

## **TICK THE JEWISH BOX**

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It's a simple task that takes less than a second to complete. All it involves is putting a tick in a box. But it is one of the most important and consequential things you can do to help contribute to the future of British Jewish life.

The national census takes place once a decade. It is the only research exercise that every household in the country is legally obligated to complete, so each time it occurs, it generates the most complete and detailed set of data on the population imaginable. Conducted in England and Wales by the Office for National Statistics, it provides essential data to support planning in more or less every walk of life: health, education, housing, employment, economics, politics, technology, social inclusion, to name but a few. There is not a single issue happening in Britain today that cannot be better understood in some way by referring to census data.

Twenty years ago, in 2001, the census included a question on religion for the first time. It simply asked: 'What is your religion?' and offered several response options: Christian, Buddhist, Hindu, Jewish, Muslim, Sikh, Other or None. It was controversial at the time – understanding the increasingly multicultural population of the UK through the lens of religion was becoming more important, but there were concerns that people might find the question too intrusive. In the end an almost talmudic solution was found. It would be included on the census form, but uniquely, among all questions asked, it would be optional to answer.

That year, 266,740 people ticked the 'Jewish' box. Because of the optional nature of the question, that figure did not capture the total size of the Jewish population. But it came close. Other estimates using other techniques indicated that 300,000 Jews lived in the UK at the time, so the census picked up about 90% of the whole. A very similar result – 271,259 people – was obtained when the question was repeated in the next census in 2011.

For most Jews, this is where the conversation about the census ends. They think that Jewish interest in it begins and ends with knowing how many people ticked the 'Jewish' box. But that impression could not be more wrong.

Close examination of census data allows us to construct an immensely detailed demographic portrait of the Jewish population – its age profile, geographical contours, socioeconomic conditions, health status, living circumstances and much more. And the existence of these data helps every single Jewish organisation in the country to understand exactly what the Jewish population of the UK looks like, how it has changed over time, and how it is likely to evolve in the coming years.

Jewish Care has used the census to help project how many elderly care home places they are going to need to provide going forward. Partnerships for Jewish Schools (PaJeS) has used it to help figure out how many school places to provide. Langdon has used it to provide accurate assessments of how many Jewish children have learning disabilities. World Jewish Relief has used it to determine how to encourage more people to support its vital work overseas.

It's used to help understand the scale and nature of antisemitism. It's used to determine intermarriage rates. It's used to help create low-cost housing for disadvantaged Jewish families. It's used in every single credible survey of the Jewish population – every data point you have seen about the proportion of Jews who think x, do y, or believe z (assuming it is credible), draws on census data.

I could go on. In short, every synagogue movement, every Jewish school, every single Jewish charity uses census data in countless ways, even if they don't realise they are doing so. I know, because I spend much of my professional life sharing it with them, and using it to explain the Jewish population dynamics they need to understand to determine how best to serve our community.

The next census takes place on 21 March. A letter about it will land on your doorstep soon, if it hasn't already. As in 2001 and 2011, it will include an optional question about religion that will include a 'Jewish' response option. Please tick it. Moreover, become an advocate for ticking it. Encourage every single Jew you know to tick it. That very simple task is one of the most important things you can do to help the community and government serve you and your family's interests for the foreseeable future.

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