned to Houston, he asked permission to take the tiny Torah saved "from the depths of Hell to the heights of space."

"Ilan felt Yoya's promise deep within his heart and carried it with him deep into space," Cohen

said. "Keeping the promise is an important part of the mission of this film."

Mission of Hope is the story of the most diverse shuttle crew ever to explore space. "Moving tributes like this film remind us all that spaceflight always carries great risk," NASA Administrator and four-time space shuttle astronaut Charles Bolden said. "But fallen heroes like Ilan were willing to risk the ultimate sacrifice to make important science discoveries and push the envelope of human achievement."

For Cohen, Mission of Hope became a personal mission. He sought to tell the story not as tragic, but rather as uplifting. "When Yoya asked, 'What can I do to help you tell this story?' I did not realize that conversation would lead me down a seven-year path," he said. Meetings with General Rani Falk at the Israeli Embassy in Washington, with Ramon's widow, Rona, and the other astronauts' families followed.

Overall, making the film took the full 10 years since the Columbia tragedy.

"We had to wait for Rona (Ramon's widow) to be ready," Cohen said. "Raising money was also difficult."

Dr. Alex Grobman, historical consultant for the documentary and executive director of the America Israel Friendship League, has great admiration for Cohen. Grobman, who also appears in the production, was called upon to verify the historical correctness of the story of the bar mitzvah in Bergen-Belson, including confirmation that there was actually a Torah at the ceremony.

"Filmmakers rarely care about historical accuracy," Grobman told JNS.org. "Cohen's approach was different-he was meticulous in his research. For him, this was a labor of love."

"Ilan Ramon was an exceptional man, a charismatic personality who recognized that being part of the Columbia shuttle crew was a transformational experience," Grobman said. "Ramon embodied the best of Israel. One cannot view this film without understanding the depth of his humanity, love of Israel, and responsibility to the Jewish people. Being involved with this

production, as an historian, as a Jew, was a great honor."

Space Shuttle Columbia, Mission STS-107, launched Jan. 16, 2003. For 16 days, every aspect of the flight and its scheduled experiments was considered fully successful. But as the crew prepared for landing, Columbia exploded and disintegrated. Little was left, either human or material. Among the objects that did survive was the in-flight diary of Ramon, virtually intact, still legible.

"I felt that I am truly living in space," he wrote. "I have become a man who lives and works in space.

Space Shuttle Columbia: Mission of Hope, produced by Christopher G. Cowen with Executive Producers Tom Hanks, Gary Goetzman and Mark Herzog, directed by Daniel Cohen for the Public Broadcasting Service (PBS), tells the story of the Columbia Space Shuttle and of astronaut Ilan Ramon. It incorporates NASA archival footage and video shot by fellow crewmember Dave Brown. Mission of Hope was shot on location in Jerusalem, the Kennedy Space Center in Florida and Washington, D.C.