

# WHY *SHAMAYIM* AS SKY

GERARDO SACHS

The Indo-European languages use both the singular word "sky" in the plural word "skies." The singular form means the zone in which the celestial bodies appear, from the solar system to the farthest star. The plural form belongs to the poetic vocabulary to connote a region. It is also used as a translation for the Hebrew *shamayim*, a word that exists only in the plural form. It first appears in Genesis 1 (v. 1), as does *mayim* [water] that also exists only in the plural form (v. 2).

Kabbalists explain *shamayim* as being composed of *esh* [fire] combined with *mayim*. A different etymology is given in the Brown-Driver-Briggs *Hebrew and English Lexicon*, as *sha* combined with *mayim*. The *sha* is a grammatical form of *shafel* indicating "gives water" – that is, the source of rainfall.

There are many words in Hebrew in which the letter "*shin*" placed before a three-letter root extends the underlying idea to the utmost. For example, "*gush*" means "grouping"; with the prefix *shin* it becomes "*shagosh*" that means "agitator." "*Ger*" means "stranger"; with the prefix *shin* it becomes "*shager*", that means "to send." The root "*abad*" connotes "work"; with the prefix *shin* it becomes "*shib'ud*" for heavy labor or slavery.

Water itself is colorless, but it can reflect the refracted sunlight that makes the air above look blue. This makes the water of the sea or a lake look blue. Early man could observe the apparently blue sky and the apparently blue water, and suppose that there was water over the sky. Consequently, in the account of Creation, first comes the creation of light (energy) and then comes the creation of "*rakia*" as a huge dome that separates the waters above from those beneath. Since there are two waters, the word employed is always the plural *mayim*. At the same time, what appeared to be an immensity of water over the dome was called *sha-mayim*, the superlative form of *mayim*.