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**Daniel Greenberg CB**

**Script for BBC Thought for the Day**

**23 February 2023**

**Animal Feelings**

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Good morning.

A colleague of mine, who combines her Parliamentary work with sitting as a part-time judge, heard a rather unusual case earlier this week.

A few years ago, a man lost his dog when it ran away from home. The local authority found it and, being unable to trace the owner, arranged for it to be placed with a new family who have looked after it ever since. Following a complicated series of events, the old owner finally found out where the dog was now living, and brought legal proceedings to recover ownership.

In the eyes of the law, domesticated animals were once treated as mere property, subject to the wishes and whims of their owners in all respects. But times have moved on. The Animal Welfare (Sentience) Act passed last year requires public policy to reflect the welfare of animals as sentient beings, and the criminal law prevents animal owners from causing them suffering or neglect. But how can we actually know what animals want or feel?

A rabbinic perspective on a Biblical law is relevant here. In Leviticus, chapter 22 verse 28, the Bible contains a prohibition against a cow and its calf being slaughtered on the same day, and the Rabbis attribute this prohibition to the avoidance of cruelty. But the author of the mediaeval Book of Education (*Sefer HaChinuch*) observes that the commandment cannot really be about actual cruelty. Beyond actual physical pain, we have no idea what emotions some animals actually feel. The author concludes that the action is prohibited not because of what the cow may feel, but because the Bible wants us to avoid behaviour that feels insensitive on our part. Some kinds of conduct suggest a callousness that may not only hurt the animal but more importantly certainly debases the human.

Listening to my colleague’s case about the dog, I was pleased that the law in 2023 can clearly go further than the mere protection of property and can demonstrate sensitivity to humans and animals alike. It was good to see that we have developed to a position where the law is able to support and protect behaviour that reflects the best human instincts that arise from the Divine image in which we were created.