

## ***Their Names Are In the Stars***



**A**s I write this article, all of us are reeling from the shock of the Columbia disaster. I had just walked into *shul* for services on *Shabbat* morning, February 1, when a member came up to me and said, "We have a problem. It appears the space shuttle has gone down."

For all Americans, this was a sad time. For us as Jews, there was an extra measure of sadness. Among the seven men and women lost was the first Israeli astronaut, Ilan Ramon. As he wore the Star of David on his space suit, his mission

was a source of pride for Israelis and Jews everywhere. It was a moment of hope, a beacon of light in these tumultuous times that have engulfed our homeland.

As I have reflected in these last few days about this loss, I was struck by its impact. Our minds and hearts ached for the astronauts and their families. Regular television programming was suspended on Saturday. The news was dominated for days with the story.

How interesting, I thought. Another sixteen minutes and the shuttle would have safely landed. And we would have hardly noticed!

It is amazing how the extraordinary has become routine. There was a time when space launches were broadcast live. The return of manned space flights was an event to stop and watch. But now they hardly bear mention on the evening news. Many of us were probably unaware that the shuttle was in orbit, or that it was scheduled to land that Saturday morning.

Until it didn't come home.

How many things that were virtually unthinkable a century ago, fifty years ago, a decade ago, have become everyday. Science fiction has become reality. Things that were impossible become every day matters. The extraordinary becomes ordinary. And we lose sight of how spectacular discovery and achievement are.

Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel spoke about the soul's need for "radical amazement" to be able to sense God. If everything is ordinary or routine, we become deadened to a sense of the wonder of the universe or of the human spirit.

Of course, we could not function if we were always focused on the marvel of daily events. Things must become routine for us to function. We do not focus on tying our shoes as we did when we first learned.

Still, to be truly human, we need to live with an "aspect of appreciation." Somewhere in our consciousness we must know that we cannot take everything for granted. The disintegration of the shuttle reminds us of that in a very palpable way. When a tragedy like Columbia, or Challenger before it, or even so many less dramatic losses, occur, we come to realize how wondrous our achievement is, how miraculous life is, how dependent we are on so much that we must take for granted, and how critical the balance is between success and failure.

While some may question the need for manned space travel, I believe the President is right when he eulogized the fallen astronauts at a memorial service in Houston saying: "This cause of exploration and discovery is not an option we choose. It is a desire written in the human heart. We are that part of creation which seeks to understand all creation. We find the best among us, send them forth into unmapped darkness and pray they will return. They go in peace for all mankind. And all mankind is in their debt."

The *Torah* reflects this spirit when God charges humankind, "Fill the earth and master it." Discovery is part of our charge as human beings. It is God's gift to us to push back every frontier and enlighten every dark place with the light of knowledge and the soulful spirit of humankind.

As we reach for the frontier, we must also be focused on earth, on building a just society, a society where each person has the opportunity to live, thrive and dream. Ilan Ramon, the child of Holocaust survivors, an Israeli who carried a *Sefer Torah* into the heavens with him, who saw himself as a representative of the whole Jewish people, gave us a charge from space. In a conversation with Prime Minister Ariel Sharon, he said: "I call upon every Jew in the world to plant a tree in the land of Israel during the coming year. I would like to see 13 or 14 million new trees planted in Israel exactly one year from now, on the anniversary of the Columbia launching."

In his memory we can do no less. Here at AJ, we are committed to planting a grove of 1,000 trees in the memorial to the seven astronauts which is being planned in American Independence Park near Jerusalem, close to the site of the Challenger memorial. Please use the coupon below to participate in this effort.

And so we remember all of the seven astronauts with admiration for their spirit of heroism and discovery:

Col. Ilan Ramon, Israel Defense Forces  
Col. Rick Husband  
Lt. Col. Michael Anderson  
Cmdr. Laurel Clark  
Capt. David Brown  
Cmdr. William McCool  
Dr. Kalpana Chawla

As President Bush said, paraphrasing a verse from Isaiah, "The same Creator who names the stars also knows the names of the seven souls we mourn today. . . May God bless the grieving families, and may God continue to bless America."

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