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Keeping kosher to be an out-of-this-world experience

By LISA J. HURIASH
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Kosher food is about to boldly go where kosher food has never gone before.

In NASA's 40 years flying into space, there have been a few Jewish astronauts -- such as Judith Resnick, who died in the *Challenger* shuttle explosion in 1986, and David Wolf, who just returned from the *Endeavour* flight. But no one has requested kosher food.

Until now.

Col. Ilan Ramon, 47, from Tel Aviv, Israel, who is training for a U.S. space shuttle mission devoted to an international research project, will be the first to get a kosher meal in space.

"I told them I wanted kosher food, and they told me they'd have to check it out because nobody until today has asked them for kosher food," Ramon said by telephone from Houston, where he has been training at the Lyndon B. Johnson Space Center since 1998.

Ramon is not particularly religious but realizes that as Israel's first astronaut, "I'm kind of representative of all the Jewish community."

Local rabbis were ecstatic when they heard NASA can accommodate Ramon's request.

"This is one small step for Col. Ramon, but a large step for Jews worldwide," said Rabbi Yossie Denburg of Congregation Chabad Lubavitch in Coral Springs.

Ramon, a member of the Israeli air force, is the son of a German immigrant and a mother who survived the Auschwitz concentration camp in Poland.

"I'm in contact with a lot of Holocaust organizations and for these people, it's more than a miracle," he said. "After all they've been through, to see an Israeli astronaut, it's very exciting."

Kosher is a Hebrew word that means "proper" or "fit," and it is used with food prepared according to Jewish dietary and religious laws.

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with food prepared according to Jewish dietary and religious laws. Rules include not mixing meat with milk, no pork or shellfish, meat must come from an animal that chews its cud and has split hooves such as cows and sheep, and meat must be soaked and salted and the animal must be killed without suffering.

That creates a new set of challenges for the space program.

Astronauts usually select their food from a wide menu that includes -- just to name a few -- spaghetti, macaroni and cheese, ham salad spread, salmon, rice, eggs, nine kinds of cereal and five varieties of pudding. They are also allowed special requests, such as vegetarian meals, or a favorite kind of candy or cracker.

To accommodate their first kosher traveler into space, Vickie Kloeris, system manager for food, said NASA contacted My Own Meals, a company in Deerfield, Ill. that sells certified kosher food in "thermostabilized" sealed pouches -- actually meant to accommodate campers. The company has also sold kosher food directly to U.S. soldiers since 1993, said Joe D'Onofrio, the chief financial officer. The military started buying the kosher food from the company in 1996 for all service members requesting it.

But the food, which comes in 8-ounce foil pouches and has a shelf life of more than three years, is also perfect for space flight.

"He'll warm them and open and eat them in orbit," Kloeris said.

Of 10 kosher choices, Ramon picked five: Florentine lasagna, beef stew, chicken Mediterranean, My Kind of Chicken (which the company describes as chunks of light and dark chicken with brown rice, peas and carrots), and Old World Stew (beef with brown rice, zucchini, pinto beans and flavors of the Middle East), Kloeris said.

Ramon will sample them, and if he doesn't like those, he has a few other choices including pasta with garden vegetables and cheese tortellini.

"What an unbelievable thing," said Rabbi Moishe Lipszyc, of Chabad Lubavitch of Fort Lauderdale. "Who would have ever thought this in your wildest dreams?"

Ramon, whose launch date from Florida has not been scheduled yet but will likely be in 2002, will work with the Americans on a project that will record particles of sand and dust from the desert whose distribution in the atmosphere can affect global cooling and warming. He will also conduct an experiment involving plant seeds that is expected to be closely monitored by an Israeli middle school.

Kloeris said cramped quarters aboard the shuttle don't leave enough room to provide Ramon with a total kosher diet. He will have to eat many items from the standard menu during his 10-day flight.

That detail doesn't concern local rabbis.

"Whatever he can do is great," Denburg said. "I'm sure he'll eat