

Census sensibility: A question of privacy

THE concept of a census in a historical context is not an unusual or controversial one. Through time immemorial, there have been various systems of counting people and collecting data.

In parashah Bamidbar, the census of the Israelites in the desert took place. It was a headcount of every male who was in the Israelite camp in the desert. Now we could discuss for hours the misogyny of only counting men, and that would be an interesting and important conversation, but let us focus for now on the concept of the count. The biblical census was fascinating because it was not interested in nuance. It was only interested in who was a Jew.

Interestingly it was not a breakdown of who believes what and who practises what. It was a headcount of all. Not a headcount of those who dress a particular way, or who have a certain amount of power or influence or money – but a headcount of everyone. Not a headcount of those who stood up to the Egyptians – but a headcount of every single male over 20 years of age. Whose voices were heard? Who was eligible for the count? Everyone.

One of the interesting features of this census was that, unusually in the historical lexicon, it did not worry about denomination, differing beliefs, affiliations, who married whom (Moses himself married a non-Jewish woman). They were interested in including people, not finding ways to exclude.

The method of data collection was interesting as well. Rather than a paper or online census, the count

School of thought

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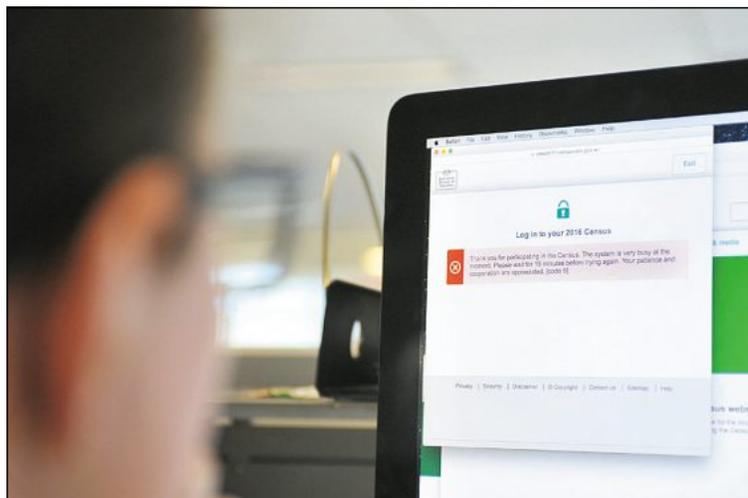
was mostly done by the contribution of a half-shekel, regardless of wealth or status. I use the word “mostly” because the Levites (priests) were exempted from the monetary contribution and simply asked to “raise their heads”.

Now, I hear you cry, “what about privacy? What did Moses and his statisticians do with the data? Where was it held? For how long? Who had access to it? Was it personalised?” And when the rabbis of the Talmud discussed the details of the census, did they anonymise the data?

The current furore over the integrity of the Census is not so much a comment on the Census as it is a comment on our time. Just as the Brexit vote for many was not really about Brexit but about immigration, globalisation and change, so in this case the fears of privacy are not just about the Census.

Have you noticed when you go onto a website that an advertisement appears that seems strangely similar to something you were previously interested in? When you click on a travel site, for example, a cookie (a piece of code) in your computer invites advertisements of a similar theme. Even many email providers connect you up with bespoke products during your web searches.

When you have supermarket loyalty cards, credit cards, apply



An error message seen on the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) Census website last week.

Photo: AAP Image/Joel Carrett

for loans, request information, little information is actually private – huge amounts of personal information are volunteered and garnered.

However, the Australian Census is a very different proposition to store cards, credit cards and mobile apps, all of which we can choose to have (or not). Not only are we required to provide this identifying information in the Census, we also have a daily fine if we do not provide it. Previously, Australians could “opt in” to have their names and addresses stored against their data. Now it is compulsory, with a fine of \$180 per day if you do not.

The ABC informed us that the Australian Bureau of Statistics “also said it would be using ‘anonymised’ versions of names, and the names and addresses ‘will only be used for projects approved by a senior-level committee’”.

Who is on that committee? And

for what purposes? While we may have faith in the benevolence of our government now, do we have similar faith in the future?

In my previous role as principal of the Jewish Community Secondary School (JCoSS) in London, we introduced electronic registration (roll-taking) and cashless purchasing from the canteen. Fingerprint technology was the same price as card technology (and teenagers are much, much less likely to lose their fingerprints than they are their cards, although with teenagers nothing can be ruled out), but we concluded that a state institution storing biometric data does not play well in the Jewish community, given our history. We opted for cards over fingerprints.

But times have changed.

Columbia University and Google researchers concluded just two months ago that having two apps open, with location data (which of

us have ever switched this off, or know how to even if we wished to?) on your mobile phone is enough to identify where you are and who you are. With just a postcode, a first name and a date of birth, you can be identified by most medium-sized businesses, if they choose to do so.

Just as the biblical census was an open source experience, so is the Census. There is no privacy nowadays, and anyone who thinks that a boycott of the Census denies government access to information that can be used maliciously, is naive to believe that this boycott will actually stop the trend.

If the trend against privacy is to be genuinely reversed, then the issue is not the Census. The issue is website search histories, cookies (not the culinary kind), mobile apps, store cards, loyalty schemes, phone records and so on. The issue is a wider issue than a government collecting data so as to help inform government policy and spending. The Census, like Brexit, may be a method of expressing a particular grievance, but the issue and its resolution are beyond the immediate situation. The reach of the protesters should be much wider, on both a national and international, societal and legal, commercial and governmental scale.

With one click of a mouse, the boycotters hope to hold back an ocean.

I wish them luck.

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