Spear phishing messages

Bro. Hal Bookbinder

Had a terrific experience in Great Britain in early August at a conference on Jewish Genealogy and afterwards travelling with my family from Stonehenge to Inverness. One of the more memorable sites was Linlithgow, Scotland, where we stayed while visiting the Edinburgh region. The ruined Linlithgow Palace was the birthplace of Mary, Queen of Scots and climbing among its many levels, with amazing views, both inside and out, provided great exercise and was a special treat.

Another unique experience was a visit to Rosslyn Chapel, with its Templar and Masonic connections. It was fascinating to hear of the history of the chapel and to see, close-up, the various carvings and pillars that were created when the chapel was originally built in the 1400s. It was constructed by the St. Clair family (later Sinclar). William St. Clair of Roslin, 20th Baron of Roslin, was the first Grand Master of the Grand Lodge of Scotland. He was acclaimed Grand Master in 1736.

I gave three talks at the conference, including, "Practicing Safe Computing in the Age of Artificial Intelligence (AI)." After my talk, an Israeli friend shared a recent experience with WhatsApp. He received a message, supposedly from a relative, which had a slightly strange tone. He figured that it was a scam and quickly deleted it. This provided a reminder that we need to be warry of messages we receive, whether email, text, Facebook Messenger, WhatsApp, or from any other application.

We tend to let our guard down when we believe that we have been contacted by a friend or relative. We might reveal personal information, provide money, purchase something, or take actions that may not be in our best interest. With the rise of Artificial Intelligence (AI), scams of this nature are sure to rise. AI's access to massive amounts of information, its speed and analytics will permit it to send an enormous number of personalized messages and then follow up in a most realistic and engaging manner.

We must maintain our guard and not accept messages, whatever the source, at face value. Rather, if anything seems odd, trust your gut, and check with the supposed sender to see if they were the actual source. Don't respond directly to such a message. This only confirms that your contact information is real and permits the false dialogue to continue. Scam artists are experts at reeling you in and with AI, the threat increases exponentially.

Spear phishing messages, targeted to you and intended to reel you in are nothing new. We have all received them. By now, you likely recognize them for what they are and do not respond. However, with AI, expect that they will seem much more real. Instead, of simply, "Hi" with no salutation, expect personalized messages with content "only" the other party should know. There is a tremendous amount of personal data out there to be found, and AI is quickly capturing and storing it.

We are shortly approaching the Jewish High Holidays. I am reminded of my experience as a fill-in Rabbi and USAF officer during the 1973 Yom Kippur War. Click here if you would like to read, "My Most Memorable Yom Kippur."

(Note: this article is slightly modified from the original which was published in the September 2023 Newsletter of the Jewish Genealogical Society of the Conejo Valley and Ventura County.)

Bro. Hal Bookbinder is a retired Information Technology Director and College Instructor. Prior article in this series can be accessed at https://tinyurl.com/SafeComputingArticles.