

# RABBI DR. NORMAN LAMM'S SPEECH AT YU MEMORIAL FOR SPACE SHUTTLE COLUMBIA ASTRONAUTS – FEBRUARY 3, 2003

We meet on this very sad day to express our grief at the loss of the seven astronauts, men and women, each and every one an accomplished human being worthy of the greatest admiration. And we meet with special poignancy as Jews and friends of the State of Israel because this is the day that Israelis, beset by all kinds of problems – economic, security, political – have anticipated as a day of jubilation. All of us hoped to have an opportunity to see the sun break through the clouds and unfortunately it turned into something quite the reverse.

One thinks of the words of the prophet Amos who said “*ve'hafachti chagaychem l'ayvel ve'chol sheerayich lekina ve'samtiha ke'ayvel yachid*.” “I will turn your festivals into days of mourning and your songs into dirges and I will make it as a day that one mourns for an only son.” Indeed this is a day of *ayvel yachid* for an only son, Colonel Ilan Ramon *zichrono li-veracha*, may his memory be for a blessing. There is a special painful and poignant coincidence that this day is the first day of the month Adar, about which our tradition tells us “*me shenichnas Adar marbin be'simcha*.” A day that ushers in a month – and this year two months – of joy and happiness. Yet, as Amos had said, the joy and the happiness have turned into ashes, into *ayvel*, into mourning.

I cannot begin these words of tribute without mentioning the powerful and moving announcement by President Bush, a truly religious person, who spoke genuinely spiritual words. He quoted the prophet Isaiah, “Raise your eyes to the heavens and see who created all this, who calls by name all the multitude of stars in the heavens, none is missing.” President Bush added that the same Creator who names the stars also knows the names of the seven souls we mourn today. They include Michael Anderson, David Brown, William McCool, Rick Husband, Kalpana Chawla, Laurel Clark, and Ilan Ramon – *aleyhem hashalom*, may they rest in peace.

So we gather to mourn these seven gallant men and women whose lives were snuffed out just sixteen minutes before what should have been a good, healthy, safe landing. At the same time we are assembled here to bemoan the loss of a co-religionist, Col. Ramon. There is much we must learn from the life and death of Ilan Ramon, especially because he was a man who was neither *dati* or anti-*dati*, neither religious, nor anti-religious. Here was a self-proclaimed secular Jew who nevertheless demonstrated marvelous *derech eretz*, or respect, for the Jewish tradition, and sensitivity for the feelings of his observant fellow Israelis. He took along with him a *sefer Torah* and proudly showed it to the world from space. What a *zechus*, what a privilege. Like Moses who went up to receive the Torah and bring it down to the people of Israel, so too Ilan Ramon went up bringing the Torat Moshe, the Torah of Moses, to display to his people on Earth. Indeed Ramon proved that the heavens are sympathetic to the message of the Torah. The midrash tells us that “*darash paltion ish romi*”; a Roman Jew, Paltion, said, “*nitlash har sinai ve'nitzav bi'she-mai marom*.” The Torah was given at Mount Sinai and somehow the entire mountain was picked up to the heavens themselves, as if to say that Torah is applicable to all times and all places – both on Earth and in heaven. Of course, we understand that when we use the term *shamayim* or *rakeeya*, heavens, we mean it in a metaphoric

sense. It does not mean that somehow God is up there in space and not down here. It is only a borrowed term, a metaphoric term.

In contemplating the life and death of Col. Ramon it occurs to me how strange, how paradoxical a people we Jews are. Earlier in the week, 400,000 Israeli citizens voted for a party called Shinui, which has a declared anti-Orthodox bias, an anti-religious bias. Now is not the time to ponder whether or not we observant Jews, or at least some of us, may be responsible for it. But they were demonstrating an impatience with religious parties and the public display of Jewish law, their preference for starting afresh as if Israel must cut off its relations with its past, with its history. And *this very week* a self-proclaimed secular Israeli Jew rises to the very heavens and declares that he is a representative of the State of Israel and of Jews the world over. He acted in a manner that was comfortable to both Jews who are believers and non-believers. He made *kiddush* on Shabbat; he made sure the food was kosher. He recited the *Shema Yisrael*, the great Jewish proclamation of faith. He took along a painting done by a youngster in the death camps when he was 14 years old. He chose to demonstrate that he represents not only the Jewish people today, but the entire people of all ages which has a history and, therefore, a future. What a magnificent gesture, what a magnificent Jew, what a magnificent human being this new national hero of Israel was!

What do we learn from all this? I mean specifically *here* – the students of Yeshiva University.

Number one – we must not give up on non-observant or secular Jews. Col. Ramon proved that in every Jewish heart there beats what in Yiddish is known as a *pintele yid*, a dot, an iota, of Jewishness, of Jewish faith and Jewish loyalty. It is this which allows a man like Ramon to be *me'kadesh shem shamayim be'rabim*, to sanctify the name of Heaven, the name of God, before all the world. And he did so both in his life and in his death. The Talmud tells us Rabbi Judah the Prince wept and said that is possible for a man to receive the gift of eternity, of *olam haba*, in one hour, in one act. Col. Ramon lived a very decent life all his life. In 1981 he was the youngest pilot to participate in the bombing of Osirak, the Iraqi atomic energy plant, the one that was making a bomb – at which time Israelis were vilified by the entire world, the Western world and the Eastern world, and only now in retrospect do we see what a wise decision that was. But as he took his last trip, he showed his true mettle as a great human being and a great Jew, as well as a great astronaut. He reminds us of the Talmud which tells us in *Chaggigah* 27, “*afeeloo poshai yisrael milaaim*

*mitzvot ke'rimon*,” even a vile Jewish sinner is filled with the performance of commandment, of good deeds and virtues, even as a pomegranate is filled with its multitude of seeds. It gives us a different view of people. It means that we who are observant must have a different attitude from the one we had in the past. We must be understanding, friendly and strive to understand each other much better and sympathize with each other; we must disagree with love.

Second, we must remember that we Jews are all bound together in a permanent covenantal bond, the *Bris Sinai*, the covenant of Sinai, that ultimately is the source of our unity. And we who are observant must understand that it is our duty to make Torah and Judaism the source of our unity, and never the source of polarization.

Third, it reminds us that all of us are bound together as human beings. All of us, all races, all religions, all colors are bound together by the *Bris Noach*, the covenant of Noah, for all human beings are created *be'tzelem Elokim*, in the image of God, and all of us therefore are co-responsible for each other. It is in this sense that we mourn for all seven of the astronauts, and we feel not only for them but for their spouses, their families, and their communities. All of them lost their lives as martyrs to a great cause. And so, to the families of all seven, most specifically to the wife and the children and the parents of Ilan Ramon, we recite the words of the prophet Isaiah (Chapter 66) which we read on Shabbat Rosh Chodesh. “Thus says the Lord: the heavens are My throne and the Earth is My footstool, and despite the majesty of God, He says I have special consideration and regard for everyone who is poor, and broken-hearted.