

Arkansas Wing, May Diversity Message

If you've taken a look at a diversity calendar lately, you will notice that there are many observances for the month of May. Asian & Pacific Islander, Haitian, Indian, Mental Health, South Asian, Personal History, Speech and Hearing Awareness, Jewish- American and Older Americans are just a few. This month I'm going to focus on Jewish Americans, because this is a category that is near and dear to my heart.

Judith Resnik - The first Jewish American person in space, and the 2nd American woman. Born in Akron, Ohio to Jewish immigrants, she got a perfect score on her SAT, and a PhD in Electrical Engineering. She was recruited by NASA in 1978, and her first trip to space was on the maiden voyage of Discovery. She was on the Challenger, January 28, 1986 when it exploded, killing all 7 passengers.

Jeffrey Hoffman - His first mission took place on the space shuttle Discovery in 1985. He made history as the first American astronaut to make a contingency spacewalk, in an attempt to make repairs on the satellite. He took with him the materials required to celebrate Hanukkah in space, a dreidel and a small menorah. He was also the first person to read the Torah in space, as he brought along a miniature Torah scroll.

Ellen S. Baker - the 2nd Jewish American woman in space. Baker became a NASA medical officer in 1981, her last mission was aboard the space shuttle Atlantis. Her first mission included deploying the Galileo probe to study the planet Jupiter.

David Wolf - a medical doctor and electrical engineer from Indianapolis. As Wolf said in one interview, "We Jewish astronauts do consider ourselves as representing the Jewish community. We take it seriously. I carried a mezuzah and it's on my door now. I also carried a yad, a Torah pointer, and gave it to my synagogue in Indianapolis. I had a small menorah up there."

Wolf also had a longstanding debate with Hoffman (no. 3, above) about who had the longest dreidel spin in space: "I have the world-record dreidel spin," he has said. "I know mine went for like an hour and a half until it got sucked into an air intake."

Mark L. Polansky - Mark Polansky grew up in Paterson, New Jersey, the son of a Jewish father and a Hawaiian mother of Korean descent. Polansky, who was nicknamed "Roman" by his crewmates, joined NASA in 1992 as an aerospace engineer and research pilot, and was recruited to be an astronaut in 1996. He participated in three space missions.

In one of these missions, he paid a special tribute to his Jewish father, Irving Polansky, who died in 2001 — before his second space mission, in 2006, Polansky called the U.S. Holocaust Museum in Washington, asking for an artifact to take with him to honor his late father. They sent

him a replica of "Refugee," a stuffed bear that a Holocaust survivor, Sophie Turner-Zaretskym donated to the museum. Later, in 2007, Polansky and Zaretsky met at the museum.

Jessica Meir - Hailing from Caribou, Maine, Jessica studied emperor penguins, elephant seals, and has trained geese to fly in wind tunnels as part of her post-doctoral studies. She was a part of the first all-female spacewalk in 2019. Back in March of 2020, when the COVID-19 pandemic was first hitting the United States, Meir posted a picture of Tel Aviv from space, paying special tribute to her father and his most uttered expression, "This too shall pass."



Jared Isaacman - made history as the commander of SpaceX's Inspiration4, the first space flight composed entirely of private citizens that orbited the earth. From New Jersey, he trained as a pilot and as a billionaire, he personally footed the bill for all four passengers that flew with him that day. The mission was part of a fundraising campaign for St. Jude Children's Research Hospital.

(most of this information came from: Kveller, the Jewish Telegraphic Agency.

These are but a few of the outstanding Jewish Americans that have contributed to or been a part of the American space program. Thank you for taking the time to read about these fellow Americans.

Major Janice Podgurski

30 May 2023