Tel Aviv and the Utopian Tradition

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The origins of the first city are found in Cain’s killing of Abel. Cain wishes to foresake the reality of a distant God who refuses to enter into dialogue — a situation which led to the murder of his brother. He seeks to escape his actions, but is able only to flee the site of the deed. And so he becomes a “wanderer” of the earth, preaching the gospel; God gives him a “sign” which both protects him from those who seek his life, and symbolizes the terrible deed and His omnipotence, from which one can neither escape nor hide. During his wanderings, Cain arrives in “East of Eden”, and then Hanoch is born. His son alone is capable of putting an end to the flight and achieving a genuinely new beginning. This renewed beginning is the building of a “city”. The proximity of the founding of the “city”, and the “sin” and the attempt to create a new reality, is worth noting. One should also consider the short distance between the Garden of Eden, from which Adam and Eve were expelled, and East of Eden, wherein the first city is located. This proximity glimmers within the tension between the expulsion from the Garden of Eden and the kingdom of necessity in which human beings have lived since the Fall, as well as that between the crime of the earth and its representation as a sin towards God. This heavenly caprice brings an end to a reality in which “the wickedness of man was great on the earth, and all impulse of the thoughts of his heart was evil continually. “God’s solution: the Flood. The Flood brings the curtain down on Act One, in which the first urban experiment was conducted, with God playing the role of Director. Act Two, though remote in terms of the history of the city, is however, just as important; unlike the first act, human beings take on the roles of director, actors and the stage. This is a special city, worthy of attention; only when the curtain falls on the second act, after the destruction of this
city, which had been human in the fullest sense of the word, is the stage set for Act Three. The locus of Act 3, within which we are still acting, is the modern city, a city existing in continual reference to the utopian tradition, whose origins are in the forgotten city, destroyed in Act Two. This link stands in constant conflict with the redemptive tradition and its conception of the true city. In this article I will relate to both traditions, the tension existing between them and their connection to Tel Aviv on her eightieth anniversary.

The word “city” is next mentioned in the Bible in Genesis 11:4-9. Human reality after the Flood is indeed utopian: “And the whole earth was of one language and of one speech.” In such a world, there is no need for philosophy, which would only try to interpret it; there is, rather, an opportunity to relate to its harmonious and uninterrupted personification. “One” language among people, and between them and their world, reflects a simple unproblematic world, which contains “one speech,” clear and discernable. There is in such a world, a room for perfect human understanding and morality; here, room had not yet been made for language’s inability to conceive of and express the world, the basis of alienation between people and the world, and among people themselves.

Walter Benjamin, the famous Utopian, yearned for the language of the Garden of Eden — a perfect language, in which cosmic harmony was reflected, and in which communicative man was perfectly integrated with the world. In opposition to the language of the Garden of Eden, he held up the language of an oppressive world, the reality familiar to us. Like many other Utopians, Benjamin too omitted the utopian city which had existed once upon a time, and has since been forgotten. Now, we must turn back to the texts of her enemies in order to reassemble evidence of her existence. The taste of the Tree of Knowledge was still fresh on man’s tongue in the forgotten city, and he distinguished himself as the possessor of unique abilities, which reached their perfect expression in the tower of the “city” which he established, a city including all peoples and all the provisions for human happiness. People are described here in the state prior to their settlement in different places, different cultures and different beliefs, an act which constituted the basis of their misery. Unlike the Eden-ish world of Adam and Eve (which already contained the tension between human possibilities and celestial evil, and into which had not yet been born the language-world alienation), in the world after the Flood, people had to work, and