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May 31, 2018 | 17 Sivan 5778

Blog Edition



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In the Wilderness and the Wilderness Within

Parshat Beha'alotecha (Numbers, 8:1-12:16)

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“*Mai shamayim*, what are the heavens?” asks the Gemara about the second day of Creation when earth and heavens came to be separate entities (Ta’anit 12a). “An old teaching answers: *esh umayim*, fire and water. The Holy Blessed One scrambled them together each in the other and made from them the firmament.” *esh umayim* becomes *shamayim*, the letters themselves combining to make something new out of these essential elements.

We imagine that mixing fire and water should eliminate one of the elements—fire should evaporate water or water should quench fire—but the coexistence of these apparent opposites is essential to Divine creation.

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