

LO, THE JEWISH BANKERS

It was revealed this past week that none of the richest bankers in the world today are Jewish; but the three top elected public officials in San Francisco are.

The banker item is of some interest because the modern philosophers of anti-semitism have always used the names of Jewish bankers as Exhibit A in their proposal that Jews were running the world for their own profit.

The special history of Jews and banking, i.e., money lending, is well known. Prohibited in ancient Israel as a profession, Jewish banking sprang up during the Babylonian Exile, as displaced Jews began their first search for ways to make a living. In the early middle ages, barred from land and other professions, some Jews continued the tradition, which reached its height at the beginning of European mercantile and industrial capitalism. Jewish bankers often had to use their powerful influence to help Jewish communities survive.

But, as banking became culturally less marginal, the dominant role of the Jews began to fade away. There remained some Jewish financiers of individual wealth, and Jews are still heavily in financial occupations, but the titanic banking powers began to be found in other portions of the population.

So, we are told, the twelve richest bankers in the world include six Asians (from Singapore, Malaysia, Thailand, Indonesia and the Philippines), five Arabs (mostly from Saudi Arabia) and one West German, none Jewish. Of course, the list is more significant than that. In American business and finance, individuals have become less titanic than corporations. This corporate and managerial revolution allows for some rich people, but fewer runaway, uncontrolled, power-laden individual fortunes. So, the corporate trend has shrunk the prominence of Jews in banking -- as in department stores and some other traditional business enterprises.

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At the same time, more and more Jews are being elected to public office by non-Jewish constituencies. The San Francisco case involving a mayor and both Congressmen, is just an unusual example. It says something about the dormant state of anti-semitism here; the candidates' Jewish identity was a matter of indifference to the populace. But that's all it meant. These are three fine public officials, but the three non-Jewish public officials who preceded them were just as close to the Jewish community, just as open to "Jewish issues."

Indeed, Jewish candidates do not automatically draw Jewish votes. In the recent Chicago election, 18 per cent of the white population voted for the Black candidate, but 50 per cent of the Jewish population voted for the Black candidate, and against his Jewish opponent.

Of course, all three of those top San Francisco officials are also women -- as is the majority of the Board of Supervisors. San Francisco seems to have found the ticket: indifference in the polling booth to religion, race or sex. In that kind of society, Jews can survive without the special influence of Jewish bankers.