

HOW ISLAM HAS INSPIRED ME

Daniel Spiro

**Delivered at the 11/18/09 Meeting of the
Jewish-Islamic Dialogue Society of Washington**

When I was in my early 20s, I went through a phase that involved reading lots of book about different religions. Turning to Islam, I read books about its history, philosophy, and religious practices. I also breezed through the Qur'an. By the time I was ready to turn to the next religion – Hinduism, perhaps, or was it Christianity? – I felt no special connection to Islam. Lord knows, I felt no special connection to the Qur'an. The thing that grabbed me most about it was all the references to “Hellfire.” It made the book seem so primitive, so irrelevant to my outlook as both a modern Jew and a lover of philosophy.

That was in the early 1980s. Two decades later, as you know, it became impossible to be an American – Jewish or otherwise – and ignore Islam. This was the period right after the airplanes hit the towers, and the airwaves were filled with stories and images purporting to explain how one of the world's great religions could possibly have given rise to such monstrous acts. I thought back to my own readings about Islam, and how it loved peace and deplored violence just like all the other faiths. Still, Islam remained far from the center of my thoughts. Indeed, I have the dubious distinction of having authored a novel about religious philosophy that was published in 2006 and that did not once mention the word Islam or refer specifically to its teachings. I tried to justify that omission to myself by the fact that the book was set a couple of years *before* 9/11, when most Americans knew little about the Muslim faith. But as I completed my first draft of the book, I realized that the real reason why Islam was absent was because it had never captivated the author. Clearly, I had to give it one more chance to move me. I had to see if I could find a spark. Fortunately, by the time I was ready to begin my second book, the fire was lit.

Before beginning my testimonial to the Muslim faith, I'd like to reference a statement made by one of my dear Muslim friends. He proclaimed that the title of this talk – “How Islam Has

Inspired Me” – is an exaggeration. “A Jew,” he argued, “could be respectful, even appreciative of Islam, but *inspired* by it? Impossible.” I knew exactly what he meant. These two faiths, for all their similarities, have clear and important differences. And someone who is as strong in his faith as I am will surely look askance at aspects of Islam that are fundamentally non-Jewish.

Perhaps. But what my friend was missing is that I am not merely a Jew. I am also a student of philosophy. And learning philosophy is a lot like mining for diamonds. It’s a constant struggle, and you’ll often feel like you’re digging through rubble, but when you find what you’re looking for, you’ve got yourself a real gem. That’s how I approach religions too – I look for the gems. And I have found plenty in Islam. Are there elements of the Islam teachings that I can do without? Of course. But as long as the fundamental spirit of the faith is holy, and I believe it is, I can deal with the fact that I don’t accept all the teachings. Candidly, that’s how I approach my own faith. It’s not like when I go to synagogue I accept every word I read in the prayer book as true. Only a small percentage of modern Jews have that attitude.

My present fascination with Islam has sprung largely from an interest in – or more candidly, an *obsession* with – the meaning of divinity. My own views have been shaped largely by the works of Baruch Spinoza, whose entire way of thinking is centered on God. Spinoza, among other things, stands for God’s omnificence – the idea that everything that happens -- every act, every thought, every vision -- comes from God. It’s a perspective that I’ve seen more in Islam than in any other faith.

Another Spinozistic attitude about God is that we shouldn’t try to compare the mind of God with our own intellects. God’s mind encompasses all of reality. Who are we to view ourselves as comparable to such greatness? According to Spinoza, to analogize God’s mind with our own is like comparing the Constellation of the Dog with “that which barks.” I see that same perspective in Islam. Allah is truly transcendent. Truly unique. Not merely the greatest of Gods, but the one and only, as is said in Surah 112. I love that little Surah, and after reading it, can’t imagine why Muslims would embrace the notion that we are made in God’s “image.” I’ve heard that metaphor used before at a mosque but am much more likely to hear it at synagogue. To say the

least, I don't care for the metaphor; it makes God sound way too human. I like the name Allah because it signifies uniqueness. Oneness. There's no plural for Allah, and no masculine or feminine form, unlike for the English word "God." If you would allow me, I'd like to say a few words in praise of Allah's greatness – in other words, in praise of certain aspects of the Muslim conception of God.

Why does it matter so darned much to me that people at churches, and even at synagogues, so commonly turn God into such a human figure? For starters, because it dishonors the divine when we approach God with anything but the utmost integrity. When we are honest, we can't possibly flatter ourselves into thinking that any monotheistic deity worthy of the name could possibly resemble the emotional powder keg known as Man. Indeed, the more our scientists learn about microscopic and macroscopic dimensions of reality, the more difficult it ought to be to view ourselves as the center of this universe, let alone as near-divine beings.

Moreover, our willingness to expect from God what we would expect from a human-like Lord may well be responsible for why roughly half of the Jews in America do not adopt a belief in God. On the one hand, we Jews are taught that God is One, and that His name should be associated with ultimacy and perfection in every respect that is desirable. On the other hand, we are also bombarded with images of God in which he comes down to earth, and perhaps too far down to earth. Jews hear about God communicating directly to Moses or with some of the other legendary rabbis or patriarchs. These great men bargain with God, sometimes they supposedly even "defeat" Him. We pride ourselves in the idea that we can best God, but we do not seem to recognize that this mythology comes at a price.

Personally, I view myself as a post-Holocaust Jew, one whose world view has been shaped profoundly by that gravest of events. As such, I am very aware of how fashionable it has become, in the wake of the Holocaust, to strip the old God of His divinity. Some Jews shake their finger at God for the Nazi terror, as if He should be ashamed of Himself for creating a world in which anti-Semitism could run amok. Others question how a God – or at least the Jewish God -- could possibly exist and allow that slaughter to occur. And still others, including many notable rabbis, wax eloquent about the limitations of God's power. Adonai is omni-

benevolent, they say, just not capable of stopping all the injustice and tragedies that befall us. It's no wonder that one of our greatest modern theologians, Abraham Joshua Heschel, depicts God as if He were a victim of human life, suffering over the plight of widows and orphans like we might suffer over a sick child.

Is this a God that resonates with us? Is this a God that truly sounds like the Ultimate One? The Most High? Or have we engaged in precisely what we decry among our Christian cousins, excessive anthropomorphism? If you want to turn off the modern educated mind, you can do no better than to make God into a *man*. I have seen it happen so often with free-thinking Jews who wish to follow the truth wherever it leads and have never been exposed to conceptions of God that separate Him sufficiently from our own species.

By contrast, what I love about the Islamic approach to God is that it starts and ends with a tribute to God's *greatness*. Not His likeness, His greatness. And it is in this regard that my fellow Jews have the most to learn from the Muslim religion.

I won't deny that Muslims occasionally use human-like qualities to refer to Allah. Allah's 99 names include such anthropomorphisms as The Merciful, The Patient, The Loving, and The Appreciative. I find those names unfortunate, to say the least. Still, when you speak to Muslims about Allah, you are struck by how they all behold Allah to be incredibly mysterious and non-human. Indeed, of the many names that Muslims give to God, one of the two that seems to most powerfully capture Allah is The Hidden.

The other name, quite paradoxically, is The Manifest. To be sure, Allah is hardly an earthly being like the rest of us, or even a composite of earthly beings, but nor is the Muslim God a merely-distant, largely-irrelevant deity. As it says exquisitely in the Qur'an, Allah is "nearer to [man] than (his) jugular vein." (Surah 50:16) Just remember that to be near to us, to be relevant to us, does not mean that He has been reduced to one of us. Allah retains His transcendence in every way possible, and that, to me, is how it should be.

So how has Islam retained both God's immanence and His transcendence? In large part, this is accomplished by assigning to Allah the role of Absolute Synthesis. Muslim thinkers will proclaim that Allah's essence is a unity, but His universe is composed of pairs or dyads, in which both elements are necessary and each contains constituents of the other. Whether you're talking about pairs like male and female, love and hate, land and sea, vice and virtue, these dyads are seen as complementing each other, and ultimately coming together in the essence of Allah. As it says in the Qur'an, "Glory to Allah, Who created in pairs all thing that the earth produces, as well as their own (human) kind, and (other) things of which they have no knowledge." (Surah 36:36)

To be Muslim, as to be a student of Spinoza, is to appreciate that we can understand much about God through observation, reflection, and intuition regarding the laws of nature. But for everything we can learn about God, there are an infinite number of other things that remain hidden to us. For we are human beings – great enough to conceive of the existence of divinity, but *far* from great enough to capture more than a miniscule glimpse of the divine essence.

Just consider a few of the ways that Islam elevates God to where we can't treat Him like some sort of heavenly ubermensch – one that obviously falters whenever a person is buried alive in an earthquake, let alone gassed in a Holocaust. To begin, we are taught that the heavenly voice who communicated directly to Muhammad is Gabriel, not Allah. This drums home the notion that residing between us and the Most High is an infinity of beings and domains.

As for the modern, New Age idea that God is a limited, or human-like deity, the Qur'an is filled with counter ideas. It teaches repeatedly that Allah "doth encompass all things" and that Allah is the "only reality." (See, e.g., Surah 41:54; 31:30) It teaches that Allah is "the Eternal, Absolute; He begetteth not, nor is He begotten. And there is none Like unto Him." (Surah 112:2-4; Surah 42:11). The Qur'an also teaches that Allah has "no partner in (His) dominion; nor (needs) He any." (Surah 17:111). Repeatedly, in fact, the Qur'an says that Allah, far from the suffering God of Heschel, is "free of all wants" (see, e.g., Surah 22:64, Surah 33:15)

“Allah Akbar,” chant my Muslim cousins at every opportunity. But exactly how great is Allah? “Infinitely” great, you might say. And yet, that word is glib. While it has the ring of accuracy, it is too abstract to do the concept justice. In my studies of Islamic philosophy, I have found a powerful example in which the notion of God’s infinity has been made descriptively, and may I add, metaphorically.

It is said that Allah’s universe is composed of 18,000 worlds, of which our material universe is among the smallest, and resembles but a grain of sand in a desert when compared to the invisible domain. According to this metaphor, the invisible domain contains seven heavens and seven earths encompassed by the Divine Footstool, which is itself encompassed by the Divine Throne. You can envision these domains as concentric circles surrounding our universe. As stated in a hadith, which is an oral teaching of the Prophet, “The seven heavens and the seven earths compared with the Footstool are no more than a ring cast in the wilderness; and the superiority of the Throne over the Footstool is again like that of the wilderness over the ring.”

It should be obvious by now that those of us who love the Kabbalistic teachings about the Ein Sof – the Ineffable One who is beyond words – largely have Islam to thank for drumming in the notion of just how small we are compared to the ineffable Allah. In my own heretical, Spinozist mind, I love the fact that Muslim philosophers employ the concentric circle metaphor. What this does is not only emphasize God’s greatness, but also points out that we – and everything known to us – are literally *in* God.

In Muslim philosophy, and in my own, we are mere expressions, mere manifestations of an essence that we can’t possibly comprehend except superficially. For as was said before, God is the only reality and this reality encompasses all else. For us to reject this God makes no more sense to the Muslim – or to the Jewish Spinozist – than to reject the belief in life or nature. We see God everywhere. And we know God is far beyond our ability to see.

It’s no wonder, when you consider the profound Islamic teachings about God, that Jewish philosophers have thrived so much in areas heavily populated by Muslims. And it’s no wonder that nearly all the modern Muslims I meet are deeply enamored with their God. So yes, I’m

inspired by the way Islam strives to emphasize the greatness of God, rather than reducing God to some sort of human ideal. And yes, I'm also inspired by the idea of an entire faith of people who would rather contemplate and praise Allah than anything else. When I hear a Muslim say "Allah Akbar," I know she really means it. And I think that's beautiful.

With your indulgence, let us now shift from the topic of God to the domain of values. Candidly, when it comes to values, I have yet to find a religion that satisfies me nearly as much as my own beloved Judaism. I particularly love the fact that Jews are people of faith, *and* people of doubt, and that combination has made us such good learners over the centuries. It has also made us capable of learning from other faiths, or even gaining inspiration from them.

For decades, I have heard people speak of the phrase "Judeo-Christian ethics." Let us please banish that term into the scrapheap of obscenities, much as we have banished terms like kike or nigger. "Judeo-Christian ethics" is not an inherently hateful term, unlike the other two I mentioned, but it is inherently disrespectful, and what is worse, its continued use confirms the conventional Western perspective that Judaism and Christianity are significantly more modern and refined faiths than Islam. If that's what you believe, then say so directly, rather than through insulting euphemisms.

The proper term is, of course, "Abrahamic ethics." Any serious student of the three great Abrahamic faiths cannot help but be moved by the fundamental similarities in their values. The same virtues that are extolled in Islam are central to Christianity and Judaism. Wisdom, courage, temperance, reverence, balance, dignity, generosity, patience, justice, honesty ... need I continue? These virtues, and so many others I have yet to mention, comprise the very notion of holiness for all the descendents of Abraham.

To say, however, that these faiths have similar values is *not* to imply that their values are identical. And it is precisely in the subtle differences among them that inspiration is to be gained.

As a general matter, the value differences among the Abrahamic faiths do not involve one faith treating as a virtue what another treats as a vice. Rather, these are differences of *emphasis*. For example, the Christian faith emphasizes such virtues as charity, kindness, and humility, and it is rare to find a sincere Christian who does not manifest those virtues through every pore. By contrast, members of the Jewish faith, while also praising those virtues, manifest their Judaism largely through their willingness to fight injustice and challenge conventional wisdom wherever it falls short.

Now, you might ask, what of Islam? How have its values inspired me? I would have to start with the notion of fraternity. Muslims are easily the most fraternal people I have met. I know of no culture in which human beings are treated more with honor simply by virtue of their humanity.

Believe me, I realize the irony in my use of the term “fraternity,” because it is a term commonly associated with the male gender and thus feeds into the stereotypes that Islam is sexist. But this term is much broader than that. It connotes the idea that we are all members of the same beloved family, and deserve all the love and dignity that goes with that membership. To a religious Muslim, I am treated as “Brother Dan” and my wife as “Sister Kathy.” And that remains the case whether the person who is encountering us is a man or a woman, and even though they would recognize that neither of us belongs to the Islamic faith.

Closely associated with the extreme devotion to the virtue of fraternity is that of warmth. Sincere Muslims are noticeable for their warmth. This follows not only from their appreciation for their fellow human beings as brothers and sisters, but also from their own humility.

My favorite time of the year is at the end of Yom Kippur, when all the Jews in a congregation are standing up and praying passionately to God after having spent hour after hour after hour atoning for their sins. We Jews stand practically naked before the divine, our egos seemingly obliterated by all the atoning and all the fasting we have done. That is when we are at our most spiritual. I say that, and then I am reminded of just how amazing it must be to be a Muslim, walking among a seemingly endless sea of brothers and sisters, namelessly and facelessly

approaching the Kaaba in Mecca while heaping praise on the Most High. This is not a religion that lends itself to egomania. Rather, it is conducive to thinking of oneself as but one of seven billion, none of whom has any special claim to the grace of God.

Some non-Muslims might find it chilling to contemplate the Islamic concept of the universal brotherhood and sisterhood. They perceive this to signify the Muslim aspiration to take over the world and convert all those who reject the superiority of Islam. Personally, though, I have encountered very few efforts on the part of Muslims to convert me or disrespect my Judaism. When the idea of conversion has been suggested, I simply point out that I am no more inclined to abandon Judaism than to dig up my father's bones and smash them – for he has bestowed on me a great religious tradition, every bit as great as their own, and I see no reason to disrespect him or it.

That said, how can I not appreciate the universalist spirit of Islam? That sense of dignity and respect which is bestowed on all human beings, great and small. That sense of warmth and fraternity which is extended by my Muslim cousins to all who cross their path, regardless of gender, race, or creed. Anyone who hasn't been inspired by these qualities needs to get out more often.

We have spoken about God and about values, but it was not until I came to grips with the next topic that I realized I had finally begun to show Islam the respect it deserved. As a young Jew, I found the name "Muhammad" to be alienating, much as I did the name "Jesus." Yes, we had our own analogue – Moses – but Moses was spoken of purely as a man, and a limited one at that. By contrast, Jesus was explicitly spoken of as divine, so divine, in fact, that those of us who rejected his divinity were supposedly heading for eternal Hell, whereas those who accepted it would be saved. As for Muhammad, while I knew that he was not technically viewed as part of the Godhead, I understood him to be regarded as the perfect man, outstanding in every respect, and thought that any insult to him would be taken as out-and-out blasphemy. All of this made me view talk about both Jesus and Muhammad to be antithetical to the purity of monotheism.

Needless to say, once I came to study Islam more carefully, I realized how shortsighted that perspective was. And gradually, I came to see Muhammad as not merely a Muslim exemplar but as a highly *Jewish* figure, one that has literally brought me to tears. It only stands to reason that I would view Muhammad in that way, since my Muslim cousins so commonly claim Moses as one of their own.

One thing that helped me appreciate Muhammad was realizing precisely why it is considered so inappropriate to depict him, be it visually or orally. I had originally thought this was done to lend Muhammad an aura of holiness, thereby turning him into something less than a god, but more than a man. But then I realized that the whole purpose of the prohibition against depicting Muhammad was to *avoid* the temptation to turn him into an idol like other spiritual leaders before him. According to Muhammad, only Allah is to be worshipped, and if Muhammad had come to be viewed as God's only son or as part of some divine pantheon, this would surely have horrified him beyond belief.

As for the idea that Muhammad is perfect, I won't deny that he is commonly viewed among Muslims as the greatest human role model. But that is far from saying that he was incapable of sin. You need only read Surah 80 of the Qur'an to see the falsity in that notion. It begins as follows:

(The Prophet) frowned and turned away. Because there came to him the blind man (interrupting). But what could tell thee but that perchance he might grow (in spiritual understanding)? Or that he might receive Admonition, and the teaching might profit him?

As to one who regards Himself as self-sufficient, to him does thou attend; though it is no blame on thee if he grow not (in spiritual understanding). But as to him who came to thee striving earnestly, and with fear (in his heart), of him wast that unmindful.

There you have an example of Muhammad serving as a role model, but of a *negative* kind. The commentators point out that he was willing to give his message to the big-shot leaders of his

tribe even if they hadn't demonstrated a sincere willingness to learn. But when a blind man sincerely came to Muhammad in an effort to grow spiritually from his teaching, Muhammad turned him away. He had more important things to do, more important people to attend to. And for this, Muhammad was appropriately admonished.

I find that story delightfully humanizing. But even more moving, to me, is the story of how Muhammad began his period of prophecy. Here he was, a man of 40, one who was raised as an orphan by his uncle into the proud tribe of Quraysh that dominated the city of Mecca. Upon receiving the "message" from the angel Gabriel, you might expect that if he were of a supremely practical bent, he would have worked diplomatically with the leaders of the Quraysh, treating their gods with a modicum of honor, while revealing to them more and more about Allah. But Muhammad, though a worldly man, was above all else an iconoclast. Steadfastly, he confronted the big *machers* of the Quraysh with the simple message of monotheism.

"Hear O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is One." "There is no God but Allah." These two sentences may sound different, but they mean precisely the same thing – when it comes to the unity of God, we must not compromise. To the extent those words contain a rebuke of all lesser deities that might get in the way of that message, so be it.

It must have taken tremendous courage for Muhammad to deliver his prophesy to the leaders of his people, but he knew that he was not the first to do so. His was, in fact, the same basic message that was delivered in a previous millennium by our father Abraham, another man of courage. If Abraham can be viewed as so Jewish, why not also Muhammad? We have already seen that they both stood for so many of the same values, and I'm not just referring to the virtues of bravery and iconoclasm.

The final area of inspiration that I'd like to discuss is the Qur'an itself. I've made numerous references to it already in this talk, but I do realize that I haven't even scratched the surface of its majesty.

Allow me to share with you a famous Qur'anic parable, which comes from Surah 24 (beginning at verse 35):

“Allah is the Light of the heavens and the earth. The parable of His Light is as if there were a Niche and within it a Lamp. The lamp enclosed in Glass. The glass as it were a brilliant star: Lit from a blessed Tree. An Olive, neither of the East Nor of the West, whose Oil is well-nigh Luminous, Though fire scarce touched it: Light upon Light! Allah doth guide whom He will to His light: Allah doth set forth Parables for men: and Allah doth know all things.”

I don't recall that passage in the slightest from the time I skimmed the Qur'an back in the early 1980s. Perhaps I thought the images were pleasant, maybe even striking, but it hardly provoked my thought. That's because I was never exposed to any *commentary* on the book. Without any commentary, the Qur'an does not come alive to a non-Arabic speaking Jew – or a least it didn't to me. So let me try to illustrate why this passage can be so inspirational if we enlist the help of the Qur'anic commentators.

The parable contains three central symbols -- the Niche, the Lamp and the Glass. The fourth, olive oil, is simply the beloved, universal substance that fuels the lamp to make it the holy of holies, as we would say in Judaism.

We've all heard the word “niche,” but many may not know that it literally denotes the small, shallow recess in the wall, such as a wall of a Middle-Eastern home. In the days before Edison, these houses needed niches – they'd be placed high above the ground, and the lamp that would be inserted inside the niche would allow light to be diffused throughout the area below with a minimum of shadows.

In this parable, the light coming down through the niche connotes light of a *spiritual* nature. To find the source of that light, we must look “upward” -- toward books like the Qur'an or the Torah, and the teachings of those who have been steeped in the spirit of those works.

As for the lamp, it represents the core of Truth that underlies all spiritual light. The Qur'an teaches that the holy books of the Abrahamic faiths, at bottom, convey essentially the same universal Truth. It applies for all peoples and for all times – just as the mystical “olive tree” that fuels the lamp is supposed to be neither from the East nor the West, but from throughout the planet. This universal Truth, this holy oil, is conveyed in words like Adonai and Allah, and preached in teachings like Jesus' holy Sermon on the Mount. Surely, the universal lamp of truth is beautiful beyond words and worthy of honor.

But there is a problem; we can't see the lamp directly in all its splendor. We're only human. We live “down below” in the world, a world in which people's concerns are not always especially spiritual, and we ourselves are too limited intellectually and linguistically to grasp more than a superficial understanding of God and truth. That's one reason why we need a glass to enclose the lamp.

The glass is the transparent vehicle through which the light passes in both its physical and spiritual senses. It serves multiple purposes. It protects the lamp from invaders – wind, insects, or for that matter, human conduct. And it serves as a medium through which the spiritual light can be *filtered* so that people can apprehend it. Our minds and our language are incredibly primitive in relation to reality as a whole; some sort of glass is needed to allow the lamp's light to be appreciated by our own limited minds and ears.

So there you have some Qur'anic commentary. It certainly helped to make the parable understandable to me. But to make it *inspirational*, I had to think for myself about it. After all, that's the whole point of Scripture, isn't it? To provoke for each reader a set of thoughts and feelings that build on our own unique sense of meaning in life.

To me, this parable is a reminder that books like the Qur'an, the Christian Bible and the Torah – with all their detailed proscriptions and history lessons – go beyond the fundamental truths contained in the Lamp. They preach ideas from a time when most people were illiterate, science was primitive, and philosophy reflected our primitive science. Admittedly, each pane of glass that emerged from these Scriptures was an inspired vehicle for filtering truth into the minds of

our ancient ancestors, and our little minds surely require some sort of filter, but our knowledge has progressed a lot in the intervening centuries. So aren't we ready for a new medium, a new filter?

Just look at how many of our intelligent young minds are refusing to pay attention to the lamp, and are satiating themselves with the lower world of business, sports, and plain old *michegas*. Something must be done to reach them – we can't simply neglect them, or assume that they will come around to see the light. Many brilliant people before them have refused to do so, and at some point, it behooves us to ask the question “Why?”

My mantra is simple: *It's time to change the glass! To replace the filter.* That takes nothing away from the holiness of the Torah, the Qur'an, or the Gospels. As sources of proscriptions of how to live ethical lives, our scriptures continue to serve us as magnificently as they served our ancestors. And they thrive as reminders of the divine lamp that lights our world – a lamp that's basically the same for all sages, whether they're Jewish, Muslim, Christian, or for that matter, Buddhist. But these scriptures must not be nooses around our necks, precluding us from tapping into the scientific and philosophical insights of the past millennium.

Before we destroy each other – cousin against cousin – let's invoke the power of these religions to *unite* us. And to make that happen, let's focus on the lamp. As for the glass, there's no reason to insult it. But there is a reason to change it – it's too late for a mere cleaning.

How do we change it? By using every tool at our disposal. And that includes seeking inspiration from other religious traditions. It also includes embarking on a dialogue with our cousins in which we will search together for a shared understanding of the lamp. Then, each respective community of faith can separately pick out some new glass – not a new scripture, but a new set of ideas that honors both the old teachings and the ideas of our greatest modern scientists and philosophers.

Frankly, the most inspirational thing that Islam has done for me is to teach that I can find value in all of the great religions, including others that are far more distant than Islam from my own

Jewish roots. Make no mistake, I know of no faith that resembles Judaism as much as Islam.
But I know of faith at all – including those two – that can't benefit from exposure to new ideas
and outside influences.