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# LETTERS ABOUT LITERATURE

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Indianapolis, Indiana

**Level Two – Grades 7-8 – First Place Winner – 2019 – Indiana**

**National Winner for Level Two for the Library of Congress**

Dear Ayaan Hirsi Ali,

For most of my life, I have blindly accepted what I have been told. Whether it be by teachers, ancient scholars, or the rest of society, I always accepted what I “must” believe in as a Jew. When your book, *Infidel*, brought to light the wrongdoings of your religion, Islam, I began to question my own religion.

I have always lived in an environment rich with Jewish experiences and been given many opportunities to shape my beliefs and view of the world. My orthodox school tended to not have the same ideas about the roles of men and women as my home and conservative and reform synagogues, but I usually sided with the orthodox approach. As a child, I was unable to see any wrong in my religion, but after reading your book, I finally thought that I did not need to simply accept all of the values of my religion. You obviously were very religious when you were growing up, even to the point that you were mutilated. You were literally branded by the past. When you still decided to reject your religion, I knew that I needed to re-examine my beliefs.

When you wrote about how your religion tries to render women powerless through keeping them in the house, I began to see the same patterns in a branch of my religion, orthodoxy. Some Muslim women have to serve their husbands and do whatever they want. Some Orthodox Jewish women are treated as lesser individuals, confined to housework and taking care of the children. When I read your book, I began to wonder if all of this is right. Should women always be in this position? Of course not.

Some people who are religious try to follow every single commandment in the Torah unwaveringly. “Our purpose on earth is to become as close to God as we can,” is what I have been repeatedly taught. So, some Jews follow each and every mitzvah (commandment) to become “close to God.” Some mitzvot contradict contemporary ideals and are irrelevant to the modern world. In addition, religious commandments are manipulated to reinforce traditional gender roles. For example, women cannot participate in religious services with men and cannot be counted towards a minyan (ten adults required to hold a religious service). In my own life, I have been told that I cannot sing because it might distract grown men. I believe that the point where someone’s everyday life and views are completely shaped by their religion is where religion can cross into fanaticism. You grew up in a life that was fully shaped by religious fanaticism. For part of your life, you fully embraced all of the parts of your religion that restricted women’s choices and full participation in society. You

blindly went through life trying to spread fanatic ideals. I would not quite consider myself a fanatic, but I was fully submerged in religious beliefs, and came up for air when I read your book.

The Torah was written thousands of years ago, and I don't believe that we should continue to follow rules that contradict modern ideals. I went to the Western Wall last year, the last remaining wall from the second temple and the holiest place for Jews. Instead of being an amazing experience, it was deeply disappointing. When we first got there, my sister and I were separated from our father, because men and women cannot pray together at the Western Wall. While he witnessed the joyous welcoming of Shabbat through song and dance, we sat in silence because women's voices are not supposed to be heard, even there. I had anticipated singing and dancing with my fellow Jews from around the world, but even our greatest attempts for a song group were silenced by the loud singing from the men's side. We women were confined to a small corner of the Wall, both physically and mentally. Since I was unable to enjoy the same Jewish experience as men were, I felt like a second class citizen. Because of this experience, I felt more empathetic towards the inequality that you experienced in your religion. You have inspired me to stop being tolerant of injustices that women suffer in my religion and in others, and to question the role that religion plays in reinforcing inequality in society.

Sincerely,  
Yael Epstein