**A Conversation with Rona Ramon**

**Biographical Note**

Rona Ramon was born in Kiryat Ono in 1964. She was a paramedic in the IDF Paratroopers Unit.

At age 22 she married Ilan Ramon. They had four children. Ilan became the first Israeli astronaut.

In 1998, the family moved to Houston in preparation for Flight STS 107 of the Space Shuttle *Columbia*. In 2003, returning from orbit, Rona’s husband Ilan was killed. Six years after that, in 2009, her oldest son Asaf was killed in an Israeli Air Force F–16 training accident.

Rona was a certified holistic caregiver who has been working in the field for more than 20 years. She had a BA in education from the Wingate Institute and an MA in holistic health from Lesley University. Her thesis on the topic “Flourishing and Transformation after Tragedy” offers a solid foundation for patients to acquire and implement the tools they need to transform themselves. Rona was the President of the Ramon Foundation, established in 2014, with the goal of providing Israel’s younger generation with academic excellence and social leadership in the worlds of aviation and aerospace, in the image of Ilan and Asaf Ramon of blessed memory. Rona died of pancreatic cancer in 2018.

**B. Baba Batra 60b**

Our Sages taught: When the Temple was destroyed for a second time, and many Jews began to abstain from eating meat and drinking wine,

R. Joshua got involved with them.

“My sons, why do you not eat meat or drink wine?”

“Shall we eat meat that would have been offered on the altar, offerings that are now canceled? Shall we drink wine that would have been poured as libations, also now canceled?”

“You should also stop eating bread, since the grain offerings too are canceled.”

“We can manage with fruit.”

“We ought not eat fruit, since the offering of the first fruits is also canceled.”

“We can manage with other fruit.”

“We ought not drink water either, since the water libation is also canceled.”

They were silent.

“My sons, come and let me tell you: It is impossible not to mourn at all, since that has been decreed.

“It is impossible to mourn too much, because the public is never presented with a decree that most of them cannot cope with …

“The Sages said this: When one paints one’s house, one should leave a small part unpainted; when one celebrates, one should prepare everything except a small part … when a woman puts on her jewelry, she should leave a small amount unused … as it says, ‘If I forget you, O Jerusalem, let my right hand wither; let my tongue stick to my palate’ (Ps 137:5–6) … and everyone who mourns for Jerusalem will earn the right to see her in her rejoicing, as it says, ‘Rejoice with Jerusalem and be glad for her, all you who love her! Join in her jubilation, all you who mourned over her’ (Isa 66:10).

**Text Study**

**Gil:** You and I have known each other for a long time. I was the principal of Blich High School in Ramat Gan, which your children attended, and I also knew Asaf personally. Like everyone, I followed your tragedy and felt your pain. Our study today will try to shed some light on an area of great darkness: Where does one choose to focus at a time of terrible tragedy? What are the social or emotional prohibitions that we’re forced to examine and cope with? The Sages seek to deal with the fog of confusion in the story we are reading today with a symposium, a quasi-Socratic dialogue, exposing the various and sometimes contradictory perspectives on mourning for the Destruction of the Temple.

Tragic events, personal or national, always pose dilemmas when social expectations contradiction one’s personal imperatives.

Such a dilemma stands at the center of the Sages’ indecision about what to decree on the question of coping with the great Destruction. They choose almost defiantly not to yield to the expectation that there should be a “cult” of mourning. Instead, they introduce a measured, balanced system of mourning. In fact, they encourage the continuation of creativity, of life.

“When the Temple was destroyed for a second time” – after the horrible event of the destruction of the Second Temple, the Talmud describes the beginning of a phenomenon of asceticism, where certain people said: We can no longer eat meat or drink wine. After a tragedy like that happens for a second time, we are simply not capable of living as we previously did.

R. Yehoshua chooses to cope with this phenomenon and try to remedy it. He addresses the ascetics not by preaching to them but by dialoguing with them, face to face. According to you, he says, we should stop eating bread, anad we shouldn’t eat fruit either, since the bringing of the first fruits can no longer be performed. We can’t drink water because the water libations can no longer be performed … Where does that leave us? Is it possible at all to live this way? And this totally silences them They have no good answer. Now he addresses them affectionately, calling them “my brothers.” He understands their position and identifies with it, but his task here is to bring them back into equilibrium. It’s impossible not to mourn, yet it’s equally impossible to mourn to excess. It’s certainly impossible to order the public to do something it cannot handle. There has to be a middle way. That’s why the Sages established the custom of “a remembrance” of the Destruction, a remembrance, without giving mourning for the Temple control over our whole lives. The Sages said: “When one paints one’s house, one should leave a small part unpainted.” When a man builds a house and plasters it and paints it, he should leave a small portion unpainted, incomplete. “When one celebrates, one should prepare everything except a small part” – you have to leave some imperfection in the beauty of a new house or the completeness of a wonderful meal, or to leave aside one of a woman’s jewels, in order to remember that not everything in this world is complete. As it says, “If I forget you, O Jerusalem, let my right hand wither; let my tongue stick to my palate if I cease to think of you” (Ps 137:5–6).

The midrash does not tell us their response, but the impression we get is that they were stuck in the mud and he’s successful in getting them out of their rut.

**Rona:** Yes, the rut they were stuck in due to the trauma of such shocking loss and grief.

**Gil:** The text offers a different perspective, one that enables them to mourn without having to stay suspended in place.

**Rona:** Actually, he paves the way for them back to a life that includes both. Both mourning and moving forward, celebrating life. On the one hand, he understands that reality has changed and he knows just as well as they do that there are certain rituals that can no longer be performed. He suggests, on the one hand, that they must certainly not forget Jerusalem, but on the other hand, they must still be able to celebrate. There are a couple of sayings that have stayed with me since tragedy struck me, and one of them is, “Life is made up of both.” To me, that is the path that he walks them toward. The place that enables both mourning and living. Despite the reality that is no more.

**Gil:** I want to go back to the beginning. “When the Temple was destroyed for a second time, ad many Jews began to abstain from eating meat and drinking wine.” Right at the beginning, he’s pointing to a trend.

**Rona:** A natural response to national mourning.

**Gil:** The emphasis here is on the *second* time. Once your Temple is destroyed *again*, where can you go from there? The response they offer is maybe the only possible one. A total retreat from life, from joy.

**Rona:** It’s really incomprehensible. The impossible has happened. Again. After we’ve gone through it once, we think, we’ve already “paid the price.” They won’t come to collect from us again.

**Gil:** We’ve somehow gone back and picked up the pieces and yet reality whacks us a second time. Leave us alone, they say to R. Yehoshua. We don’t *want* to eat meat. We don’t *want* to drink wine. But he shows them that doing these things means you have lost the will to live.

**Rona:** Right. They’re giving up on life here. R. Yehoshua shows them what they’re giving up – meat, bread, fruit, even water. Water is life. So he begins to make inroads on this “no” of theirs with a “yes,” filling the absence – at least, a significant part of it – with a presence.

I think life is like a cake. There are the slices of mourning and loss that are always with me, always with us. But all around the empty slices there’s still cake, full of life, full of meaning, full of service, full of whatever fulfills you. The mourning slices don’t dictate the whole of you. They’re just part of who you are, not all of you.

The first stages mourning are all about surviing, and that colors every area of life. That’s where you encounter the most difficult emotions a human can have – hopelessness, despair. Everything there is painted black. With time, the question of meaning begins to take over.

In his famous book *Either/Or*, Kierkegaard calls on man to choose, to become someone who wants to exist. According to Kierkegaard, a life based on sensory pleasure is a life of frustration. One has to find the way to claim one’s pleasures in a meaningful way. That’s the book where he coined the phrase, “a leap of faith,” to express how people attempt to afford new meaning to life. Frustration and despair at relying on one’s physical existence, on bodily pleasure, are what cause the leap, the attempt to aim at a different way of life.

The question is whether it’s possible to create a new meaning for life is essential if you are to build a future. The meaning is the impetus. That’s what actually makes it possible to begin to bring in healthy, healing places by which you can process your grief and begin to see the power of renewal. And that’s how it is. At first, it’s the alternatives: either/or. But with time it turns into both-and. Of course, there are extreme cases in which mourning is protracted, but most of the time the will and the ability to choose an alternative life are there for you to take. In order to make this possible, it takes a new impulse.

**Gil:** That moment in which a community needs their leader to find them an impulse that will push them toward the existence of an alternative life, that’s a very dramatic moment. Should I go with my survival instinct, or something more profound, more complicated?

**The Driving Force**

**Rona:** The complex aspect of mourning is in finding a new meaning for life, a reason to go on to the next moment. When my world was wrecked for a second time, and really for the third time – because before Asaf was killed my beloved brother died – I felt beaten down, felt that I couldn’t stand one more blow. Seven years have passed since then, and I’ve seen how I manage to hold on, how I live life to the full. The pain, too – I also live that to the full.

The first impulse was my worry for my kids, Tal, Yiftach, and Noa. They turned out to be the thing that kept me going, my life preserver. Worrying about them was the thing that made the next task possible. Someone who’s in mourning pictures the future as painful, even impossible, so you’ve got to hang on to something, and they, they, were “the thing” for me.

**Gil:** It’s interesting to think about R. Yehoshua’s images of the man who repaints his house “and leaves a small part unpainted.”

**Rona:** So that it won’t be complete. So there will be a little something more to improve, to work on.

**Gil:** That’s beautiful, what you said. The place in the new house that you leave unpainted isn’t directed just at the past, “in memory of the Destruction,” but at the future. It points to the repairs that still need to be done – a challenge and a motivation that give meaning to life after the Destruction.

**Rona:** More than once, I realized that perfection frightens me. I was blessed with a relationship that got better with time. It’s common to say that we come into this world to make things better. Twice in my life I’ve encountered the words, “They are too good.” The story of Ilan and Asaf always reminds me that perfection is problematic. There always has to be something more to perfect.

**Gil:** And we may be able to find an allusion to that in the instruction to “leave a little bit unfinished.”

**Rona:** He says something else here that’s really beautiful, he enables the mourner, on the grounds that mourning brings healing: “Everyone who mourns for Jerusalem will earn the right to see her in her rejoicing.” Someone who really makes space for a mourner can also see the light and the joy of rehabilitation. I believe in the need to express the pain in every way, both because it is unending and needs to be expressed, and because expressing it makes healing possible.

**Gil:** How do we make this transition from a mourner stopped in his tracks to a place of joy and life? So many difficult, poignant questions arise along the way.

**Rona:** The main question you normally ask is, Why? Why? Why me? Why him? Why didn’t we keep it together? Why? And why did it have to happen to us, of all people? And of course there are no answers. Even if they tell you there are, they are worthless in the face of the pain and the grief. I told my children: “We don’t ask why. We ask, For what purpose? We don’t know why, but “for what purpose?” at least has some motivation , the purpose that in fact is the thing that connects you to the meaning of life. The same impulse that makes it possible for us, amidst such grief, to begin an increase of vitality, of opening up, of development. Maybe this is the meaning he was alluding to when he said that one who mourns for Jerusalem will live to see it rebuilt. Maybe it’s from exactly this place, which really knows how to take the mourner to thes very depths, that it’s possible to begin to see the light and to connect to yourself, to really understand “for what purpose,” to make life possible.

**The Go-Between**

**Gil:** You spoke about the role of R. Yehoshua in holding out help to them. In general, it has to be an outsider who can offer this kind of help, say, a psychologist or a friend. But with you it seems that you were the outsider, that is, you had a double role here. One role with regard to yourself and one with regard to your children.

**Rona:** Our parents are our first teachers. They guide us, and it’s true, I understood that my “purpose” had to be to raise my children. No one else could raise them like me. This was the impulse, they were the meaning, and so I was able at one and the same time to be the boss, the rabbi, and the sage they could lean on.

**Gil:** That takes enormous mental energy. After all, R. Yehoshua is in mourning too. But he manages to postpone his own mourning and become someone significant for them, capable of assisting them.

**Rona:** Definitely, and along with his private mourning he brings in meaning, hope, and light to a place so dark that an entire community has given up on life.

**Gil:** Society asks whether it’s even *allowable* for a mourner to feel joy ever again.

**Rona:** The story in the Talmud speaks about the Destruction of the Temple; it’s like losing your home, or your memory, but infinitely greater. The Temple was their connection to their spiritual world, its Destruction was a spiritual breakdown, What did we do wrong? Why did this happen to us? It echoes the most basic questions: vitality, sustainability. What’s the point of it all?

**Gil:** It’s interesting that he chooses not to try to make sense out of the Destruction. He doesn’t want to go into it. Instead he says, “It was decreed.”

**Rona:** He just declares that this is the reality.

**Gil:** Because there are other texts – we’ve got to say this – there are other texts in which the Sages looked for answers to the Why? question and even offered explanations: Pointless hatred, for example, that is the reason Jerusalem was destroyed, according to one source. In our text, there’s a conscious choice not to deal with the reason.

**Rona:** Finding the reason wouldn’t change the reality.

**Gil:** “It was decreed.” Let’s not get into the question of why just now, but what’s amazing is that “decreeing” appears once more: “The public is never presented with a decree that the majority cannot cope with.” Suddenly we ourselves are those who issue the decree, the ones who impose punishment. It’s as if he’s saying, “Don’t punish us more than we’ve already been punished.”

**Rona:** Not everyone can bear the loss that was decreed, and so it’s forbidden to intensify the grief of the community.

From out of these destructions, R. Yehoshua begins to call them into some kind of order: He tries to plant new meaning through rebuilding the home – not God’s home, but ours. The preoccupation with eating and cooking brings us inside a house, right? The same with the example of the woman and her jewelry. It’s very homey, very feminine, he invites them to go back to the source – that is, to go home.

The process of flourishing begins at the first stage, the stage of the call. The proclamation of a catastrophic event that demands change. The second stage is to grant new meaning to life in the new reality. The understanding that these are the cards that are dealt us right now, so come on, let’s learn what to do with them, in fact.

**Gil:** It’s a call for change.

**Rona:** Yes. The decree is real and it’s clear, because until you hear the explicit words “reality has changed,” there’s always a scrap of hope.

The third stage is the stage of struggle. Taking care of your wounds and focusing on the strengths that result from the care you’ve taken. You really get power from those places. For me, it happened when I stood up to NASA and the government of the United States. Standing up to these enormous entities, those are the moments when you reveal discover qualities you didn’t know you had. Meaning that those are the moments you work on expressing both your strengths and your weaknesses. In this process, you get a lot of insight into the “new me.” That’s when I learned things about myself I never knew existed within me. I learned about my ability to connect with people, to stand up in front of an audience, to convey messages, and to get things moving. Thoae were the turning points. They make your return to life happen from a much stronger place, a place of self-awareness. Your mental life gets stronger too, the essential questions about life in fact accompany the entire process: Who am I in this reality? What are life and death? What’s our place in this world? So this starting point in fact describes a process. R. Yehoshua makes it possible for them to begin it.

**Gil:** You were talking about your own children. I don’t know exactly when this happened, but suddenly you took on responsibility for very many other children.

**Rona:** Right, today the Ramon Foundation has a tremendous influence on children all over the country. After Asaf’s tragic accident, I needed something to hold on to, and I found one thing that Asaf wrote before he died. Asaf wrote that he and his siblings were blessed with parents who believed that everyone had to find his own purpose in life. Asaf dreamed of being a pilot, and I obviously didn’t want to stop him; I helped him turn his dream into reality. He wrote those words exactly seven years ago, on August 28th, just before the accident, and they have become my call to move forward. When I read the words, they shook me right down to the depths of my soul, and I decided I would try to make it possible for as many children as possible to be in that situation, to fulfill their dreams, to reach their goals, and not to live in fear of what might happen to them. It’s worked out pretty well.

**Gil:** It’s really a living memorial for Ilan and Asaf.

**Rona:** Yes, for sure. The Ramon Foundation, which was established seven years ago, provides education for excellence and leadership on the model of Ilan and Asaf, and it continues to pass on their heritage and their inspiration in the worlds that they so loved. After all, this is what we want, isn’t it? We, you in this book and I in what I’ve been doing, make it possible for our loved ones to be with us, here and now. In fact, that’s how we manage to keep a connection with them, to live with our loved ones in the present, not just in our memories.

**Gil:** You did all these things at the same time, right? You mourned, you supported your kids, you started this project to continue Ilan and Asaf’s work, you sought meaning.

**Rona:** That’s the complexity of flourishing after a crisis. Everything happens at the same time, and for me there was also the public, national aspect.

**Gil:** And what about the national mourning? Obviously you did not choose that, but the death of Ilan became a national event. I think about this in connection with the Destruction. After all, the entire nation was mourning together with you and your family, both the first time and the second time.

**Rona:** The issue of public mourning versus private mourning is very difficult, very delicate. We set up a respectful communal commemoration, and along with that I fought with all my strength to keep my own private mourning, especially after Asaf’s accident / tragedy. The blurring of public and private, the intrusiveness of it, hurt me very much. Today we have reached a situation that very, very much respects our private space, and I continue to protect it.

**Gil:** You did this on the very day of the tragedy. I remember the media storming your house in Ramat Hen, and you saying, “No one gets one step closer.”

**Rona:** Right. I didn’t want anyone photographing the funeral. Some things are better remembered in the memory, subjectively. Every time they show the shuttle plunging into the atmosphere on television, we see Ilan. The daughter of the Challenger’s commander, who underwent this experience at age 14,[[1]](#footnote-1) wrote this to my children. She said: “Every time you see these historic pictures, you’ll think about your father.”

It's not easy to maneuver between the public and the personal, and as I said that was a struggle of its own. Where in fact do you cross the boundaries between “us” and “you”? But along with that comes an enormous hidden opportunity for connection and empathy. More than that, I found myself in a very strange position – I became a representative of Israel in the United States, and that brought me into situations that were not at all simple. I announced, for example, that I would not participate in the official ceremony at Arlington Cemetery on the anniversary of the tragedy, because I saw that the Israeli anthem would not be played at the ceremony. I called them and said, “You forgot, right?” They told me that American national protocol never permits a foreign anthem to be played at Arlington.

“Well then,” I said, “I’m not coming.”

It went all the way up to President Bush.

**Gil:** What happened?

**Rona:** On crutches, broken in body and spirit, I took a stand for the Israeli national anthem, along with some people from the Israeli Embassy. As far as I was concerned, the entire Israeli people was with me at that event.

**Gil:** You know that even this is a continuation of the heritage of Ilan, because when people think about what Ilan did when he went up in the shuttle, he did so many symbolic things. He took the flag of Blich High School with him, saying, “I represent the next generation, the students.” He took a little Torah scroll with him, too. Even the things he said when he broadcast from the shuttle. These were moral choices.

**Rona:** Moral choices that were the result of profound thought. Ilan understood the special opportunity and place he had been given, and he appreciated the platform that had been put at his disposal. Ilan emphasized these values through the particular objects that he chose to bring along, to tell our story, the story of a people that flourishes amid crises, and rises out of the dust.

**Gil:** He showed you the way. It could have been a kind of personal victory – “I was chosen!” – as a talented pilot, but he took it to another place. A place of mission.

**Rona:** There’s no contradiction. Those things don’t cancel each other out. On the contrary. That is the way to fulfill one’s destiny. The way is to connect with something else, bigger than you are. Something that’s a contribution to society as a whole. Ilan knew how to do that in the most unmediated way, at eye level, as we say in Hebrew. He really was so magical, he knew how to conquer the world, in the most positive sense, by uniting all of us.

**Gil:** He in fact chose to be a public servant.

**Rona:** Yes, and at the same time he was fulfilled, both as a family man and in service of the nation. At a very young age, Ilan wrote to Professor Yeshayahu Leibowitz about the meaning of life – what’s the purpose, how do I attain my goals? Those spiritual questions we all have to cope with, but at such a young age. Sometimes I used to think, why was he preoccupied with this when he was so young? After all, these are questions that people normally ask when we are more mature. But at that age he had already gone through two air crashes. He understood the transience of human life. This spiritual development, the searching, the questioning, and then the implementation, awoke both in him and in Asaf at a very young age. He chose to cope with the question of our transience and what, nonetheless, we can do here and now to touch eternity nevertheless.

1. On January 28, 1986, the space shuttle Challenger exploded in the atmosphere 73 seconds after launching from the Kennedy Space Center in Florida, in view of many observers. The tragedy – one of the most significant in NASA’s history – killed seven astronauts, shocked the entire world, and was covered dramatically in all the media. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)