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**Daniel Greenberg CB**

**Script for BBC Thought for the Day**

**3 November 2021**

**Negotiation and the Power of Speech**

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Good morning.

When climate activist Greta Thunberg described COP26 as simply “politicians pretending to take our future seriously” she doubtless voiced the frustrations of many at what they see as endless talk, when what they want is immediate action.

Despite their frustration and commitment to rapid change, however, the presence of protesters at COP26 possibly shows that they do not underestimate the power and importance of the exchange of views that forms the substance of political negotiation.

Our own legislative assembly is called the Parliament: where people “parley”, or talk, apparently endlessly and often without apparent impact. But rhetoric is not always as empty as it may appear on the surface.

In Government and Parliament one sees all the time how apparently endless dialogue suddenly emerges into real-world change. During work on legislation leading up to the Good Friday Agreement, I will never forget sitting between the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland Sir Patrick Mayhew and the Shadow Minister, Mo Mowlam, offering a seemingly endless series of minor variations on a theme, that they could discuss and agree between themselves to take away and discuss with others. Yet out of those seemingly interminable talks came change that brought peace to the streets of Northern Ireland and altered the lives of generations.

Judaism sees speech as the most precious and dangerous of Divine gifts precisely because of its impact. The Bible symbolically describes the initial act of creation of the world as an act of speech by God. Discussions between God and Abraham, Moses and other prophets frequently have the appearance of negotiation rather than unilateral instruction. The potential force of dialogue and discussion is stressed throughout rabbinic literature. Speech is constantly characterised as having the ability to create and destroy worlds, as a result of which the rabbis developed the laws of permitted and forbidden speech into one of the most complicated areas of Jewish law.

Even in domestic politics, outside authoritarian regimes, nothing can change without agreement, and agreement depends on discussion. As for international law, like the 1992 Framework Convention underpinning COP26, it is ultimately consensual, requiring self-enforcement and therefore requiring to be built on real agreement.

Hopefully both politicians inside COP26 and protesters outside can agree that while talks can be an excuse for inaction, they are also the only route to agreement that makes effective action possible.