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**Daniel Greenberg CB**

**Script for BBC Thought for the Day**

**1 December 2022**

**War Crimes**

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Good morning.

On Tuesday the First Lady of Ukraine opened an exhibition in Parliament of Russian war crimes. Addressing MPs and others she said “Every torturer in this war has his face too. I really want you to look at those photographs. Then your abstract idea of the war in Ukraine will become real.”

The point that the First Lady made so powerfully is that rape and other forms of violence are not carried out by faceless regimes: they are inflicted by individual people making individual choices.

As a religious person I would like to think that religion helps to make people better. But the troubling reality is that many individual perpetrators of brutality come from homes and communities with strong religious messages. So what allows them to become willing tools of barbaric regimes?

There is a rabbinic aphorism that “Jewish scholars [meaning community leaders in this context] increase peace in the world”. That seems rather ironic when one thinks how often leaders of all religions and ideologies actually promote intolerance and even violence in the name of their religion or ideology; today that includes the suppression of individual freedom in Iran, in China and elsewhere. Turning that rabbinic saying around gives it a lot more meaning: the test of whether someone is a Jewish leader in a meaningful sense is whether she or he expresses their religion by contributing to the peace of the world, or by creating sectarian division.

In a world where religion is increasingly supplanted by other approaches to life, if it is to remain relevant it must make contributing to world peace its highest priority. That starts with individual religious families giving children an education that encodes core moral values into everyday decision-making. (As the Rabbis say elsewhere, *derech eretz kodma laTorah –* “decent behaviour comes before religion”.) But it has to go further, with religion being an active promoter of justice and inclusion, helping to build and support unshakeable moral values that give individuals the courage to stand up to tyranny and oppression rather than helping to support them.

That could make religion a less frequently recurring component of the challenges to world peace, and a more constructive part of the solution.