

# Current Sufism In Israel. The Way Of Abraham - A Bridge Between Religions



*Shelley Elkayam - Ills.:  
Joseph Sassoon Semah*

*Current Sufism in Israel El Tarika El Ibrahimiyah - The Way of Abraham - A Bridge between Middle East Religions*

## *Introduction*

I wish to thank the University of Goettingen for inviting me to lecture at the Intercultural Theology program on the Current Sufism in Israel and on Sephardic Ultra-Orthodoxy in Israel.

I will begin by introducing my subject with some historical background. Then, I would like to make a reference to the specific audience sitting here right now because it is a very special audience. On the one hand, it is German; on the other, it is an international audience. So we have to consider how do we speak to such a local yet global group.

At that point, I will present the thesis of this lecture.

So, let us now discuss the issue of the Sephardic Jews. Who are they?

The reason why one knows so little about the Sephardic or Oriental Jews is also a

matter of scientific concern for those of us who study *Intercultural Theology*. Thus, let us have a quick look at a long and serious matter such as The Stage of History.

Yes, stage as in Stage Theater, with the very writers who write the script and the very actors who play the protagonists and the very hegemonic audience who wish to see themselves on stage, or else the very far exotic other. Then we shall move forward to have an idea about the intellectual assets of the ISRAEL Sufi way and perhaps if time allows, we shall read during our workshop some of the devotional texts studied by the Israel Sufi Way, such as El-Ghazali. So hopefully you should have some taste regarding the intercultural Theology that is bridging between religions in the Middle East today, and we shall conclude with that today.

### *Background*

In the Jewish State of Israel, Sufi activity had been almost eliminated by the disruption of the War in 1948, partly revived after the renewal of contacts between Palestinians in Israel and in the West Bank and Gaza “in the wake of 1967 Arab Israeli War” and suppressed in the Second Intifada, also known as the Oslo War and the Al- Aqsa Intifada (2000 to 2005). This Intifada raged between the 20th and the 21st century.

In this lecture I focus on Sufism in Israel as manifested by The Israeli Sufi Way. The Israeli Sufi Way is known as The Sufi Way of Abraham. In Hebrew – One of Israel’s two national languages, it sounds Derekh Avraham (אברהם דרך). In Arabic, the other national language, it sounds Al-Tariqah Ibrahimiyah or Ibrahimiyah-Al (أ-طريقة آل-إبراهيمية / الطريقة).

The members of the Israeli Sufi Way come from various circles: Academy, conservative and orthodox Rabbinic institutes and leadership of other Sufi brotherhoods of Israel: Qadiriyyah, Shadhiliyyah-Yashrutiyyah and Naqshbandiyyah.

Ibrahimiyah defines itself (2014) publicly as an inter-religious movement encouraging dialogue between Jews, Christians and Muslims. This inter-religious character is a “post-Sufi” strategy as well as a spiritual response to the particular modern European challenges of the State of Israel, tackling the Israeli East-West debate.

The Sufi leadership of the 3 Muslim brotherhoods responded to the challenge of the peculiar circumstances in which they live in the Middle East, by joining the Ibrahimiyyah and establishing it as the Israeli Sufi Way of Abraham.

This Israeli Sufi brotherhood was created during the 1990s right at the end of the twentieth century. Public activity gathered momentum during the first decade of the twenty first century, with a double mission of both peace between Jews and Muslims, and spiritual search for Medieval Jewish Sufi roots. Special attention is given to 16th century Safed (in the Land of Israel) and of Egypt and North Africa and since the Sufi festival in 2010 also to Indian Jewish Sufism of perhaps 12 century.

### *Here and Now*

We have in the audience 60 students of Prof. Andreas Grunschloss of the Faculty of the History of Religion and on the other hand 30 international students of Prof. Fritz Heinrich Intercultural Theology program of the Theological Faculty of Goettingen University.

Therefore, my lecture relates to both the historical and theological dimensions of this phenomenon, which I consider to be a capsule of Jewish Muslim spiritual brotherhood. It is true that The Way of Abraham was established only in the 1990s. And yet we should ask whether it is indeed *a new religious movement*. New or old, this is the question.

While this particular initiative has a local – and a national – Israeli context, as a Jewish-Muslim initiative it is also part of a larger scope. The Israeli Sufi Way interfaces with an inter-religious trans-local context that emerged during the 20th Century. It should also be looked at in the international context of an International and Intercultural Sufism that emerged in the USA and Europe. Ibrahimiyyah is a new religious movement in that sense that it is committed generally to the mystical spirituality of Sufism, while departing it from any established religion.

Looking at the Israeli Sufi Way in the Israeli context, it is a “glocal” phenomenon. In other words, Ibrahimiyyah is a global yet local movement. It is a manifestation of two opposite powers: on the one hand, the social and political Israeli realms of Dialogue and Peace movements and on the other, it belong with the fundamental realms of religious Revival and Jewish Renewal.

We have to remember that there this order or brotherhood is not an official institution. It is not registered as a non-profit or a religion. Therefore it features a built-in flexibility and reflects changes in the view of its members as it lives on.

Hence, what began as *Derekh Avraham*, the Sufi Way of Abraham, first in Hebrew and then in Arabic, is more and more referred to by its members as “the Israeli Sufi Way.” This gradual change reflects a not-always-conscious tendency to focus mainly inwards, to the Jews themselves. So the Israeli Sufi ways, which was for many years Jewish Muslim movement, is often turning more toward Jews in Israel, the Jewish State and beyond, to the Jewish world.

The *Ibrahimiyyah* is still working tightly with Muslim teachers and friends, but it also gradually developing a typically Jewish Sufism. It is calling Israelis to look at the very Jewish Medieval origins of Sufism and to take a moderate perspective [toward their faith]. It invites Jews to refrain from looking at things in a clear cut, black and white, perspective. This is no little challenge for a culture famous for its inclination to heated arguments and even bickering.

So *Ibrahimiyyah* appears to go against Jewish tradition and the fundamental nature of Orthodox Judaism. But this is not really the case. It does stand on a firm ground of medieval (and even Biblical) Jewish tradition.

Indeed, unity of opposites is no stranger to both Hebrew and Muslim classical Sufi mystical traditions. (Ibn Arabi’s *wahdat al-wujud*, unity of the being, وحدة الوجود).

They experience silence in the midst of noise, Love in the midst of hate, hope in the midst of despair.

### *My thesis*

Considering, theologically, the 4 major criteria of Moshe Sharon for new religious movements

- Holly new book
- Holly New Schedule\Days
- Holly new Spiritual figure
- New Religious Praxis

I would argue that the Israel Sufi Way is an NRM if one considers Judaism since Safed 16th century as an NRM, which I doubt would one do.

But that is a matter of study for another occasion.

From an intellectual-historical perspective, one should consider mainly

developments within the Mizrahi and Sephardic Jewish traditions.

Mizrahi/Oriental signifies Jews dwelling in area occupied by the Muslims in the 7th century while Sephardic refers to Jews who were forced to leave the Iberian peninsula following Expulsion of the Jews from Spain in 1492.

(Sephardic means originating from Sepharad, Spain or the Iberian Peninsula.) These terms are largely (but not entirely) overlapping, namely referring to the same communities.

Here I refer mainly to developments, which occurred in 16th Century Safed as well as North Africa, India and Egypt since 12th century on.

I argue that the Intercultural Theology of the Israel Sufi Way (i.e. the contents of the gatherings as reflected in the selection of Sufi and Kabbalistic texts mainly from 12th and 16th centuries, translated and studied by Ibrahimiyah) — clearly demonstrates The Israel Sufi way is not as a mere political peace movement. Rather, it is a thorough-going spiritual-intellectual movement of Jews who seek to remember and re-connect with their own forgotten heritage. This is a group of people who seek to discover their own genuine Jewish Sufi origins and sources.

I will argue that this forgetfulness was imposed on the Sephardic Jewish culture by forces of the Israeli-Arab conflict, European modernity, Westernization, and by Ashkenazi secular categories.

My thesis is that the Way of Abraham has combined the local El Qadiri [i] and Shadhili Yashruti [ii] tradition and the Naqshbandiyya [iii] tradition with a renewal Jewish import from Medieval Jewish Sufism not as a new religious movement but as a way for Mizrahim, for Sephardim, to live in the Middle East in a good spirit and in neighboring relations with the religions of the Middle East Islam, Christianity, Judaism and the new spiritualities that are currently coming from the Indian peninsula.

*Who are the Sephardic Jews?*

They are the Jews who find themselves in Medieval Spain creating a great Jewish culture and religious Jewish texts in Hebrew. According to Daniel Elazar, the Sephardi were the Majority of Jews, about 95%, at the 11th century yet in the recent centuries they are not the majority of Jews as most Jews in Europe and in the USA and Canada are not Sephardi but Ashkenazi.

In Israel until the 1990s, the majority were Sephardic Jews. These Jewish Israelis

identified themselves as Mizrahim (Orientals) mainly since 1983. Yet, recent studies by Ben Dor and Behar traced the use of the term Mizrahim as identity marker (at least of some Sephardi intellectuals), already from 1910. Thus, again, we are talking about the same people as we say both, Sephardim or Mizrahim.

### *The Stage of History*

Historically, there is no one Sephardi History, as there are many Sephardi Histories; each Sephardic Jewish community has its own History. Not because the Sephardic Jews did not have an intellectual discourse of reading and writing. They definitely did read a lot and wrote quite much, more than any other Jewish group.

Yet, the unfolding of history was such that the history of the Sephardic Jews was not yet staged on the Stage of History. While they wrote, quite a lot, scholarship on the history of Sephardi Jews during the last 70 years leaves much to be desired. One needs to set a new stage with new historical tools, combining philological research with the research of Folklore studies.

### *Who sets the Script Unfolded on the Stage of History?*

I want you to close your eyes. Imagine there is a stage of *History* where the protagonists you know are active and vivid such are the Jews, the Christians, The Muslims, the Catholics, the Protestants, the Hindus, the Buddha, the Maya.

But when you look for the Sephardic Jews, they are not to be found on the Stage of Jewish history. They are largely ignored by mainstream historiography.

They are periods associated with the Sephardic Jews such as the Golden Age in Spain, the Expulsion from Spain 1492, Safed 16th Century, The Damascus Blood Liber of 1840, the Sephardic immigration from the Islamic countries into the new State of Israel in 1948.

All these dramatic periods relate to each other in revival and in survival. They serve as important turning points in Jewish history. Yet, they are largely hidden from the eye.

In Safed in the 16th century, I would argue, the Modern Jewish way was designed and shaped the way we know it today. Yet, the secrets of Kabbalah of Safed made the History of Safed remain hidden and unseen for hundreds of years. (Kabbalah,

Jewish esoteric learning, is not easily accessible).

But the story of the past did not disappear altogether. 16th century Safed (a Jewish center now in Northern Israel and then within the Ottoman Empire) is my field of expertise. Safed was the showground of an intensive creative intellectual history for the Jews. Yet this history was largely hidden from the mainstream historians. Why was this history so difficult to trace and understand?

Was that a mystery? No. It is a subject for an analysis. I assume we all see through dichotomies. Black and White, Blue and Red, Right and Left. Isn't it?

I would argue that this may be explained by the inherent limitation of the dominant way of thinking, which applies dichotomies. This Yes/No thinking as Secular versus Religious, Mysticism versus Religious Law, and even Allah versus Eloha, The God of Israel. That is why the Sephardic Jewish way of life was—to a large extent—misunderstood and perhaps even misrepresented.

Yet, once we are able to overcome this kind of black and white way of thinking, we kind find the way to understand and understand this Sephardic tradition. This is a tradition that builds bridges between Middle Eastern Religions today, because when Allah and God are one, the bridge is set for the religions to mutual respect.

My first argument today is that the Way of Abraham is powerful case study for this perspective.

The Sephardic Ultra-orthodox Jews in Israel are typically affiliated with the Shas Movement. Shas (Hebrew: ש"ס, an acronym for שומרי ספרד Shomrei Sfarad, lit., ("Religious) Guardians of the Sephardim") is an ultra- Orthodox movement and also a religious political party in Israel. The Shah movement was founded in 1984 under the leadership of the illustrious (Iraqi) Rabbi Ovadia Yosef.

Sephardic Jews of the Shas Movement adhere—in terms of religious practice—to the interpretation of Jewish Law (Halacha) by Rabbi Yosef Karo. Indeed, Rabbi Yosef Karo authored his famous Halachic compendium of laws, Shulkhan Arukh (literally meaning "A Set Table"), in 16th century Safed.

In other words, Sephardi Jews have a set of laws that is different from the Ashkenazi (European) one.

Most important particularly when it comes to the Ultra-Orthodox camp, is the deep divide between the secular and the religious that we find among the

Ashkenazi.

To say the least, the Sephardic Jews, even those who hold to modern norms, were not subject to the modern dichotomy between secular and religious. It is within the Ottoman Empire that 90% of the Sephardic Jews lived for generations. So while many would refer to Sephardic Jews as Arab Jews the truth of the matter would be that they are Jews under the Ottomans rule.

That is Turkish Jews in a way.

One has to remember that the separation of Church and State is originally European and Christian. It began with Jesus quoted as saying: "Render therefore unto Caesar, the things which are Caesar's; and unto God's, the things that are God's" (Matthew 22:21)

It then evolved into an ever growing dichotomy beginning with the Renaissance and later during the enlightenment. European modernity required a dramatic separation from many aspects of religion. Church and state were to be fully separated.

Not so in the Ottoman environment, where modernity continued alongside religion.

With the encounter of West and East, the secular outlook became also the colonialist outlook. European secularism became a tool for breaking and deconstructing the unified politico-religious heritage of the Sephardic communities.

Within modern Israeli culture one often finds an Orientalist outlook of the Sephardim, as explained by Meir Buzaglo. On the other hand, Sephardic Jews in Israel also became as source and a force of an underground creativity in the Arts, culture and intellect, as explained by Ammiel Alcalay and Haviva Pedaya.

### *Intellectual Account*

The concept of the Israeli Sufi Way emerged - or reemerges - in the face of Israeli-Arab conflict. While the challenge of peace is structured in this effort, it differs from other Israeli peace movements such as the well-known (mainly Ashkenazi) Peace Now movement. The Peace Now movement (עכשיו שלום Shalom Achshav) was launched in 1978 as an all-Israeli movement aimed at supporting the Egyptian-Israeli peace process, but later became more and more sectorial,



representing mainly leftists of European origin.

To illustrate the difference let us look tomorrow into the lyrics of the devotional text studied by the Ibrahimiyyah.

We will study that at our workshop tomorrow.

Let us focus on the 5th Source of the 3rd chapter in the poem of Al Ghazali which is a devotional text for the Way of Abraham.

*El-Ghazali, a devotional text studied by the Ibrahimiyyah:*

*In the name of Illah, the merciful, the compassionate*

*The prayer and the peace*

*Upon Our Master Muhammad*

*And upon His beloved and pure family and friends*

*Oh Lord!*

*Have mercy on us*

*For Thou art the merciful Father*

*Forgive us*

*The evil of our passions*

*And our wrongdoing*

*Oh Lord!*

*Thou art peace*

*And from Thee doth peace emanate*

*And to Thee shall peace return*

*Bless us, oh Lord, with peace*

*Oh Lord!*

*Guide Thy creations to their success*

*So that their deed shall be blessed*

*And cause them to love each other*

*May the Lord bestow plenty of bounty*

*On all of men's doings*

*Oh Lord!*

*Avert wars and misfortunes*

*From Thy created beings*

*And take them closer to Thee*

*Oh Lord!*

*Oh Lord of the Worlds!*

*Amen and amen.*

This text demonstrates the complexity of Ibrahimiyyah as a Jewish-Muslim gathering in the midst of the Jewish-Arab conflict, since the year 2000 up to now.

In a search for God, Ibrahimiyyah members call for peace which involves love, mercy and regret. But suchlike classical Kabbalistic and Sufi texts abound among the readings and theosophical study and practice of Ibrahimiyyah: Al-Rumi, Al Ghazali, Al Qushayri, Attar, and Muhyi al-Din ibn 'Arabi – all are common names in the Tariqa.

But this is not all.

The transformation of Ibrahimiyyah from a focus on classical Sufi and Medieval Jewish texts into Sufism of the 21 Century is accompanied by the new media, using emails, blogs and Facebook.

Since 2000, members of the Way of Abraham are at the forefront of forming a new intellectual and Academic public Hebrew sphere, which is Islam-friendly. This is done by translating books, poetries and works, by writing PhD dissertations with no institutional budgets, and by participating in panels and conferences. Ibrahimiyyah members used for years to meet weekly in Tel Aviv within each academic year since 2000. There are also three annual conferences being held in Jerusalem, Nazareth and Neve Shalom.

And when the Shadhili Yashruti Shaykh opened the doors of the Sufi lodge (Zawiyah) in Acre [Akko], the Ibrahimiyyah has gathered in Hanukkah too, for a celebration. This annual Hanukkah celebration is centered on light in Jewish and Muslim traditions. And includes Hanukkah sermons by Muslim Shaikhs, perhaps a first in history of religions.

One has to remember that while Hanukkah is a festival of lights, it is also a nationalistic Jewish holiday that commemorates the great Maccabean or Hasmonean Revolt (Hebrew: 167 ) (החשמונאים מרד) to 160 BC). Its religious significance revolves around the purification of the Jewish Temple in Jerusalem. Not a light thing, to have Palestinian Muslims regularly contribute to such an event.

Occasionally, Ibrahimiyyah hosts visiting Sufi Shaykhs from the USA, Albania or Turkey. Considering the fact that Ibrahimiyyah has no lodge (zawiya) of its own, it has been expanding for about twenty years, around 30 to 70 active adherents

were assembled, most of them belonging to the Academia and to artistic and intellectual circles in Tel Aviv, Jerusalem and Galilee. All of the participants are organized into a formal study group in which they discuss their spiritual experiences over Sufi texts.

Ibrahimiyyah became an active Sufi order in Israel. With weekly meetings held in Neve Tzedek Tel Aviv tens of members gathered at the ally in the house of Rabbi Roberto Arbib and his wife Dr. Marina Arbiv. Some of the seminars were held at the Masorti synagogue Sinai at Gordon Street and soon weekend conferences followed.

From its very beginning, since its establishment in the presence of Shaykhs, Rabbis, Poets, Academics and a large audience who gathered at the Jewish-Arabic village of Neve Shalom in 2000, the Ibrahimiyyah adapted the dhikr ceremony as a common prayer, as a remembering practice of enlightening the heart, and as a spiritual call.

The Manasra family and disciples lead the dhikr ceremony in the gatherings. Thus the Ibrahimiyyah dhikr ceremony includes foundations from the Qadiri dhikr as well as a devotional song in Hebrew composed by Rabbi Nathan, that follows the melody of the prayed La Ilaha Illa Allah and performed by Rabbi Roberto Arbib in the end of each Ibrahimiyyah dhikr:

*There is none like our God  
There is none like our Lord  
There is none like our King  
There is none like our Savior [La Illah Ila Allah]  
Who is like our God  
Who is like our Lord  
Who is like our King  
Who is like our Savior  
Let us praise our God  
Let us praise our Lord  
Let us praise our King  
Let us praise our Savior  
Blessed be our God  
Blessed be our Lord  
Blessed be our King  
Blessed be our Savior*

*Lo, Thou art our God*  
*Lo, Thou art our Lord*  
*Lo, Thou art our King*  
*Lo, Thou art our Savior*

The specific contribution of the leadership of the Ibrahimiyyah for fourteen years was a weekly gathering of study of Sufi scriptures, in Hebrew, under the guidance of Muslim Sufi Shaykh and of Dr. Avi Elqayam, as well as a practice of a *dhikr*. Ibrahimiyyah performs musical improvisations, devotional poetry, whirling dance and prayers.

This involved translations of Sufi classical corpus from Arabic into Hebrew. Indeed Elqayam and the Ghassan, the son of Shaykh Manasra, translated major classical Sufi works as well as researched into the [forgotten]works of the Jewish Sufis. Following an intensive decade of Sufi praxis, Shaykh Manasra who had been nominated in 1995 as the Qadiri Shaykh of the Holy Land by the Sufi Shaykh of Al-Aqsa Muhammad Hashem Al Baghdadi, initiated in 2008-2009 five of the Israeli Jewish Sufi leaders – whom he attributed as carrying exceptional character and scholarly achievements – as Shaykhs of The Ibrahimiyyah. Along with his son Ghassan and his grandson Abed Al Salam, Manasra guides the *dhikr* ceremonies and teaches the Sufi texts and poetry.

### *Conclusion*

I argued in this paper that the Ibrahimiyyah is holding a specific practice that corresponds with Islamic traditional.

So we have here an inter-faith peace oriented efforts with Muslim and Jewish activists working together, often with members of other faiths.

Yet, the Israeli Sufi Way of Abraham is turning largely inwards, to the Jews themselves. They present an alternative view of combining region and modernity that draws on the heritage of Sephardic Judaism. Both as a tradition that avoids the pitfall of dichotomy between modernity and religion and as a tradition that has much in common with Islam.

Sephardic Judaism traditionally kept its channels open to interaction and inspiration from both the European-Christian and the Levantine-Muslim worlds. Ashkenazi Jews followed the European model, which led to a great split between secular modern Jews and the Ultra-Orthodox. This tendency to think in

dichotomies, the either/or paradigm, made reconciliation with Muslim Arabs more difficult. It also forced the Sephardi Jews to stay under the radar for a very long time, in the name of an imaginary “melting-pot”.

But the Israeli Sufi Way—and similar movements—present an alternative. Making Judaism more tuned to both Europe and the Levant. Thus, forming an alternative modernity to the fully secular West, and challenging the hegemonic Ashkenazi Judaism of Israel, in both its variations, the modern-secular and the Ultra-Orthodox.

And, at the same time, the Sufi Way opens the hearts of Israeli and other Jews to Muslims, Christians and Druze and others. The Ibrahimiyyah contributes to bringing peace to our region via a spiritually intensive grass-root effort.

Other important corollaries are also academic work, new discoveries and a lot of happiness in lightly-social and deeply-religious gatherings of all sorts.

#### *Notes:*

[i] From the Qadiri point of view their active support in establishing the Ibrahimiyyah might be seen as a strategy to survive.

Under the circumstances of living under a Jewish government since the 1948 War, the Sufi Qadri brotherhood declined, yet it was “partly revived after the renewal of contacts with the Palestinians of the West Bank and Gaza in the wake of the 1967 War”, and roads to these contacts were blocked again after the Second Intifada.

Dr. Avi Elqayam of Bar Ilan University, Prof. Paul Fenton of the University of Paris Sorbonne and the Masorti [Conservative] Rabbi Roberto Arbib of Tel Aviv, were looking for a Sufi Shaykh. They visited Shaykh Dir Kadis of the Palestinian Authority, and the Shaykh of Rammla Abu Labban of the Rifa’iyah, who took them to Gaza to meet the great Shaykh of Rifa’iyah. The last paid then a visit when he came to teach a seminar in the first gathering at Neve Shalom. Yet, Shaykh Abd Al Salam Manasra and his family were committed enough to teach the Ibrahimiyyah on a weekly basis for 14 years already. Thus Shaykh Manasra is one of the founders of Ibrahimiyyah. As with spiritual-historical events, one has to cross few versions about how it all started. According to Shaykh Manasra, at the late 90’s one of his disciples, Imam Khalid Abu-Ras met with Dr. Avi Elqayam at an international conference. Abu-Ras was talking about him, and following this, the Jewish leaders of Ibrahimiyyah. Dr. Elqayam, and Rabbi Roberto Arbib and Dr.

Itzhak Weismann came to see the Shaykh in Nazareth. He recalls these days: When Abu Ras spoke about me, Elqayam did not leave him until he gave him the contact details, and I heard he asked would the Shaykh be angry if I will call him? [They came to me and] We spoke about Sufism and love of people. They asked me "Do we have to be Muslims? And I answered "If we would have forced you [Jews] to become Muslim than we would have not been [deserved to be called] Sufis. You can become Sufis without being Muslims, [because] what is Sufism? It is love, it is help. It is giving without receiving.

Long time ago, once, in the beginning of Derech Avraham [Ibrahimiyyah] Elqayam asked me whether or not "we have to be Muslims". I answered him "not at all". There are fifteen million Jews and One and half milliard Muslims, so why should we take the Jews. Let the Jews stay Jews. We need peace to be amongst us. To think not make a problem to the other. For us in Islam Peace is God, This is one of the names of God. If we think of peace then we think of love of God. Avi Elqayam said to me once, four-five years ago, during an argument "We in the Way of Abraham". [But] I made the Way of Abraham. With us to make a Way is a Sufi matter. Who is not a Sufi can't make a Way. Making a way is a matter of bringing hearts near each other and to walk together in one way. I did not wish Jews to become Muslims and Muslims to become Jews. So we made The Way of Abraham, because there is no leader in the Israeli Qadiri Sufism but me. Even though professors ...because they need first to receive [the hirka] from a Shaykh. And Shaykh Muhammad Hashem Al Baghdadi passed on to me the Hirka.

I meant the Way of Abraham to be that the Jews will stay Jews and Muslims to stay Muslims and Christians to stay Christians.

We aimed for love to prevail, for peace and for humanitarianism."

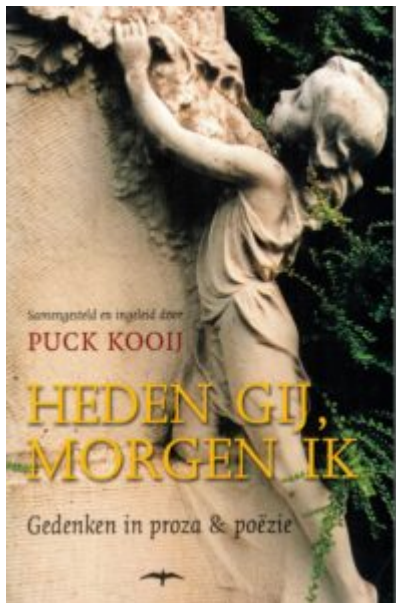
[ii] The Yashrutiyya founded in Acre by the Tunisian Shadhili-Madani Shaykh 'Ali Nur al-Din Yashruti (1815-1899) in the mid-nineteenth century. The Shadhili Yashruti Shaykh lives in Amman yet the Shadhili Yashruti in Acre host in their beautiful zawiya cultural and social panels on the Architecture of Light and on Inner Mystical Journey in Kabbalah and in Sufi Mysticism. With Shadhili Yashruti support the Ibrahimiyyah turned their Jewish holiday of Hanukkah into an inter-religious festival of light (النور معمارية), as its secret Sufi teachings.

[iii] The head of the Naqshbandi Sufi order in Jerusalem, Shaykh Abd al-Aziz Bukhari, a Muslim leader of the Ibrahimiyyah. Shaykh Abdel Aziz Buchari adhered to the orthodox position held by Naqshbandis and Salafis alike, that Islam is the

final religion; on the other hand, however, he was active in the inter-religious understanding movement and participated in many interfaith conferences, even to an extent that it cost him lose his job from which he earned his living. Shaykh Abdel Aziz Bukhari was pointing out that the three Abrahamic religions stem from one common source, and in a lecture at Bar Ilan University at a course on Sufism he maintained that all denominations are different traditions of the one universal religion. In harmony with this position he claimed that he has been long engaged in interfaith dialogue, taking part in various conferences in the Holy Land especially Tarika Ibrahimiyah and the Sulha and Jerusalem Hug as well as conferences around the world, and hosting delegations in his Naqshbandiyya compound in Jerusalem. To the end of the first decade of the 21 century the neighborhood took over the Naqshbandiyya awiya in Jerusalem and turned it into a mosque. The Naqshbandiyya at the Holy Land was not as active as in Turkey and Syria, yet Shaykh Abdel Aziz Buchari has been long characterized by his modern and universal da'wa of Love and Peace that appealed to Sufis from the West, who made pilgrims to Shaykh Abdel Aziz Buchari home at the Old City of Jerusalem. His lectures combined a strong orthodoxy with an interfaith and interreligious understanding. He was willing to teach Quran and Islam to Israelis and to Jewish members of Tarikka Ibrahimiyah with respect to their search for their own Jewish Sufi origins. Shaykh Abdel Aziz home in East Jerusalem became a center for international delegations from many Western countries around. He was an Ambassador for Peace and traveled extensively to meetings and conferences around the globe, from Tunis and Morocco to Turkey and England and the United States. Shaykh Abdel Aziz Bukhari was attacked in his own Sufi compound in Jerusalem by his sister. He died in June 1st 2010.

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**Zoveel soorten van verdriet:  
poëziecitaten in rouwadvertenties**



*Dood ben ik pas als jij me bent vergeten  
Rust nu maar uit  
Weggaan is iets anders dan het huis uitsluipen*

Het gebruik om iemands overlijden publiekelijk te melden door middel van een rouwannonce in een dagblad is zeker meer dan twee eeuwen oud. Puck Kooij heeft er een boek aan gewijd. De titel, *Heden gij, morgen ik. Gedenken in proza en poëzie* (Amsterdam, 1995) is een variant op het gezegde “Heden ik, morgen gij” (in het Latijn *hodie mihi, cras tibi*), afkomstig uit een apocrief bijbelboek, met de betekenis “Wat mij vandaag overkomt, kan u morgen treffen”.

Kooij stelt in haar boek, dat de eerste rouwadvertentie verscheen in de “Oprechte Haarlemse Dingsdagse Courant van den 16 Augustus, 1791”. Die luidde

*’s Gravenhage den 15 Augustus. “In den nacht van den 12 op den 13 deezer, is alhier, aan den gevolgen van eene Borstkwaal, in den ouderdom van byna 67 Jaaren, overleden, de Wel-Eerwaardige en zeer Geleerde Heer CASPARUS VAN DER HEIDE.{..}*

*Zyne Assche ruste in vrede, en zyn Aandenken blyve in zegen, by alle zyne binnenlandsche en buitenlandsche Vrienden en Bekenden, aan welken mits deezen, hun geleeden verlies wordt bekend gemaakt, door den aangestelden Testaments-Executeur.”*

Was de toon van zulke aankondigingen, hoewel plechtig, vooral zakelijk en informatief, gaandeweg verandert die. Kooij: “Halverwege de 19 de eeuw worden advertenties gekenmerkt door een soberder woordgebruik. (..) Spectaculaire



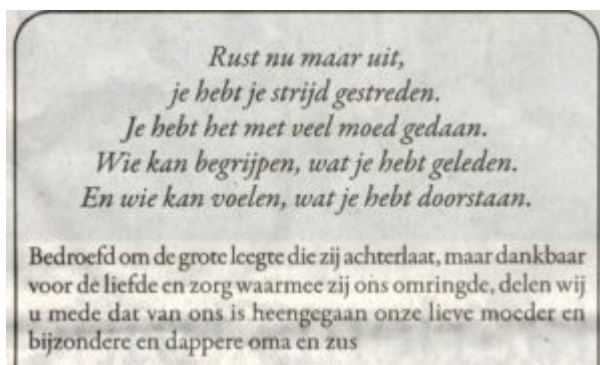
veranderingen in de rouwadvertenties in vorm en inhoud deden zich vooral voor in de jaren negentig van de 20 e eeuw. De uitlatingen en uitroepen werden steeds creatiever en vrijmoediger, zodanig dat van terughoudendheid nauwelijks meer sprake is en de 'emotie-cultuur' hoogtij vierde."

Tot die veranderingen hoort sindsdien ook het in de annonce opnemen van poëzieregels die een gemoedstoestand weergeven, hetzij nog door de overledene bij leven zelf bepaald, hetzij door de nabestaanden. Rouwpoëzie is minder bekend onder de naam funeraire poëzie, wat afstamt van het Franse *funéraire*, een begrafenis betreffend. Het komt ook voor in het woord funerarium, rouwcentrum.

Misschien wel het meest sprekende voorbeeld van de rol die een poëziecitaat ging innemen in de rouwannonce, is een gedicht van Nel Benschop (1918-2005):

*In memoriam voor een vriend*

*Rust nu maar uit – je hebt je strijd gestreden.  
Je hebt het als een moedig man gedaan.  
Wie kan begrijpen, wat je hebt geleden?  
En wie kan voelen, wat je hebt doorstaan?  
Rust nu maar uit – je taak is afgekomen;  
vandaag heeft God de kroon op 't werk gezet  
dat je eenmaal in Zijn kracht hebt ondernomen.  
De zin was af. God heeft een punt gezet.  
Maar 't valt ons moeilijk om de zin te vatten  
van 't zwijgen van je laatste harteklop.  
Misschien alleen maar dit: de afgematten  
en moeden varen als met arendsvleuglen op ...*



Benschops bundels horen tot de best verkochte in ons land en de beginregel(s) van dit In memoriam horen tot de meest geciteerde. De columnist Nico Scheepmaker viel op dat dit citeren niet altijd geheel letterlijk gebeurde. Sterker nog, hij turfde de varianten en wijdde daar in 1985 een artikel aan voor het

maandblad Onze Taal, onder de titel "Rust nu maar uit: 77 variaties". (Het stuk

verscheen ook in een bundeling van zijn columns, *Maar mooi! Beschouwingen over poëzie*. Amsterdam, 1992).

Zelden werd het gedicht in zijn geheel geciteerd, meestal werd volstaan met de eerste vier regels.

Varianten daarop waren bijvoorbeeld

*Rust nu maar uit in vrede  
Jij hebt je strijd gestreden  
Geen mens begrijpt wat jij hebt doorstaan  
Vol moed heb jij het begaan*

of

*Rust nu maar uit,  
je hebt je strijd gestreden.  
Wie kan voelen wat je hebt doorstaan,  
wie kan begrijpen wat je hebt geleden.  
Je hebt het als een moedig man doorstaan.  
Rust nu maar uit*

Maar vaker werd alleen de eerste regel uit eigen herinnering opgediept. Een selectie:

*Wie kan beseffen wat je hebt geleden  
Wie kon begrijpen wat je hebt geleden  
Niemand weet wat je hebt geleden  
Wie weet hoe hij heeft geleden  
Geen mens weet wat je hebt geleden  
Wie kan zeggen wat je hebt geleden*

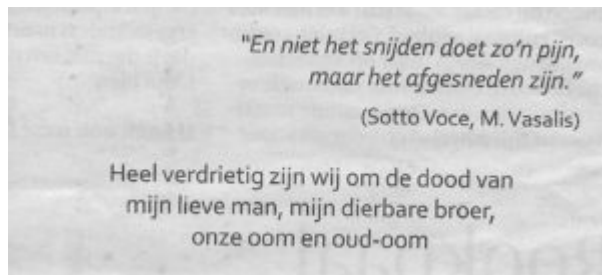
Opmerkelijk is, dat uit het werk van de christelijke dichteres Nel Benschop niet geciteerd wordt in christelijke bladen als Trouw. Daar treft men in rouwannonces uitsluitend citaten uit de bijbel en psalmen aan.

Na Nel Benschops *In memoriam* is waarschijnlijk het populairste rouwgedicht een gedichtje van Toon Hermans (1916-2000) – hij sprak zelf van versjes –:

*Sterven doe je niet ineens,  
maar af en toe een beetje,*

*en alle beetjes die je stierf,  
't is vreemd, maar die vergeet je.  
Het is je dikwijls zelfs ontgaan.  
Je zegt: ik ben wat moe,  
maar op een keer dan ben je  
aan je laatste beetje toe.*

Of zelfs twee van die versjes, al is Een vriend – *“Je hebt iemand nodig stil en oprecht”* – strikt genomen geen rouwers.



### *Literair gehalte*

Wordt het literair gehalte van het werk van Nel Benschop en Toon Hermans in vakkringen soms betwijfeld – in dat verband vallen wel eens termen als rijmelarij en versjeskunde –, de

poëtische zeggingskracht van twee van onze belangrijkste dichters staat niet ter discussie. Het gedicht *Sotto Voce* van M. Vasalis (1909-1998) (de titel – letterlijk “onder de stem” – is een term uit de muziek en betekent “met ingehouden stem”) – hoort zonder twijfel tot de meest geciteerde funeraire verzen.

### *Sotto Voce*

*Zoveel soorten van verdriet,  
ik noem ze niet.  
Maar één, het afstand doen en scheiden.  
En niet het snijden doet zo'n pijn,  
maar het afgesneden zijn.  
Nog is het mooi, t geraamte van een blad,  
vlinderlicht rustend op de aarde,  
alleen nog maar zijn wezen waard.  
Maar tussen de aderen van het lijden  
niets meer om u mee te verblijden:  
mazen van uw afwezigheid,  
bijeengehouden door wat pijn  
en groter wordend met de tijd.*

*Arm en beschaamd zo arm te zijn.*

Het gedicht, waarvan gewoonlijk slechts de eerste vijf versregels geciteerd worden, heeft een tragische autobiografische bron: in 1943 overlijdt haar zoontje Dicky aan kinderverlamming, achttien maanden oud. Aan diens dood zijn ook de gedichten Phoenix I en Phoenix II gewijd.

Ogenschijnlijk afstandelijker, maar bij nadere beschouwing zeker zo indringend, niet in het minst door het veelvuldig herhalen van “zeven maal”, is *De gestorvene* van Ida Gerhardt (1905-1997).

*De gestorvene*

*Zeven maal om de aarde te gaan,  
als het zou moeten op handen en voeten;  
zeven maal, om die éne te groeten  
die daar lachend te wachten zou staan.  
Zeven maal om de aarde te gaan.  
Zeven maal over de zeeën te gaan,  
schraal in de kleren, wat zou het mij deren,  
kon uit de dood ik die éne doen keren.  
Zeven maal over de zeeën te gaan –  
zeven maal, om met zijn tweeën te staan.*

Over die herhaling schrijft Gerrit Komrij in zijn prozabundel *In liefde bloeyende* ((Amsterdam, 1999): “De dichteres spreekt een bezwerende formule uit – en meteen maar de sterkste die er is, met uit de getallensymboliek dat allerheiligste tovergetal zeven en met een Bijbelse verwijzing naar het instorten van de muren van Jericho, waar zeven priesters met zeven ramsbazuinen zevenmaal omheen liepen – het is van het eerste begin duidelijk dat haar *zeven maal om de aarde te gaan* meer op een processie lijkt dan op een survival-tocht met hakmes en heupflacon.”

*Troost*

Voor een gedicht dat niet expliciet over sterven gaat, wordt *Weggaan* van Rutger Kopland (1934-2012) verrassend veel geciteerd. Blijkbaar spreekt de metafoor van weggaan voor overlijden veel nabestaanden aan. En ook uit de gedachte dat het afscheid niet voor eeuwig is, zullen veel mensen troost putten.

*Weggaan*

*Weggaan is iets anders  
dan het huis uitsluipen  
zacht de deur dichttrekken  
achter je bestaan en niet  
terugkeren. Je blijft  
iemand op wie wordt gewacht.  
Weggaan kun je beschrijven als  
een soort van blijven. Niemand  
wacht want je bent er nog.  
Niemand neemt afscheid  
want je gaat niet weg.*

Die hoop op een hernieuwd contact met of voortleven van de overledene, al is het dan ook in een andere vorm, werd een categorie op zich. Ook in Nel Benschops “A Dieu” klinkt die hoop door. De eerste vier van de twaalf regels luiden

*Je bent niet dood – de Heer heeft je geroepen  
bij Hem te wonen in Zijn glanzend huis;  
Je hoeft geen rust en vrede meer te zóeken.  
je hebt ze nu – want je bent veilig thuis.*

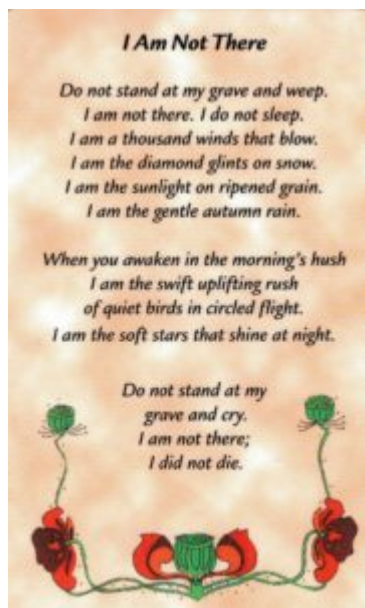
Sprekend voorbeeld van het voortleven in andere vormen is het In memoriam dat Hanny Michaelis (1922-2007) schreef voor de joodse dichteres en verzetsstrijdster Reina Prinsen Geerligts (1922-1943). Zij werd in Sachsenhausen gefusilleerd en voor haar nagedachtenis stichtten haar ouders een prijs voor het beste literaire debuut. Het gedicht van Michaelis bleek breder toepasbaar, getuige vele rouwannonces.

*In memoriam*

*Meen niet dat zij gestorven is –  
Over de velden rijst haar schim  
Ten voeten uit tegen de kim,  
Ontheven aan de duisternis.  
Zie hoe zij aan de einder brandt,  
Een ranke, smetteloze vlam  
Die lichtend aan de as ontkwam,  
Gelouterd en onaangerand.*

*Lieflijker dan een bloesemblad  
Dat geurend aan zijn knop ontviel,  
Ademt haar wezen door de ziel  
Van hen die zij heeft liefgehad.  
En in de diepten van hun hart,  
Uit doolhoven van leed ontward,  
Weerspiegelt zich haar beeltenis.*

*Meen niet dat zij gestorven is!*



Eenzelfde opeenvolging van beeldspraken biedt “*Do not stand at my grave and weep*”. De mythe wil, dat het geschreven zou zijn door een Britse soldaat in de Eerste Wereldoorlog in de loopgraven in Vlaanderen en bestemd was voor zijn geliefde in Engeland. De realiteit is echter een stuk minder romantisch. De tekst werd in 1932 geschreven door de Amerikaanse Mary Elizabeth Frye (1905-2004) en door haar zelf als pamflet aan de man gebracht.

*Do not stand at my grave and weep,  
I am not there; I do not sleep.  
I am a thousand winds that blow,  
I am the diamond glints on snow,  
I am the sun on ripened grain,  
I am the gentle autumn rain.  
When you awaken in the morning's hush  
I am the swift uplifting rush  
Of quiet birds in circling flight.  
I am the soft starlight at night.  
Do not stand at my grave and cry,  
I am not there; I did not die.*

Het gedicht werd al snel internationaal populair. Het is bijvoorbeeld verkrijgbaar als geplastificeerd kaartje en is in tientallen talen vertaald, onder meer in het

Fries en het Nederlands.

*Huil niet aan mijn graf.*

*Ik ben daar niet. Ik slaap niet.*

*Ik ben duizend winden die waaien.*

*Ik ben de diamanten glinstering op sneeuw.*

*Ik ben het zonlicht op het rijpend graan.*

*Ik ben de zachte herfstregen.*

*Als je in de morgenstilte wakker wordt,*

*ben ik de snel opstijgende vlucht*

*kalm rondcirkelende vogels.*

*Ik ben de vriendelijke ster die 's nachts schijnt.*

*Huil niet aan mijn graf*

*Ik ben daar niet. Ik ben niet dood.*

Dit is een van een aantal varianten, want net als het gedicht van Nel Benschop waarvan Nico Scheepmaker 77 variaties telde, komt dit vers in vele versies voor. Enkele voorbeelden van vertalingen van de eerste twee regels:

*Ga niet staan huilen aan mijn graf, ik ben daar niet. Ik rust daar niet.*

*Huil niet aan mijn graf. Daar ben ik niet. Ik slaap niet.*

*Sta niet aan mijn graf, huil niet. Ik ben er niet. Ik ben niet gestorven.*

*Sta aan mijn graf zonder verdriet, ik ben daar niet, ik slaap er niet.*

*Sta niet aan mijn graf en huil, ik ben er niet. Ik slaap niet.*

Jean Pierre Rawie (1951) schreef een aantal sonnetten over sterven met een grote herkenbaarheid, blijkens de vele annonces waarin een citaat uit zijn werk te vinden is. Met name de gedichten over het overlijden van zijn ouders worden veelvuldig gebruikt in rouwadvertenties.

*Sterfbed*

*Mijn vader sterft; als ik zijn hand vasthoud,*

*voel ik de botten door zijn huid heen steken.*

*Ik zoek naar woorden maar hij kan niet spreken*

*en is bij elke ademtocht benauwd.*

*Dus schud ik kussens en verschik de deken,*

*waar hij met krachteloze hand in klauwt;*

*ik blijf zijn kind, al word ik eeuwen oud,  
en blijf als kind voor eeuwig in gebreke.*

*Wij volgen één voor één hetzelfde pad,  
en worden met dezelfde maat gemeten;  
ik zie mijzelf nu bij zijn bed gezeten*

*zoals hij bij zijn eigen vader zat:  
straks is hij weg, en heeft hij nooit geweten  
hoe machteloos ik hem heb liefgehad.*

De dichter stelde zelf een bloemlezing met 47 van “de mooiste rouwgedichten” samen uit zijn oeuvre, onder de titel *Wij volgen één voor één hetzelfde pad* (Amsterdam, 2003).

### *Pop*

Een redelijk recente tendens is, dat er niet geput wordt uit de funeraire poëzie maar uit de teksten van popsongs, een trend die wellicht is ingezet met het nummer Vanmorgen vloog ze nog, uit de musical *Tjechov* (1991) van Robert Long en Dimitri Frenkel Frank. De meest geciteerde regels blijken vooral van toepassing als de bezongene jong overleden is:

*Vanmorgen vloog ze nog  
Zo onbelemmerd en gracieus  
En zo verheven  
Zo’n sierlijk wezentje  
‘t Was geschapen om te zweven*

Profaner is het gebruik van de meezinger Leven na de dood van Freek de Jonge (1944) uit 1997, een bewerking van het nummer *Death is not the end* van Bob Dylan op diens album *Down in the groove* (1988). Gewoonlijk wordt in zo’n rouwadvertentie de regel “Moet je weten Er is leven na de dood” voorafgegaan door een regel die rijmt op dood, wat niet zelden leidt tot al dan niet bedoelde ongein.

Dan is een keuze uit het werk van Bram Vermeulen (1946-2004), die jarenlang met Freek de Jonge het duo Neerlands Hoop (in Bange Dagen) vormde, een betere keus. Hij biedt daartoe twee nummers, waarvan in de meeste gevallen alleen het refrein geciteerd wordt, soms alleen de eerste twee regels daarvan, zoals van De steen, van het album *Rode wijn* (1988).



*Ik heb een steen verlegd in een rivier op aarde.  
Het water gaat er anders dan voorheen.  
De stroom van een rivier hou je niet tegen.  
Het water vindt altijd een weg omheen.*

en soms ook alleen de laatste twee, zoals van Testament (op Vriend en vijand, 1991)

*Als ik dood ga, huil maar niet  
ik ben niet echt dood moet je weten  
't is maar een lichaam dat ik achterliet,  
dood ben ik pas als jij me bent vergeten*

Veel gebruik wordt er ook gemaakt van de tekst van Zeg me dat het niet zo is van Frank Boeijen (1957), te vinden op zijn album Een zomer aan het eind van de twintigste eeuw (1989).

*Zeg me dat het niet zo is  
Zeg me dat het niet zo is  
Zeg me dat het niet waar is*

*Kom we gaan, trek je jas aan  
Anders wordt het te laat  
Kom eens hier  
Ik houd je vast  
Ik laat je nooit meer gaan  
En ik vertel je een grap die je laat huilen van de lach  
En we vergeten de blikken van de mensen in de stad*

*We doen net alsof het niet zo is  
Alsof het niet zo is  
Alsof het niet waar is*

*We doen net alsof ze gewoon verder leeft  
Alsof ze gewoon verder leeft  
Zelfs als het niet zo is*

Interessant aan de tekst is, dat wat een gesprek tussen twee geliefden lijkt in de laatste drie regels een monoloog blijkt te zijn gericht tot de overledene. Dit is een

voorbeeld van monologue morbide, een stijlfiguur die in de popmuziek onder meer ook is toegepast door Cat Stevens in *Lady d'Arbanville*, waarin de regel *Why do you sleep so still?* een niet te missen verwijzing is naar haar dood.

Door gebruik te maken van poëziecitaten, kunnen nabestaanden – en in toenemende mate de overledene zelf al bij leven – hun gevoelens beter onder woorden brengen, ook al zijn dat woorden van anderen, dan met clichés als “Tot ons leedwezen”, “Diep bedroefd geven wij kennis” en “Volkomen onverwacht is ons ontvallen”.

—  
*Robert-Henk Zuidinga* (1949) studeerde Nederlandse en Engelse Moderne Letterkunde aan de Universiteit van Amsterdam. Hij schrijft over literatuur, taal en bij uitzondering – over film.

De drie delen *Dit staat er* bevatten de, volgens zijn eigen omschrijving, journalistieke nalatenschap van Zuidinga. De boeken zijn in eigen beheer uitgegeven. Belangstelling? Stuur een berichtje naar: [info@rozenbergquarterly.com](mailto:info@rozenbergquarterly.com)– wij sturen uw bericht door naar de auteur.

*Dit staat er 1. Columns over taal en literatuur.* Haarlem 2016. ISBN 9789492563040

*Dit staat er II, Artikelen en interviews over literatuur.* Haarlem 2017. ISBN 9789492563248

*Dit staat er III. Bijnamen en Nederlied. Buitenlied en film,* Haarlem 2019. ISBN 9789492563637

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# **Chomsky: Voting Is Not The End. It's Only The Beginning**



Noam Chomsky

Joe Biden is the winner of the 2020 election. Yet while Trump has lost, the Democrats failed to materialize the blue wave some expected — and Trump fared extremely well despite the pandemic. In this exclusive interview, Noam Chomsky shares some of his insights about Trump’s continuing popularity and what the left needs to do in the years ahead, emphasizing that voting is never an end — only a beginning.

*C.J. Polychroniou: Although Biden has won the election, the Democrats failed to materialize a blue-wave landslide, and it is clear we will continue to deal with large-scale Trumpism. Given that you were extremely skeptical of the polls from day one, what do you think contributed to the massive turnout for Trump, even as Biden saw an even more massive turnout? Or, to phrase the questions differently, why is nearly half the country continuing to support a dangerous charlatan leader with such a feverish passion?*

*Noam Chomsky:* The very fact that someone could be considered a serious candidate after just having killed tens if not hundreds of thousands of Americans through a disastrous response to COVID-19 is an extraordinary victory for Trump — and a defeat for the country, for the world and for hopes for a decent future. Some of Trump’s victories are very revealing. A report on *NPR* discussed his victory in a solid Democratic county on the Texas-Mexico border with many poor Latinos that hadn’t voted Republican for a century, since Harding. The *NPR* analyst attributes Biden’s loss to his famous “gaffe” in the last debate, in which he said that we have to act to save human society from destruction in the not very distant future. Not his words, of course, but that’s the meaning of his statement: that we have to make moves to transition away from fossil fuels, which are central to the regional economy. Whether that’s the reason for the radical shift, or whether it’s attributable to another of the colossal Democratic organizing failures, the fact that the outcome is attributed to the gaffe is itself indicative of the rot in

the dominant culture. In the U.S., it is [considered] a serious “gaffe” to dare to hint that we have to act to avoid a cataclysm.

Poor working people in the border area are not voting for the predictable consequences of Trump’s race toward cataclysm. They may simply be skeptical about what science predicts. Sixty percent of conservative Republicans ([35 percent](#) of moderate Republicans) believe that humans are contributing “not too much/not at all” to global warming. A poll reported in *Science* found that only 20 percent of Republicans trust scientists “a lot...to do what is right for the country.” Why then believe the dire predictions? These, after all, are the messages pounded into their heads daily by the White House and its media echo chamber.

South Texan working people may not be ready to sacrifice their lives and communities today on the basis of claims in elite circles that they are instructed not to trust. These tendencies cannot be blamed solely on Trump’s malevolence. They trace back to the failure of the Democratic Party to bring to the public a serious program to fend off environmental catastrophe while also improving lives and work — not because such programs don’t exist; they do. But because they don’t appeal to the donor-oriented Clintonite neoliberals who run the Democratic Party.

There’s more. Trump has shown political genius in tapping the poisonous currents that run right below the surface of American society. He has skillfully nourished and amplified the currents of white supremacy, racism and xenophobia that have deep roots in American history and culture, now exacerbated by fear that “they” will take over “our” country with its shrinking white majority. And the concerns are deep. A careful [study](#) by political scientist Larry Bartels reveals that Republicans feel that “the traditional American way of life is disappearing so fast that we may have to use force to save it,” and more than 40 percent agree that “a time will come when patriotic Americans have to take the law into their own hands.”

Trump has also skillfully tapped reservoirs of anger and economic resentment among the working and middle classes who have been subjected to the bipartisan neoliberal assault of the last 40 years. If they feel that they have been robbed, they have good reason. The Rand Corporation recently estimated transfer of wealth from the lower 90 percent to the very rich during the four neoliberal

decades: \$47 trillion, not small change. Looking more closely, the transfer was primarily to a small fraction of the very rich. Since Reagan, the top 0.1 percent has doubled their share of the country's wealth to an astonishing 20 percent.

These outcomes are not the result of principles of economics or laws of history but of deliberate policy decisions. If decisions are shifted from government ("government is the problem," as Reagan claimed) they do not disappear. They are placed in the hands of the corporate sector, which must be guided solely by greed (per neoliberal economic guru Milton Friedman). With such guidelines in place, results are not hard to anticipate.

On top of the near-\$50 trillion train robbery, the international economy ("globalization") has been structured to set American working people in competition with those in low-wage countries with no workers' rights while the very rich are granted protection from market forces, by exorbitant patent rights, to take one example. Again, the effects of this bipartisan enterprise are not a surprise.

Less educated workers may not know the details or understand the mechanisms that have been designed to undermine their lives, but they see the outcomes. The Democrats offer them nothing. They long ago abandoned the working class and have been full collaborators in the racket. Trump in fact harms workers even more than the opposition, but he excoriates "elites" — while slavishly serving the super-rich and corporate sector, as his legislative program and executive orders amply demonstrate.

Apart from almost daily steps to chip away at the environment that sustains life and to pack the judiciary top-to-bottom with far right young lawyers, the main achievement of the Trump-McConnell administration has been the tax scam of 2017: "a delayed tax increase dressed up as a tax cut," economist Joseph Stiglitz [explains](#). "The Trump administration has a dirty little secret: It's not just planning to increase taxes on most Americans. The increase has already been signed, sealed and delivered, buried in the pages of the 2017 Tax Cuts and Jobs Act."

The law was carefully designed to lower taxes initially so as to "hoodwink" Americans to think their taxes were being reduced, but with mechanisms to ensure that tax increases "would affect nearly everyone but people at the top of the economic hierarchy. All taxpayer income groups with incomes of \$75,000 and

under — that's about 65 percent of taxpayers — will face a higher tax rate in 2021 than in 2019." It's the same device that the George W. Bush Republicans used to sell their 2001 "tax cut" — for the rich.

*What happens if Trump refuses to accept a Biden victory and seeks to settle the matter in the Supreme Court? And when corporate lawyers and the militias end up doing their thing, is it even remotely possible that the country could end up under martial law?*

My uneducated guess is that it won't come to that, but it's a speculation with little basis or credibility. Trump has strong reasons — maybe even his personal future — to hold on to office by any possible means. We are not in the days of Richard Nixon, who had good reasons to question the legitimacy of the vote he lost in 1960, but had the decency to put the welfare of the country about his personal ambitions. Not Donald Trump. And the organization that grovels at his feet is not the political party of 60 years ago.

Trump still has two months to wield the wrecking ball that has already diminished the United States, harmed the world and severely threatened the future. His penchant for wrecking everything he did not create, whatever the cost, is hard to miss. He might decide to go for broke.

*What are the next steps for the left?*

For the left, elections are a brief interlude in a life of real politics, a moment to ask whether it's worth taking off time to vote — typically against. In 2020, the choice was transparent, for reasons not worth reviewing. Then back to work. Once Trump is fully removed, the work will be to move forward to construct the better world that is within reach.

*This interview has been lightly edited for clarity. It has also been updated to reflect Joe Biden's victory over Donald Trump in the 2020 election.*

Source: <https://truthout.org/articles/chomsky-voting-is-not-the-end-of-our-work-its-only-the-beginning/>

C.J. Polychroniou is a political economist/political scientist who has taught and worked in universities and research centers in Europe and the United States. His main research interests are in European economic integration, globalization, the

political economy of the United States and the deconstruction of neoliberalism's politico-economic project. He is a regular contributor to *Truthout* as well as a member of *Truthout's* Public Intellectual Project. He has published several books and his articles have appeared in a variety of journals, magazines, newspapers and popular news websites. Many of his publications have been translated into several foreign languages, including Croatian, French, Greek, Italian, Portuguese, Spanish and Turkish. He is the author of [\*Optimism Over Despair: Noam Chomsky On Capitalism, Empire, and Social Change\*](#), an anthology of interviews with Chomsky originally published at *Truthout* and collected by Haymarket Books.

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# Irreconcilable Differences: The 2020 Elections Prove Again The U.S. As Outlier



CJ

*Polychroniou*

The most consequential election in modern U.S. history won't produce a winner for at least a few more days. And then, the result may be contested in the Supreme Court, with unforeseen consequences for the future of democratic order.

However, while much of the media and the public are consumed with scenarios as to how Biden, or Trump, can reach the magic number of 270 electoral votes, there are some highly disturbing trends and facts about the 2020 election that need to be analyzed if progressives in the U.S. can hope to advance a successful strategy in the years ahead.

First, the polls were wrong again. A blue wave did not materialize in spite of the highest voter turnout in a century and the huge demographic changes taking place all across the United States.

Second, Biden failed to perform as expected in spite of the country being in the midst of a catastrophic pandemic, with a criminally negligent president in charge who has misled the public about Coronavirus from day one and has intentionally spread dangerous information about it.

Third, Trump did much better than expected in spite of being a charlatan, the sort of a leader who says and does such outrageous and highly dangerous things that it is simply unimaginable that citizens in other advanced democracies would have tolerated him in their midst, let alone support with a feverous passion as so many Americans do.

The 2020 U.S. elections have revealed as strongly as possible that the country remains highly polarized, marked by irreconcilable differences between red and blue states. In fact, the U.S. is probably more divided today between red and blue than it was during the 1860s, and much of the credit for this accomplishment is due to the brilliant skills of the con artist occupying the White House for the last four years. Trump has exploited the anxieties, frustrations, and fears of white America, with its toxic ideological notion of racial superiority, in a manner that would have made Joseph Goebbels feel like an amateur.

Racism has always been around. But it is more alive and kicking in today's USA than any other time since the 1950s or 1960s. This is why Trump's neo-fascist political posturing is found to be so appealing among such huge segments of 21 st century Americans. Democracy, for Trump and many of his supporters, is an unnecessary luxury if it would mean building a society where whites are the minority. In fact, in a survey cited in Larry Bartels's research article "Ethnic antagonism erodes Republicans' commitment to democracy", "most Republicans...agreed that "'the traditional American way of life is disappearing so fast that we may have to use force to save it.'" <https://www.pnas.org/content/117/37/22752>

This is why there was a record turnout in the 2020 election: this was an election about white Americans, as Umair Haque, Director of the Havas Media Lab, artfully argued a few days ago in his essay "Is White America Really Ready to Reject Trump's Fascism?" <https://eand.co/is-white-america-really-ready-to-reject-trumps-fascism-cf88d6f9b48d>

To be sure, the U.S. remains an outlier among highly advanced societies on



many issues, because racism is the driving ideological force. The U.S. is the only country in the advanced industrialized world without a universal health care system, but with a warfare but no welfare state.  
<https://www.salon.com/2020/08/08/as-the-pandemic-has-made-clear-america-has-no-welfare-state-but-we-sure-have-a-warfare-state/>

The U.S. is alone among western countries with its continued use of the death penalty (where racial disparities continue even though the death penalty usage has declined), it has not ratified the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, and has ratified fewer key human rights treaties than all other countries in the G20 group. Additionally, it never ratified the Equal Rights Amendment proposed in 1972, and it ranks 75th globally in women's representation in government.  
<https://www.cnbc.com/2019/03/04/the-us-ranks-75th-in-womens-representation-in-government.html>

Indeed, white America is very different from the rest of the advanced world, as Haque points out in "Is White America Really Ready to Reject Trump's Fascism?", in profoundly striking ways: "Voters in Europe and Canada — white majorities there — can be relied upon to act with some modicum of decency and humanity and common sense. They back, over and over again, what the world now considers modern social contracts that make up functioning, sophisticated societies — healthcare, retirement, education, childcare, and so on, for all, not just themselves. It would be a massive, massive shock if voters anywhere else in the West began to act like America's white majority — they are so far off the scale of conservatism, in formal terms, that it might as well not exist."

In sum, what the 2020 elections demonstrate, regardless of who wins the election, is that Trumpism will remain the dominant ideological and political movement in the third decade of the 21st century in the United States. With or without Trump in the White House, white America will surely remain vigilant in its attempt to "safeguard America's traditional values" and, in that context, progressive forces will have their hands full.

In the light of this, the creation of a "Popular Front," a coalition of all democratic forces of the sort that took place in Europe in the mid-1930s to combat the rise of fascism, should be embraced as possibly the only coherent strategy to roll back Trumpism. But in 21st century USA, this would mean a commitment first and foremost to the norms and values of an inclusive democracy within the context of

class-and environmental politics.

As such, “identity politics,” which has gone from inclusion to division and has led to political tribalism in U.S. society, needs to be reassessed in a manner where its positive attributes are incorporated into a broader political agenda. But this is a story for another time.

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*C.J. Polychroniou* is a political economist/political scientist who has taught and worked in universities and research centers in Europe and the United States. His main research interests are in European economic integration, globalization, the political economy of the United States and the deconstruction of neoliberalism’s politico-economic project. He is a regular contributor to *Truthout* as well as a member of *Truthout*’s Public Intellectual Project. He has published several books and his articles have appeared in a variety of journals, magazines, newspapers and popular news websites. Many of his publications have been translated into several foreign languages, including Croatian, French, Greek, Italian, Portuguese, Spanish and Turkish. He is the author of [\*Optimism Over Despair: Noam Chomsky On Capitalism, Empire, and Social Change\*](#), an anthology of interviews with Chomsky originally published at *Truthout* and collected by Haymarket Books.

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# The Winner Of The 2020 Election Won't Be Inheriting A Genuine Democracy



Today’s election is widely regarded as the most important national election in recent U.S. history, voters remain divided and polarized over what should be essentially the future of the country. Issues over racism, immigration, guns, women’s rights, police brutality and climate change

are what essentially divide Republican voters from Democrats. The former, galvanized by the extreme and divisive rhetoric of a racist and reactionary president, wish to preserve the values of “traditional America” (white supremacy and patriarchy, militarism, rugged individualism and religiosity), while Democrats worry that another four years of Donald Trump in office will spell the end of democracy.

Is destroying or saving U.S. democracy what the upcoming election is all about? In this interview, political scientist *C.J. Polychroniou* says it is high time that we did away with the political rhetoric when it comes to U.S. democracy and look at the facts: The U.S. has a highly flawed system of democratic governance and doesn’t even rank among the top 20 democracies in the Western world, and thus is in dire need of major repair. In fact, Polychroniou argues, it is far more accurate to describe the United States as an oligarchy, a regime where an economic elite and powerful organized interests are in virtual control of the policy agenda on most issues of critical importance to public interest while average people are mainly political bystanders.

*Alexandra Boutri: The general consensus among a significant percentage of voters opposed to Donald Trump is that the upcoming election represents a pivotal moment in U.S. politics, for what is at stake is nothing else than the future of democracy itself. True, or an exaggeration?*

*C.J. Polychroniou:* Trump’s presidency has been marked from the beginning by lies, strong authoritarian impulses, contempt for the media and disdain for science, big gifts for the rich and big cuts for the poor, and complete disregard for the environment. His political posturing is outright neo-fascist, and, as such, this president surely has little concern about the subtleties of democratic governance. Of course, U.S. democracy was in a crisis long before Trump came to power. In fact, one could easily make the argument that the U.S. is not a true democracy at all (it qualifies as a mere procedural democracy), and was never meant to be when you get to understand the architecture of the Constitution, who the framers were, and why they opted to ditch, in the manner of a coup, the Articles of Confederation, during the Constitutional Convention of 1787. In fact, the drafting of the Constitution itself was not a democratic process: The delegates were sent there by state legislatures with a mandate to revise the Articles of Confederation, but, instead, they worked in total secrecy in producing an entirely new legal document for the future government of the United States.

The Constitution that the framers produced, with its system of checks and balances, was as a legal document way ahead of its time, since back then, monarchy was the prevailing form of political rule throughout the world. But in addition to designing a system of governance that would prevent the rise of an absolute ruler, the framers also wanted to make sure that the masses themselves would not be in a position to determine political outcomes. Indeed, the framers were seeking a form of government that would keep the elites safe both from the caprice of absolute rulers and from the whims of the rabble. They were indeed in complete agreement with the view of John Jay, one of the so-called Founding Fathers and the first Chief Justice, when he said, "Those who own the country ought to govern it." Hence the purpose behind the introduction of the Electoral College, which blatantly violates the very basic principle of democracy, i.e., one person, one vote; hence also the anti-democratic nature of the Senate, where states with very small populations get the same number of senators as states with huge populations.

The U.S. is also the only democracy in the world where politicians are actively involved in manipulating the boundaries of electoral districts. Political gerrymandering has a long history in the U.S., but as Common Cause National Redistricting Director Kathay Feng pointedly put it, "In a democracy, voters should choose their politicians, not the other way around."

In addition, federal election campaigns funded entirely by private money makes a mockery of the democratic process for electing public officials, while the "winner-take-all" system, which is not in the Constitution and therefore can be changed without a constitutional amendment, can easily be regarded as undemocratic under modern election law jurisprudence, as has correctly been pointed out by [former Republican governor of Massachusetts, William Weld, and law professor Sanford Levinson](#).

In sum, there is no other democracy in the advanced industrialized world with the "undemocratic" features of the system of democracy found in the U.S., including its two-party system which severely limits public dialogue and debate among competing political views. Little surprise, therefore, why even the conservative weekly magazine *The Economist* has labeled the U.S. a "flawed democracy." As a matter of fact, U.S. democracy does not even rank among the top 20 democracies in the Western world, according to the Democracy Index compiled by the Economist Intelligence Unit. The U.S. form of governance fits far more perfectly

with that of classical oligarchy, although in the last four years, the country also had a leader who behaved more in tune with the traits of the tyrannical man outlined in Plato's *Republic*.

*Why then is the U.S. Constitution treated as some sort of a sacred document? Why aren't there calls for a constitutional amendment, or even for an entirely new constitution?*

It's amazing what propaganda and lack of knowledge can do to a citizenry and therefore to the prospects of a democratic polity. All sorts of myths have been built around the so-called Founding Fathers, while the idea of the United States as the "world's greatest democracy" is echoed by every politician either running for or while in office. Only a handful of political analysts and legal scholars are raising the question of the undemocratic nature of the U.S. Constitution. I suppose it's the similar mentality behind the pathetic habit of U.S. politicians ending every speech with "God Bless America." Here, the hypocrisy is quite striking since the framers of the Constitution were very specific about the separation of state and church. The word "God" does not even appear in the Constitution. But no one seems to be raising these issues in today's U.S. political culture. For the unfortunate fact is that it has always been something of a taboo in the U.S. to point out the flaws of the political system and its political culture. This is why the use of the term of "anti-Americanism" was invented in the first place: to frighten open-minded citizens from exposing the flaws in the workings of the U.S. political system and criticizing U.S. policies.

The U.S. Constitution is extremely difficult to amend: It requires a two-thirds vote in both chambers, then ratification by three-quarters of the states. Of course, scores of constitutional amendments have been introduced over the years, but not one has become part of the Constitution. But here is an interesting fact about what the man who drafted the Declaration of Independence thought of constitutions: Thomas Jefferson was of the view that any constitution has to lapse after every generation. The laws and constitutions drawn by previous generations, according to Jefferson, in a letter written to James Madison from Paris, should not be binding on future generations. Yet, the U.S. is stuck with the same Constitution for the last 231 years, with a Constitution drafted by men whose language and mode of thinking bear no resemblance whatsoever to the mindset of most 21st century Americans and to the dictates of contemporary democracy. On the other hand, an overwhelming majority of Chileans just voted to rewrite the country's constitution, which dates to the era of General Augusto Pinochet. This is

how democracies ought to work.

*How comparable are capitalism and democracy?*

Capitalism can function under different forms of government, including brutal dictatorships. There is nothing inherent in the dynamics of a capitalist economy that allows democracy to flourish. Calls for the recognition of social rights and demands for freedom, political participation and democratic governance have always come in fact from those who were exposed to the cruelties and injustices which are naturally built into a capitalist system of economic and social life. Democratic rights were gained, advanced and secured under capitalism, almost everywhere in the world, through prolonged social and political struggles from below. They were not granted to the masses by the masters of capital themselves. The right of workers to unionize, for instance, has a long and bloody history behind it. The U.S., in fact, has had the bloodiest and most violent labor history of any industrialized capitalist country in the world. By the same token, there are limits to how far democracy can advance under capitalism. Direct participatory democracy and economic democracy are anathema to a capitalist organization of socio-economic life. And under neoliberal capitalism — which is essentially a politico-economic project that aims to return society to the age of predatory capitalism when labor power was completely “free” — nature is totally at the mercy of unrestrained capital exploitation, and state policies cater exclusively to the interests and needs of the plutocrats, and thus democracy is a sham. Competition is seen as the defining characteristic of what it means to be human, citizens are turned into consumers, and society is dog-eat-dog.

*How exactly would one go about proving that the U.S. is actually an oligarchy?*

This is not very hard to prove if you approach the question with a critical eye instead of engaging in breast-beating about how great U.S. democracy is by virtue of the simple fact that we enjoy basic civil liberties and civil rights, which are the very basic elements of even the most rudimentary form of democracy. You can start by looking at the distribution of economic and political power. That is the most direct and obvious way to figure out whether a society functions democratically or is controlled by a power elite. The U.S. is one of the richest countries in the world, but also one with extreme levels of inequality. The richest 1 percent own 40 percent of the country's wealth, according to a study produced a few years ago by economist Edward N. Wolff. By the same token, the top 1 percent incomes have grown in recent years to be five times as much as the bottom 90 percent incomes. Economic power, of course, translates almost automatically into political power. This does not mean that the capitalist state is by extension a mere tool in the hands of the capitalist class, as crude Marxism used to contend back in the era of the Comintern, but the government agenda is

heavily influenced, if not outright shaped, by economic elite domination.

A few years ago, two mainstream political scientists, Martin Gilens and Benjamin Page, tested the different theories of U.S. politics (majoritarian democracy, pluralism and elite theory) by looking at a huge set of policy cases for a period covering more than 20 years (from 1981-2002). What they found is shocking even to those of us who are fully cognizant of the undemocratic nature of the U.S. political system: Economic elites and business interests had overwhelming impact on U.S. government policies, while average citizens had little or no independent influence. Another mainstream political scientist, Larry Bartels, also published recently a book, mainly an empirical study, titled *Unequal Democracy*, exposing the myths of U.S. democracy by showing how the political system favors overwhelmingly the wealthy.

In sum, there is no doubt about it: What drives U.S. politics and the framing of government policy is economic-elite domination. Moreover, average people seem somehow to be cognizant of this realization, which probably explains why such an overwhelming percentage of U.S. citizens do not bother to vote: “democracy” isn’t working for them.

*If U.S. democracy is so highly flawed, what then is really at stake in the November elections?*

There can be no denying that even procedural democracy has been facing a historic crisis under the reign of Donald Trump. When it comes to transparency and accountability, Trump has broken new grounds with his disregard for such democratic niceties. He has blatantly challenged the authority and independence of agency watchdogs overseeing his administration and has retaliated against officials who have exposed wrongdoings of his administration. He has encouraged actions to silence certain broadcast news outlets and individuals and even threatened to shut down social media industries. He has dispatched federal agents to cities to crush protests, and has even refused to accept that there would be a peaceful transition to power in the event he loses the November 2020 election. As I noted before, he has been acting as Plato’s tyrannical man in the *Republic*, which probably explains why he fancies so much dictators like North Korea’s Kim Jong-un and strongmen like Turkey’s Erdoğan and Russia’s Putin. No doubt, he is jealous of their authoritarian powers. But it should be pointed out that the Republican Party as a whole has moved so far to the right that it has

become part of the illiberal political universe, as a [major study](#) just published by a Swedish university confirms.

Be that as it may, much more is at stake in the upcoming election than democratic formalities. Aside from his catastrophic handling of the coronavirus pandemic — which has resulted in the death of more than 225,000 Americans, the highest total in the world — and the death figures continue to rise on an almost daily basis, Trump's white supremacy vision will tear completely apart U.S. society, his economic policies will exacerbate even further the huge inequalities present in U.S. society and his nuclear posture will move us closer to Armageddon. Finally, and far more important, there are his anti-environmental policies and refusal to even acknowledge humanity's greatest existential crisis, namely global warming. During his reign in power, he has initiated an unprecedented number of regulatory rollbacks, with complete indifference to their impact on the environment and people's lives. In that sense, he doesn't pose just a threat to democracy. As Noam Chomsky never tires of repeating, Trump is a real menace to civilization, to organized human life, like no other leader has ever been in recent history anywhere in the world.

*This interview has been lightly edited for clarity.*

*Alexandra Boutri* is a freelance journalist and writer. She grew up in France and studied political science at the Sorbonne. She is currently collaborating with C.J. Polychroniou on a book on the Russian Revolution.