

Spirit and Story Archive

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Somebody Else's Sacred Space

Robert Rabinowitz

Carrying a backpack of gear up the steep ascents of the Inca trail was physically one of the toughest things I have ever done. After the magnificent sights of the hike, Juliette- my wife- and I each confessed that we were beginning to suspect that Machu Picchu, the sacred Inca city and purported wonder of the world, would be a little of an anti-climax. Nevertheless, along with several hundred other weary and dusty travelers, we raced for two hours along aged stone trails through cloud forest to see the sun rise over Machu Picchu. It was worth it. Machu Picchu is a complex of agricultural terraces, fortresses, houses, Temples and plazas built on a crest of rock jutting into the precipitous Urubamaba Valley, overlooked by mountainous hills covered with jungle and, beyond, the snow-capped peaks of the Andes. From the Sun Gate, several hundred feet above, the sight of the sun's rays hovering in the mist as they rose above the surrounding heights to illuminate the city was breath-taking. This place was certainly beautiful, but was it also holy?

As the guide took us round the site, I was constantly making Jewish comparisons. All those Incas who were not priests or nobility had to work three months each year for the royal or religious estates. I thought back to King Solomon who assembled thirty thousand men to cut wood and hew stone for the Temple. They worked in rotation; in Lebanon for a month, followed by two months at home (1 Kings 5:27-28). Each temple at Machu Picchu is built on a foundation of "living rock" from the mountain, not on quarried stones. And, of course, I thought of the Temple Mount, mythic site of the world's creation and the binding of Isaac. There are also ceremonial fountains, flowing through Machu Picchu from springs, reminiscent of the Torah's requirement of immersion in Mayim Chaim (living, or flowing water) for ritual purity.

And yet, despite these similarities, there was something strikingly different about Machu Picchu from any Jewish place that I had studied or visited. The ritual fountains clearly followed the shape of the stream that they harnessed, combining natural erosion and human construction. The reliance on living rock for buildings' foundations meant that the physical profile of the city flowed and blended almost organically with that of the hills into which it was fashioned. There was even a gap in construction left to

accommodate a geological fault that ran across the site. At various points around the city there were rocks carved in imitation of the sacred mountains that could be seen from Machu Picchu. There were also myriad features relating to the sun- viewing points for the solstices and equinoxes, complex solar observation instruments, windows designed for specific lighting effects. I was particularly struck by one stone carved into the shape of a prominent astronomical constellation, bringing the constellation almost physically into the precincts of the temple in which it was located. Machu Picchu is a true microcosm. Its architecture integrates the life-giving elements- water, rock, mountains, sun and stars- into its very fabric.

The feeling I got from Machu Picchu was one of attempted harmony with the physical forces and powers around it in appreciation of the fact that they can be neither mastered nor ignored. The vision of the good life that emerges from a place like Machu Picchu is one lived in tune with the natural environment without attempting to separate humanity from its myriad natural constraints. Now, I have to confess my ignorance of the everyday life of the Incas, and I know that their civilization had its unsavory aspects such as human sacrifice. Nevertheless, I feel that Judaism has something to learn from them. At Machu Picchu, I experienced something that I had not experienced in any Jewish sacred place, something particularly relevant in times of environmental overload, a different, more naturalistic way to think of humanity's place in the universe. And that led me to thinking about what Jewish sacred places would look like if they truly reflected a commitment to help humanity live in an environmentally sustainable fashion. And then I thought again of the Temple. What would it, the ultimate Jewish sacred space, look like if it were to be designed by someone inspired by Machu Picchu?



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