

Unbroken

The Legacy of Rona Ramon
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The passing this week of Rona Ramon, the widow of Ilan Ramon, after a private battle with pancreatic cancer, is a moment for all of us to pause and reflect. While there has been much discussion surrounding what she chosen to do, or not to do, with respect to burial, let us not, in our evaluation of that matter, even as we do not for a moment diminish the sanctity of Jewish burial, forget the timeless wisdom of our Sages, “do not judge your friend until you have been in her place”, אל תדין את חברך עד שתגיע למקומו. And that was precisely the thing about Rona Ramon, no one, but no one, could walk in her shoes, could even begin to comprehend her loss.

First, of course, the death of her husband Ilan, one of the finest pilots in the history of the Israeli Air Force, who successfully participation in the destruction of the Iraqi nuclear reactor in Osirak, and who was, as we all recall, Israel’s first astronaut, being handpicked from the elite of Israel’s air force for that specific mission.

In his final weeks, Ilan created perhaps the greatest *Kiddush Hashem* of my lifetime- we all recall that Ilan, the son and grandson of Auschwitz survivors, brought into space a Sefer Torah from Bergen Belsen, the Moon Landscape drawn by Peter Ginz in Theresienstadt, and who later died in Auschwitz; how Ilan recited Shema Yisrael as the Columbia orbited the planet; how he insisted, irrespective of his practices on planet Earth, then when he was in space, as the representative of the State of Israel and the entire Jewish people, that he had to observe the laws of kashrut.

Who could ever forget Ilan's kiddush in space, uttering the words **זכרון למעשה בראשית** in a way that brought greater glory to the Almighty as the sovereign master of the cosmos than anything which could be recited on this earth? Who could forget that in those dark days of the Second Intifada, and I was learning in Israel at the time, they were dark days indeed, how Ilan brought us pride and hope and a sense of the strength and vitality of the first Jewish state in two thousand years.

אין בעל מת אלא לאשתו, the loss of a husband under any circumstances is enough to crush a spouse. The loss of such a man, at the height of his powers, in front of the entire world on that February morning in 2013, is beyond imagination. And yet, Rona persisted. She was not broken.

Fast forward six and a half years, in the skies over the Judean desert, Asaf Ramon, Ilan and Rona's eldest child, the top graduate of his own air force class, **טייס מצטיין**, is careering to his own death in an F-16, the same fighter jet his father flew, having spent just twenty one years on this earth. He is laid to rest in the grave beside Ilan, the one Rona thought would be hers many decades into the future. The loss of any son, under any circumstances, is enough to crush a mother. The loss of such a son, in the very bloom of his youth, with unlimited promise, in the skies, just as his father had, is beyond imagination. And yet, Rona persisted. She was not broken.

Rising from the grief, Rona founded institutions to memorialize her husband and her son, that would focus on education and service, empowering disadvantaged children in Israeli society. She furthered her own education, studying healing and holistic medicine. She recently participated in the naming ceremony of Israel's new airport outside of Eilat, named for her husband and her son, the Ilan and Asaf Ramon Airport.

Rona would speak widely and publicly, refusing to allow the tragedies of her life to define her. As she said, not knowing that this was precisely the same view that the Rav, Rabbi Soloveitchik articulated in his own inimitable way in his seminal essay, *Kol Dodi Dofek*, the question of **למה**, why did this happen to me, is completely inscrutable, and thus, devoid of meaning; the question of **ל-מה**, for what purpose, what can I do now

that my life has taken this course, is and must be the center of my thoughts, and the impetus for my every action.

ראה אנכי נותן לפניכם היום את החיים ואת הטוב ואת המוות ואת הרע, God placed in Rona's lot life and goodness, but at the same time, death and darkness. She chose, as we are mandated to, with singular courage, to carry on with life, ובחרת בחיים, to choose life, until she left us five days ago, stricken by a cruel and lethal disease.

If the message of Ilan and Asaf's life was the importance of striving for excellence, for each of us to reach his or her maximum potential, literally, to touch the very skies, the message of Rona's life was different, as Providence would have it. Her life is a master class in resilience and perseverance, irrespective of unthinkable loss and suffering.

None of us, not a single person here in this room, has a perfect life. We face challenges of one form or another, in terms of our health, in terms of our families, in terms of our finances, in every imaginable sphere. We stumble. And sometimes, we fall. But, with Rona's fortitude in mind, we must never allow ourselves to be defined by tragedy and failure, but by our response to them. For, as long as we draw breath, we can create ourselves anew. We can, and we must, choose life.

At the communal plane, the same truth maintains. The American Jewish community is coming to terms with a new reality, one in which emboldened anti-semites have perpetrated terrible acts against our people in Pittsburgh, and one, recently arrested, who sought to do the same in Toledo. We are not naive, and we understand that, sadly, there are more like these wicked and deranged men.

In the wake of these attacks, we have, as I have communicated over the course of the last weeks and months, taken many steps to update and upgrade our security infrastructure. There is no sense of panic or fear, only vigilance and a steely resolve to ensure that our sacred communal spaces remain safe, and continue to serve our community as we continue to carry on the sacred heritage of which we are the proud heirs.

Our security co-chairs, Avi Fried and Dr. Ben Cooper, who will address us briefly following davening, have worked hand in hand with our President, Bob Rabkin, and myself, and our partner's in local, state, and federal law enforcement, to ensure that we have the proper layers in place for our safety and security, which will always remain our top priority.

Most of all, however, the moment we are facing challenges us to have the right attitude. We will not simply be victims, lamenting the rise of anti-semitism, pointing fingers as to its origins and feeling powerless to do anything about it. On the contrary, we must and will be resilient, to accept that we are dealing with a new reality, but one in which must depends on our own actions and choices.

We thank all those of you who have been serving on our security teams, and urge everyone to take responsibility for the safety of this community, in conjunction with our wonderful partners in law enforcement, and thereby, demonstrate our own capacity for resilience and perseverance, the message which Rona Ramon, in her fifty four years, imparted to us all. We must take responsibility. We must, ultimately, see ourselves as guarantors of our beloved shul.

Somewhere in the skies above, where Moon Landscapes drawn by children of the Holocaust, and Kiddush Cups, and a Sefer Torah from Bergen Belsen can all be found, the souls of two of Israel's finest pilots, a father and son, are reunited with their wife and mother.

Unencumbered by the bonds of Earth, and of gravity itself, they soar, and they shine, illuminating a path for the rest of us, revealing that in the darkest night, we must never succumb to grief and despair, but rather, find that strength implanted by our Creator within each of us, to rise, once more, as our People have always done, from the depths, ממעמקים, to untold heights.