

Data Breaches: A Spiritual/Practical Solution

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In the past several weeks, we've learned that there have been some major security breaches involving largenumbers of credit and debit cards. So I've been wondering how the sages would address this situation.

In some ways, it was far easier to keep—and lose—your identity in the ancient world. In the days of cuneiform tablets, you were known by the hem on your garment. You pressed this hem into the clay as your signature. The underlying assumption, of course, was that you basically had only one garment and could be known by it. Unless someone stole this garment off your back, your identity was secure.

On the other hand, you could move from place to place, remaking your identity as you went. For an example of this, we need look back no farther than our grandparents' (or great grandparents') generation. When they came to America, they remade their names, the years of their birth, their place of origination, etc., with creative abandonment. (If you've ever researched your family on a genealogy site, you can see this phenomenon in black and white.) All the more so, could one move and remake their identity in the ancient world. Get yourself a new signet ring, move down the road and, voila, a new identity could be yours. (The patriarch Jacob/Israel did it!)

But today, streams of data cling to us wherever we go, identifying not only who we are but our phone numbers, our latest web searches and purchases and every picture we've taken in the last several years, our tweets, etc. Our data falls like ripe fruit from a tree and it's not surprising that a few unethical people will decide to keep some for themselves.

So what can we do? I believe Pirkei Avot has an answer:

Hillel used to say...one who increases possessions, increases anxiety.
(Avot 2:7)

As usual with Hillel, he says quite a lot in a very few words. So our strategy on data breaches should be reducing risk by the reduction of goods we acquire. And how do we curb spending and protect our identity when we must spend? I offer a two-step solution.

Step 1: Leave your phone in the car. People used to do it all the time...actually just 30 years ago! That way, you are just a person in a store or a mall. And you'll also be less distracted and more able to shop and leave quickly. The store doesn't need to know your name or your email, which will only produce spam and junk mail.

Step 2: Pay with cash. I know, it's radical, but hear me out. If you bring only as much cash as you can afford to spend, you won't overspend. But more, if you haven't paid in cash for a long time, try it. Especially if it's something you may want but don't necessarily need, it will hurt as you lay those bills on the counter. Seriously, try it. Paying with cash just feels different than paying by card. It hurts. What do you do if you see a good buy but you do not have enough cash to make the purchase? Pay what you can and ask them to put it on layaway for you and you can pay for it gradually. Also, the storekeeper may cut you a deal because s/he is actually benefiting from not having to give a cut of the price to the credit card companies.

Discussion Questions

1. Hillel's saying reminded me of what a boat owner told me: "A boat owner's 2 happiest days are when he buys the boat and when he sells it." How often do you buy the idea of an item without considering its reality? Can you give an example? In the boat example, he bought the idea of a boat but didn't think about insurance, storage, fuel, how little time he would actually have on the

boat and how little he knew about how to sail the boat and maintain it. What would happen if, at the point of purchase, you thought through what owning the item would really mean? Would you still make the purchase?

2. The worries of ownership are as real today as they were 2000 years ago. People become attached to their stuff. This is why the storage unit business makes money. It is almost certain that once your stuff goes into one of those units, you'll continue to store it there. Instead of storing it, how can we gracefully, and gratefully, let go of our stuff? What could that stuff do if given to charity? And how would your environment change if you gave these things away?
3. Why do we have so much more stuff than the generations before us? How would it affect our savings, the environment if we bought less? How would it change what you buy if you bought fewer things?
4. Please do try the experiment: leave the phone/computer at home and pay with cash. You'll find yourself in and out of the store more quickly and you will think, as you put those bills down, how long it took to earn them. That's when you'll know whether you're buying something you need, or if it's just something you want.

Looking forward to your answers and insights as always!