

Healing Communities through Faith and Science: Forgiveness Education and Training of Jewish Community Spiritual-Religious Leaders in Israel

Bridging Jewish Wisdom and Forgiveness Science

In June 2024, the Templeton World Charity Foundation awarded a grant to a groundbreaking project titled “*Forgiveness Education and Training of Jewish Community Spiritual-Religious Leaders in Israel*.” Directors of the project are Yitzhak Ben Yair from Zefat Academic College, Natti Ronel from Bar-Ilan University, and Lior Salomon from The Jewish Agency for Israel, along with partners, Robert Enright from the University of Wisconsin-Madison, and Suzanne Freedman from the University of Northern Iowa. The project seeks to integrate insights from forgiveness science with Jewish teachings on forgiveness to create a tailored forgiveness training program focused on forgiveness science and Jewish theological principles (Ben Yair et al., 2025).

The program’s goal is to train spiritual leaders, to bring forgiveness back into their communities. Rabbis, educators, and mental health professionals hold influential roles in helping people navigate hurt, conflict, and reconciliation, and this project empowers them with tools grounded both in Jewish sources and empirical research on forgiveness.

Why Forgiveness Matters

Research shows that forgiveness is linked to improved mental and physical health. Benefits include lower levels of depression, anxiety, and anger, as well as enhanced immune functioning, self-esteem, and hope (Enright & Fitzgibbons, 2015; Freedman & Enright, 1996; Toussaint et al., 2015). Beyond individual well-being, forgiveness has also been found to improve relationships and help communities cultivate compassion and resilience (Griffin et al., 2018).

Yet forgiveness is often misunderstood and not one’s first response to wrongdoing. Many believe forgiveness requires forgetting, excusing, or reconciling with an offender, which is not the case. Individuals also fail to recognize forgiveness as a moral virtue, simply viewing it as a way to feel better emotionally (Freedman & Chang, 2010; Song et al., 2025). Jewish theology encourages forgiveness, but its practice, regarding what it looks like and how to forgive, is rarely taught in schools or community life. This project helps to close that gap by educating spiritual leaders to emphasize and reintroduce forgiveness as both a religious and practical tool.

The Training Program

Thirty-four participants, known as “Forgiveness Ambassadors,” were selected for two training programs hosted at Zefat Academic College. Participants chosen were both personally interested in applying forgiveness to their lives, as well as professionally sharing knowledge about

forgiveness in ways that best fit the needs of their communities. Each six-week program included weekly three-hour sessions, totaling 18 hours of education. The curriculum combined theory and practice, blending psychological research with Jewish sources. Following Enright's (2015) book, *Eight Keys to Forgiveness*, topics included:

- Why forgiveness is important and what it means - exploring both psychological benefits (like reducing anger and anxiety) and Jewish sources.
- Developing the capacity to forgive - practicing inner strength and the “fitness of forgiveness” through small daily steps.
- Identifying the source of one's pain and inner storm - learning to recognize injustice and its emotional impact, while reflecting on the Jewish teaching of “You shall not hate your brother in your heart” (Leviticus 19:17).
- Cultivating a forgiving mindset - training our thoughts to see the humanity in the other person.
- Finding meaning in suffering and the forgiveness process - reframing difficult experiences and connecting them to growth, drawing on Jewish teachings about turning hardship into an opportunity for deeper faith and resilience.
- Self-forgiveness - addressing the struggle many people have in releasing guilt and being kind to themselves, which parallels the Jewish practice of vidui (confession) and seeking atonement.

Sessions encouraged reflection on personal experiences as well as strategies for introducing forgiveness education into spiritual, educational, and therapeutic contexts. According to project director Dr. Ben Yair, *“What makes this project unique is how successfully it bridges rigorous forgiveness science with authentic Jewish wisdom.”*

Support Beyond the Classroom

Following the formal training program, participants joined an online “forgiveness forum” to share experiences, challenges, and successes in applying forgiveness in their communities. This type of “support group” allows for the Forgiveness Ambassadors to continue to learn from each other and deepen their understanding of forgiveness. A virtual community platform was also created for broader community members interested in learning more about forgiveness and how to apply it in their lives and the lives of others. Through WhatsApp, Facebook, and LinkedIn, participants and researchers share messages of inspiration, answer questions, and extend forgiveness practices beyond the training sessions.

The Ripple Effect in Communities

Even in its early stages, the program has already produced ripple effects. Participants have launched initiatives such as:

- Art therapy groups for young women at-risk, combined with forgiveness practices.
- Support groups for women seeking self-forgiveness while returning to stricter religious observance.
- Community dialogues on *“The Power and Influence of Forgiveness for Oneself and Others.”*
- A workshop for Haredi men: *‘Removing Barriers and Personal Development in the Employment World - based on Forgiveness tools.’*
- A series of articles published by a therapist/social worker offering practical tools for cultivating inner compassion, with the last article in the series titled, *“Developing the Fitness to Forgive”*.

Amid the widespread trauma that affected many families in Israel, Forgiveness Ambassadors continued to live by the principles of empathy and forgiveness, helping to foster resilience within their communities. As Dr. Ben Yair reflected, *“The project’s continuation during the Iran conflict demonstrates how forgiveness training becomes even more relevant during trauma. Rather than being derailed by war, the work adapted and showed its practical value for healing communities under stress.”*

To celebrate the Jewish New Year, an evening titled *"Melodies of Forgiveness"* was held at Zefat Academic College at the end of September. It was a moving and inspiring event that combined culture, spirit, music, and Jewish identity with a focus on forgiveness. The event, held in partnership with the Department of Jewish Culture of the Zefat Municipality, the Israeli Forgiveness Project, the community centers, and the Tzachar–Palm Beach Partnership, drew hundreds of participants from across the North. Lectures were given by Mr. Yechiel Michael Yosefi on "Love, Forgiveness, and Renewal," and by Dr. Yitzhak Ben Yair and Professor Natti Ronel on "The Israeli Forgiveness Project."

 **To experience the spirit of this unique evening, you can watch a short video summary of Melodies of Forgiveness, capturing the music, atmosphere, and heartfelt stories that made the event so memorable. [\[Melodies of Forgiveness\]](#)**

Participant Reflections

Verbal reports from participants also illustrate the powerful impact learning about forgiveness had on their lives. One ambassador shared, *“I understood from the beginning that this was a tool that could really be brought to the general public... I think it accompanies me greatly in educating my children. I think it upgraded my marriage”*.

Another reflected on a shift in perspective and understanding of forgiveness and stated, *“I think my current definition of forgiveness is that it is a process you give to yourself. It doesn't face outward; it faces inward... A life in which you understand that forgiveness is a process you need*

to do to heal yourself, and it is an integral process in life. I think it heals tremendously, and this is a renewed understanding”.

Another participant commented on the passion and motivation of program leaders stating, “*Dr. Ben Yair did fantastic work, he really lives it, he really speaks about it, and he also explained very well the spiritual concept and how it connects to this entire subject”.*

These quotes highlight how the training not only supports leaders to serve others but can also transform their personal lives.

Researching the Impact

Research is also being conducted on the results of this project. The evaluation design assesses the program’s impact over time. Participants, randomly assigned to either an experimental or a wait-list control group, completed six questionnaires at four different points, examining forgiveness, empathy, anger, and psychological well-being. Analyzing differences between experimental and wait-list control groups will help measure the program’s effectiveness. Continuous refinement of the program design will be based on research results to ensure ongoing success and the success of similar initiatives.

In addition to the collection of quantitative data, several participants took part in in-depth interviews exploring their experiences, perceived impact of the training, and the ways they have integrated forgiveness into spiritual and community work.

Looking Ahead

This initiative represents more than a training program and research study; it is a model for building cultures and communities of forgiveness. By educating and training Jewish leaders with scientific and spiritual tools, the project promotes resilience and compassion at both personal and communal levels. The virtual platforms provide ongoing support, and the positive effects of the forgiveness training is already evident across diverse communities in Israel. Future plans include evaluating the follow-up projects initiated as a result of learning about forgiveness and its benefits on the part of the Forgiveness Ambassadors and community members.

 **For a visual overview of the project’s journey and its impact on communities across Israel, we invite you to watch our official short film, *The Israeli Forgiveness Project - Healing through Faith and Science*, which presents the vision, the people, and the stories behind this work. [Official film](#)**

As the Israeli Forgiveness Project Team reflected, “*...it was more than just six sessions. It created space for the heart, mind, and soul. Together, we explored the concept of forgiveness, studied its ancient sources and modern applications, examined research and therapeutic methods, and opened a personal door to a deep inner journey that required courage, understanding, and empathy.*”

In a world, too frequently shaped by conflict and division, where forgiveness may seem impossible, this project shows that forgiveness, rooted in both faith and science, is not only possible, but powerful and healing.

References

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