
What are the odds of this?

Starting this Sunday evening, with the festival of *Shemini Atzeret,* observant Jews add a brief passage in the middle of the *Amidah,* the central prayer of the Jewish liturgy. Addressing God, the line reads:

> You cause the winds to blow and the rain to fall.

It's hardly surprising in one sense: with the beginning of autumn, it stands to reason that a line about stormier weather would be added.

But there is a weird aspect to this addition: the ancient Rabbis (Mishnah Berachot 5:2) decreed that this line should be added right after a provision that lauds God for "raising the dead". That seems almost like the paradigmatic example of an anticlimax: "You raise the dead — and even cause the rain to fall!" What's going on?

In the Gemara, (Babylonian Talmud Berachot 33a), Rabbi Yosef provides an explanation as to why his forbears had constructed the prayer in this way. In the same way that raising the dead is a miracle, he says, sending rain is a miracle. So it makes sense to put the two together.

My initial response to this was: how quaint! Although the rabbis might have regarded rainfall as a miracle on par with resurrection of the dead, of course now we know that it is simply part of nature's climatic cycle.

But then I thought better of it. Perhaps another way of thinking of Rabbi Yosef's argument is that the ancient rabbis were believers in the Rare Earth hypothesis, or the Great Filter. If you believe these things — and while hardly proven (how could they be?), they are certainly plausible — then the fact of rainfall on earth is in fact something akin to a miracle. The odds of intelligent life developing on a planet, in this model, are extraordinarily small. And yet here, on this planet, it has developed.

The Earth is 93 million miles from the sun. 92 million miles would make it too hot; 94 million miles would make it too cold. Very tiny changes would have precluded human life from existence. Yet here we are.

One doesn’t have to believe in a sentient Supreme Being, reaching out and zapping Earth to create human beings, in order to appreciate the special and unique quality of intelligent life, or the enormous gift that a supportive biosphere is. All one has to do is maintain gratitude — to Whomever — that that biosphere exists, that it is very rare, that it is truly wondrous for it to be here, and that we are here to benefit from it.

What a miracle.

Chag Sameach l’Moadim Simcha to all.