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Ron McNair and the Space Shuttle Columbia

The space shuttle Columbia disaster has many connections with other events involving similar sociotechnological events. One obvious connection it has is with the Challenger disaster of 1986 in that there are numerous similarities and differences between the two events. For example, in the Challenger disaster the United States' first African-American astronaut was killed, while in the Columbia disaster Israel's first astronaut was killed. In this paper I will explain the significance of one similarity between the two events by describing the role of Dr. Ronald E. McNair and how his involvement in the Challenger disaster directly relates to the context of the Columbia tragedy.

Ronald E. McNair grew up in the racially-gearred 1950s when his home state, South Carolina, was still segregated. This made being a model student-athlete in secondary school, from which he graduated as class valedictorian, quite a challenge for Dr. McNair. It also fueled him to ignore nay-sayers and pursue his dreams. He went on to attend North Carolina Agricultural and Technical State University from which he graduated magna cum laude in 1971 with a B.S. degree in physics. After that, Mr. McNair went on to become Dr. McNair in 1976 having completed the Ph.D. program in physics at MIT.

In 1978 NASA selected Dr. McNair to join the astronaut corps after he applied to the program along with approximately eleven thousand other people. He was trained to be an astronaut at NASA and went on his first space mission on February 3rd 1984 as a mission specialist for the space shuttle Challenger. At that time he was the second African-American astronaut, but America's first African-American astronaut, to travel into space. The first African-American to travel into space is Guion S. Bluford, Jr.. He was born and raised in

Philadelphia, PA, and pursued undergraduate studies at Penn State University. Bluford flew missions on Challenger and Discovery in 1983 and 1991, respectively.

Ron McNair's first Challenger trip was a success. His second was not. The space shuttle Challenger exploded 73 seconds into lift-off on January 28th 1986, killing Dr. McNair and six other crew members.

On February 1st 2003, NASA lost another space shuttle - the Columbia, which was on a research mission carrying thirteen lab rats and seven astronauts. Damage to thermal tiles incurred during lift-off allegedly caused the spacecraft to experience difficulties during reentry into Earth's atmosphere. The craft disintegrated midway through descent. The connection the Columbia has with the Challenger disaster is that the Columbia was carrying crew member Ilan Ramon, Israel's first astronaut. Ramon was a colonel in the Israel Air Force, had a B.S. in electronics and computer engineering from the University of Tel Aviv, and had been preparing to join a space shuttle crew as a payload specialist since 1997.

Israelis praised him as a symbol of "excellence and freedom" and mourned him while describing him as "the best we could offer." However, Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon expressed a sentiment of joint mourning and shared pain: "[The] hearts of the American people and the people of Israel are bonded together. We are all holding hands and we all pray together." In this sense, the tragedies of Dr. Ronald E. McNair and Ilan Ramon are bonded together by the common feelings of loss among the American and Israeli nations. Thus America is sympathetic to the feelings of the Israeli people from the loss of Dr. McNair and will be able to guide them through both the period of mourning and of recovery when they will regroup and select Israel's second astronaut.