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**Daniel Greenberg CB**

**Script for BBC Thought for the Day**

**27 July 2022**

**Apologies**

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Good morning.

On Monday Pope Francis apologised for the Catholic Church’s role in abuse in schools meant to assimilate indigenous Canadian children.

It seems to have become fashionable for political and religious leaders to apologise for historic wrongs for which they had no personal responsibility. Opinions are divided about the utility of these apologies. They may lead to compensation or other action: but the generation or group making an apology may feel that passage of time or some other reason has made reparation impossible or inappropriate. So is there any point in apologising for something if you are not prepared to do anything about it?

The Jewish month of Av begins tomorrow night. It marks the destruction of the Temple, caused by senseless division and hatred. Each year we try to learn the lesson of Av, when preparing for the High Holydays in the following month, Ellul, by mending divisions and removing causes of hatred. And Maimonides, the medieval Jewish philosopher, emphasises apologising to others as an essential component of repairing human relationships, before we can repair our relationship with God.

Insurance companies used to warn motor policy-holders involved in an accident never to apologise, in case the courts took it as an admission of liability. When a driver rear-ended us with children in the back of the car years ago, I assumed they were following insurers’ instructions by sitting tight-lipped as we waited for the ambulance. They didn’t follow that most natural of human reactions by enquiring whether the children were hurt, but simply kept quiet.

Some years later I wrote the Bill that became the Compensation Act 2006. Section 2, added in the House of Lords, provides that “An apology … shall not of itself amount to an admission of negligence”.

This legal recognition of the difference between an expression of emotion and an acceptance of liability means that people can feel free to express an emotional response in the form of compassion, empathy, sympathy and even contrition, leaving legal liability to be determined in accordance with legal principles.

Few are called upon to apologise for major historical wrongs: but we all encounter situations where an apology can make a real difference, making our own small contribution to bringing some much-needed peace to the world.