From Ancient Egypt to Nazi Germany, the concept has had economic, political, philosophical and intellectual overtones – and penetrated to the very core of Western culture.

— GLENN C. ALTSCHULER

A good maxim," Friedrich Nietzsche claimed, "is too hard for the teeth of time, and all the millenniums cannot succeed in consuming it, though it always serves as nourishment."

According to David Nirenberg, a professor of Medieval History and Social Thought at the University of Chicago, "Judaism" is one such maxim. In its many guises, "Judaism" has fostered debates among Christians over fundamental philosophical and political questions: the relationship between free will and the fixed laws of nature, the world of spirits, the sword of justice and the shield of faith, the right of scripture, sovereigns, and their subjects. Used with great frequency, whether or not it was being applied to "real" Jews, he argues, "Judaism" was a negative charge hurled against anyone who made "the erroneous passage from soul to flesh, from spirit to letter, from eternal truth to the mere appearance of truth."

In Anti-Judaism, Nirenberg ranges across millennia: from Ancient Egypt to the Spanish Inquisition and the French Revolution; from Augustine to Luther, Voltaire, Hegel and Marx; to demonstrate that all the "Judaisms" penetrated to the very core of Western culture. Deeply learned, sophisticated, original and profound, Anti-Judaism may well be the most important book on this subject to appear in decades.

Nirenberg indicates, for example, that in medieval Europe Christian knaves pretended Jews enjoyed special protection, insisting that they "belonged" to them in a way that was different than for other subjects. This subjection made it clear that they were not political members of the "republic." It also allowed monarchs to direct the economic activity of Jews toward money-lending to Christians so that they could exploit a stable share of the proceeds through taxes without impairing their power in what was regarded as an odious practice.

In turn, Jews, in efforts to augment or limit royal power were virtually always accompanied by demands that action be taken against Jews. It is no exaggeration, Nirenberg suggests, to claim that out of anti-Judaism movements for "representational validation emerged."

Nirenberg's re-interpretation of The Merchant of Venice is a tour de force. The play, he claims, is Shakespeare's dramatization of questions of great importance to his English contemporaries: "How can a society built on a Jewish foundation of commerce, contract, property and law consider itself Christian?" Are there limits to the autonomy of body and soul, like a pound of Christian debtor's flesh, that can be relinquished in an agreement made between consenting adults?

According to Nirenberg, the limit case is defined in the concomitant wars, but only by "outsourcing" the Jews And Shylock, who may bleed like a Christian and hate like a Christian, cannot possibly become a Christian, even after his conversion. In the end, through "the comedy of the rings," Nirenberg reveals, Shakespeare's players -- and members of his audience -- come to recognize that "the Christian triumph over Judaism consists in knowing not how to keep the oath and its symbols, forms but when, in the interests of love, to let them go."

Nirenberg ends this narrative by viewing "the interplay of critics of religious" and "theologians and Enlightenment philosophers -- to think about problems of cognition as 'Jewish' and to imagine overcoming them by 'eliminating this Judaism.'"

Abstract, logical or hyper-rational thought, he reminds us, was stigmatized as 'Jewish.' As were modern art, music criticism, philosophy and linguistics. And evolutionary biology, medicine and psychology were denounced as "race science." Perhaps "the most spectacular failure" of modern intellectuals, Nirenberg writes, was a failure to investigate or interrogate the history of their own ideas about "Judaism.

Too expansive to make definitive claims about the impact of his intellectual tools on "the many millions whose actions in the aggregate make up the flow of history," Nirenberg does point to abundant evidence that the concept of "Jewish capital" appeared regularly in the platforms and propaganda of the Nazi Party and that "ordinary people" absorbed and seem to have acted on the propositions offered to them.

He reminds us as well, however, that even though the history of thought he has described "was broadly shared," he is not making a deterministic argument. Asked to predict the nation that might erupt in violence against Jews, an informed observer of Western Europe in 1900, he suggests, might plausibly have nominated France. And during World War II, many Americans told politicians that Jews, not Germans or Japanese, posed the greatest threat to their country.

Although he cannot be certain that the constellation of ideas he calls "Anti-Judaism" caused Germany to move from anti-Semitism to genocide, Nirenberg does believe that "the Holocaust was incomprehensible and is unexplainable without them." Best understood not as the product of economic crises or paranoid fantasies, "Judaism" was -- and perhaps still is -- deeply embedded in Western culture, helping "for too many centuries make sense of their world."