

Genesis 15 contains the *berit bein habetarim*, or “covenant between the pieces”, a symbolic foreshadowing of Jewish history at least until the Exodus. The symbolic narrative of this covenant is, for the most part, fairly straightforward. Avraham cuts some animals into pieces and lays those pieces and a bird out so that G-d, symbolized by a flaming oven, can pass through them in what seems to be a formulaic covenant-establishing ritual. Before passing through, G-d informs Avraham that this covenant promises only long-term success, but the short-term (four hundred years/ four generations) will be bitter.

15:11, however, injects a seemingly incongruous element into the narrative. “*Vayairaid haayit al hap’garim vayashaiv otam Avram*”, which we will translate tentatively as “and the carnivorous bird descended on the pieces of meat, and Avram restored them”. This action could simply be seen as a practical note – how did Avram keep vultures off the fresh-killed meat until dark so that the covenant could be initiated – but the consensus opinion, which I share, is that this would not explain its inclusion in the Torah narrative. Rather, this detail too must have symbolic meaning.

Let’s lay out the translation and interpretational options for each element of this sentence.

*Haayit* – seems to be a carrion-eater, but not necessarily a negative symbol in Tanakh – see e.g. Isaiah 24:11. Some identify this bird with the bird Avram did not divide before placing on the pieces of meat in 15:10. Rashi tells us that this bird is King David. Others say it represents the enemies of Israel.

*Al hapegarim* – no argument that this refers to the pieces of the animal Avram chopped up. However, they may symbolize the Jews, at various stages of Jewish history, or alternatively the nations of the world, or else the sacrificial rites in the Temple.

*Vayashaiv* – can be translated as “and he restored them”, or as “and he sent them back”, or “and he blew them away (literally, not idiomatically). The latter two refer to the “*ayit*” – the former to animal parts. If it refers to the animal parts, it may mean that Avram restored them to their original places, or, as Saadia suggests, that he resurrected them. Finally, it may be a pun and mean that “Avram restored them via repentance”.

a. What combination of these translation options generates the most compelling translation of the verse?

Two. What combination of these options generates the most compelling symbolic narrative within the broader symbolic narrative of the “covenant between the pieces”?

Three. If the answers to a and b are incompatible, what does one do?

I don’t wish to answer this question, but I’d like to take you through a possible recreation of Rashi’s thought process.

In verse 10, Avram chops the animals but leaves the bird whole (perhaps even alive!). Assuming that this detail is meaningful (contra the position that birds are simply too small to divide), an obviously attractive symbolism is that the bird represents Avraham’s descendants (and in general “Israel is compared to a dove” via Song of Songs), the animals their enemies. This means that in verse 11 Avram is protecting his descendant’s enemies (contra the claim in some midrashim that the symbolic elements need not represent the same things consistently). Why would he do that? Only because the time of their destruction had not yet arrived, for whatever reason.