

GROWING UP IN BEERSHEVA, ISRAEL, ILAN RAMON NEVER DREAMED THAT ONE DAY HE'D BECOME HIS COUNTRY'S FIRST ASTRONAUT.



An Air Force Colonel, elite fighter pilot and engineer, Ramon was chosen when the United States invited Israel to join its space program in 1995. After training at NASA's Johnson Space Center in Houston, he became a Payload Specialist

aboard the Space Shuttle Columbia. The son and grandson of Holocaust survivors, Ramon represented not only Israel, but the world Jewish community. Veteran journalist Barbara Sofer vividly chronicles Ramon's life from his childhood in a desert town to his dramatic journey into space and the tragic accident that took his life and the lives of his fellow crewmembers. In a world in search of peace, Ramon has become both a hero and a symbol of hope.

**ILAN
RAMON**





ILAN RAMON

**ISRAEL'S
SPACE HERO**

BARBARA SOFER

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To Yaakov, our children, children-in-law, and the next generation

—B.S.

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An aerial view of the town of Beersheva in 1961

CHAPTER 1

CAMELS FOR SALE

Ilan Wolferman was new in Beersheva, a town on the edge of the Israeli desert where the sun shone most days of the year. A man with a red and white head scarf was leading a camel right toward him. “Want to buy it?” the man offered.

Riding high up on the camel’s back sounded like fun. Some kids were afraid of heights, but not Ilan.

But what would he do with a camel? There was just enough room in their apartment for Ilan, his mom and dad, his older brother Gadi, and the piano!

The Wolfermans had moved from Ramat Gan, a suburb of Tel Aviv, when Ilan’s father Eliezer went to work

in the Dimona nuclear plant. Ilan was in second grade.

Ilan means “tree,” but there were few shade trees in this hot town. David Ben-Gurion, Israel’s first prime minister, promised that one day Beersheva would be a major city and play an important role in Israel’s future. But when Ilan was growing up, it was mostly a quiet town. Every Thursday, the Bedouin Arabs who lived in tents outside the town came in to set up a street market with shining jewelry, coins, sheep, donkeys, and camels.



A crowded section of the weekly Bedouin market in Beersheva

Israelis and tourists from abroad came to shop. Ilan and his friends got used to seeing the Bedouin men riding camels that other kids just saw in movies.

Ilan attended the Be'eri Elementary School. There were nearly 40 boys and girls in his class. The language at school and on the playground was Hebrew, even though many of his classmates spoke different languages at home. Their parents had immigrated from Morocco, Iraq, India, Poland, Hungary, and Romania.

Ilan's parents spoke Hebrew at home. His dad had come to Israel from Germany as a teenager and had fought in Israel's War of Independence in 1948. Ilan's mom, Tonia Kreppel Wolferman, had been imprisoned in the terrible Polish concentration camp at Auschwitz when she was 19. She didn't talk much about that sad part of her life. She wanted her children to be happy and smiling and not to think about her suffering. Mrs. Wolferman loved music and gave piano lessons.

Like most Israeli children, Ilan studied music at school. His teacher would write the words of the songs on the blackboard and play the accordion. The children would copy the words into brown notebooks, decorate the pages, and memorize the songs. Memorizing came easily for Ilan, but he enjoyed solving problems even more. His favorite subjects were arithmetic and nature,



**Israeli schoolchildren in the 1960's
help tend a vegetable garden.**

which included learning about science, and hiking around Beersheva. He studied desert vegetation, especially the plants that managed to grow even though they had little rain. Once a week, the class went to a field where they tended a garden of tomatoes and cucumbers. At recess and after school, Ilan played soccer and dodgeball.

CHAPTER 2

WARTIME BAR MITZVAH

For Jewish boys, turning 13 and becoming Bar Mitzvah is an exciting time. It means being old enough to be considered an adult in religious ceremonies. Family and friends celebrate with a party and presents. Ilan would turn 13 in June 1967.

As his Bar Mitzvah day approached, other events shadowed the lives of all Israelis. In May 1967, Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser expelled the United Nation's peacekeeping forces from the area between Israel and Egypt and stationed Egyptian soldiers along Egypt's southern border with Israel. Then Egypt blocked Israel's port of Eilat, threatening war. Jordan to the east

and Syria to the north pledged their support to Egypt. The only direction without enemies was the west—the Mediterranean Sea. Israel's enemies repeated over and over that they would "drive the Jews into the sea." They meant that they would bomb Israel's cities, defeat the army, and force the Jews to leave.

In Beersheva, everyone prepared for war. Few buildings had shelters. Boys and girls Ilan's age helped



**Students fill sandbags for the school shelter
in preparation for an air attack, May 1967.**

dig ditches and pile sandbags around them. In case they were attacked by air, everyone would go into the ditches for protection. Windows were blacked out with dark paper so the enemy couldn't see the lights of the city and know where to drop the bombs.

Then, on June 5, Israel surprised her enemies. Leaving only 12 planes to defend the country's air space, nearly the entire Israeli Air Force—183 planes—participated in a mission that destroyed the fighter planes of Egypt, Syria, and Jordan. In six days, the war was over and the threat was gone. Israelis celebrated their victory.

Ilan became a Bar Mitzvah in the happy days after the Six Day War. Everyone shared stories of the war. In particular, they praised the skill and daring of the brave pilots.

When they reached ninth grade, Ilan and most of his elementary school friends went on to the much larger Regional Comprehensive High School #3, also called the Himmelfarb High School, in Beersheva. The school had 10 ninth-grade classes. Students had to wear school uniforms of light blue cotton shirts and blue pants. For special occasions, such as Memorial Day, they wore white shirts.

In high school, Ilan chose to concentrate in chemistry and physics, and he was one of the best students in the

class. He was very good at figuring out complicated problems in algebra and trigonometry. Even though he wasn't tall, Ilan was a star basketball player. He was a good swimmer and a fast runner too.

Every year, the school had overnight class trips that Ilan loved. He and his friends would ride in open trucks singing, cooking their own food, and camping out. One of his favorite places to hike was the mysterious and



**Ilan (*back row, third from right*) and his class
take a trip to the beach.**



Ilan loved to hike. One of his favorite places was the Ramon Crater, from which he would later take his Hebrew name.

beautiful Ramon Crater of colored rock, 50 miles south of Beersheva. Years later, Ilan would remember this beautiful spot when he chose a Hebrew name.

Ilan and his group of friends got together on Friday nights, after dinner with their families, to dance and have fun. On Saturday nights, they went to the Beersheva movie theater and a local ice cream parlor. By 11th grade, some of them had bought used motor-bikes that gave them the freedom to get around town.

Nearly everyone in Ilan's class would be going into the army after graduation. It was the dream of many of the boys to become pilots. A lot of the Air Force training