

A Purim Afterthought

By Ari Z. Zivotofsky

Misconception: Mordechai and Esther, the Purim heroes, were uncle and niece.¹

Fact: According to *Megillat Esther* Mordechai and Esther were first cousins.

Background: This is a widespread misconception, even found in the renowned midrashic compilation of Louis Ginzberg. For example, in *Legends of the Jews* Vol. IV, page 387 he writes: “This lively interest displayed by Mordechai in Esther’s physical and spiritual welfare is not wholly attributable to an uncle’s and guardian’s solicitude in behalf of an orphaned niece.”²

Yet, the relationship between Mordechai and Esther is explicitly described twice in the book of Esther. In Esther 2:7 the characters of Mordechai and Esther are introduced, and Esther is described as Mordechai’s *bat dodo*³—his uncle’s daughter, i.e., Mordechai’s first cousin. In Esther 2:15, when Esther is called to the king’s palace, her lineage is given as: Esther, the daughter of Avichayil, Mordechai’s uncle, i.e., she was Mordechai’s first cousin. The Targum Sheni elaborates further by specifying that it was Mordechai’s father and Esther’s father who were brothers.

There is an additional relationship found in the *midrash*. Rashi (on Esther 2:7) cites the Talmudic (*Megillah* 13a) exegesis that Mordechai

not only raised, but later married, Esther.⁴ The Talmud (*Megillah* 13b) further derives from Esther 2:20 that they actually lived as husband and wife even subsequent to Esther’s being taken to the royal residence, up until the time she voluntarily went to Achashverosh.⁵ However, these rabbinic interpretations supplement the straightforward meaning of the text, and do not contradict it. In contrast, I have been unable to find any traditional source that says that Mordechai was Esther’s uncle, for to say so would contradict the text.

A possible source for this common misconception may be that two old, non-Jewish, translations, the Old Latin (3rd-5th century) and the Vulgate (ca 390-405 CE) actually have the uncle-niece relationship. In the Vulgate, verse 2:7 states that Mordechai raised the daughter of his brother, and in 2:15 it identifies Esther as the daughter of Avichayil, the brother of Mordechai!

This error may have crept into these translations because the even older Greek Septuagint uses the phrase “father’s brother” instead of a single word “uncle” as used in the Hebrew. If this was then the source text used for the Vulgate, it is possible that the translators accidentally left off the word “father’s” and ended up with Esther being Mordechai’s niece — daughter of his brother. The Catholic tradition was then based on the faulty Vulgate, and it is possible that the common Jewish misperception was influenced by that belief.

An alternate, simpler source is also possible. It may be that because Mordechai adopted and raised Esther as his daughter, he is perceived as having been much older. Hence the uncle-niece rather than the first cousin relationship comes to mind. In addition, the phrase “*dod* Mordechai,” used to describe Avichayil, Esther’s father, could actually trigger the association of the way one would call their “uncle Mordechai” as “*dod* Mordechai,” a nickname Queen Esther would technically not have used for her cousin Mordechai!

Misconception: If a *baal korei* (person publicly reading the Torah) makes an error that alters the meaning of the text and he has already read God’s name in that verse, he must first finish the verse and then reread the entire verse.

Fact: There is no need to first complete the verse, nor to restart it. The *baal korei* may stop immediately, return to the start of the *phrase* in which the error occurred, and reread from that point.

Background: How to handle an error by the *baal korei* during *laining* is the source of much discussion. Two extreme positions are cited by the Tur (OC 142): Either there is no need to correct any error and doing so will embarrass the *baal korei*, or, as the *Shulchan Aruch* (OC 142:1) and Rambam (*Hilchot Tefillah* 12:6) rule, even minor grammatical errors must be corrected. In this vein, the Sha’arei Efraim (3:16) advises chastising the *baal korei* even for minor errors. The

Rabbi Dr. Zivotofsky is on the faculty of the Brain Science Program at Bar Ilan University in Israel.

Ramah (OC 142:1 and see commentaries) states a compromise position that requires correcting only mistakes that alter the meaning of the word.

There are two aspects to the *halachah* of how these corrections are executed — 1) whether or not there is a requirement to finish the verse before correcting the error, and 2) how much text must be repeated. The second issue, how much of the verse to repeat after an error, is a three-way debate that applies in all cases of a Torah-reading error, and not only in those involving verses containing God's name. Some opinions require that the entire verse be re-read, while others require re-reading only from the corrected word. The commonly accepted practice follows a third opinion, that of the Baal Hatanya, which requires the *baal korei* to re-read from the beginning of the *phrase* in which the error occurred.⁷ This ruling applies even if the phrase contains God's name.

As far as first completing the verse there are few sources. The Sha'arei Rachamim (3:18)⁸ commentary on the Sha'arei Efraim, cites the Chesed L'alafim (215:10) who derives from the Chayei Adam (5:2) that it is unnecessary.⁹ In support of this position are the many sources which discuss the laws of when a *baal korei* needs to repeat a section, and in which there is a resounding silence on the distinction between verses with and without God's name.¹⁰ This is a strong indication that the major halachic decisors saw no distinction, and hence no need to first conclude a verse that contains God's name. Tzitz Eliezer notes that the custom has developed as per this misconception and the verse is usually first finished. He points out, however, that the strict law of not completing the verse must be followed if the unread, second half of the verse also contains God's name. In that case, the verse must *not* be completed. Rather the *baal korei* must stop where he is, re-read the required section properly, and then continue to complete the verse.

The Complete Torah Reading Handbook (Dr. Ely Simon, Judaica Press, NY, 1996) raises (page 71, point 3) the important point that if a *baal korei* read God's name and then in the same verse subsequently made an error, he should not go back to the beginning of the verse, thereby unnecessarily repeating God's Name, but rather he should just repeat the phrase that contained the error. However, even this otherwise excellent work continues (page 71, point 4): "If the *korei* continued past the mistake and read God's Name, he must finish the verse and then reread it correctly." While this is (often) not wrong, it is unnecessary.

The Beit Yosef (OC 142) cites an interesting Sephardic custom of reciting "*v'hu rachum y'chaper avon...* (He the merciful one is forgiving of iniquity...)" after the Shabbat Torah reading as an atonement for any inadvertent errors made during the reading. However, he concludes that this custom is no longer practiced. The Kaf Hachaim (OC 142:4) suggests saying it silently, and further recommends that it is better to precede the Torah reading with the recitation of "*v'ayehi no'am*" because it is preferable to request that God prevent an error than have to request forgiveness after committing an error.

Notes:

1. I would like to thank Michael Segal for assistance with researching this topic.

2. In IV: 384, Ginzberg wrote: "In Hebrew it means 'she who conceals,' a fitting name for the niece of Mordechai... She herself had been kept concealed for years in the house of her uncle..." In IV: 388 he wrote, "At the advice of her uncle, Esther..." There are no supporting footnotes for the relationship given.

3. A scriptural proof that "*doḏ*" is father's brother can be found from Leviticus 18:14.

4. This exegesis is already found in the Septuagint (Esther 2:7) which

reads: "When her parents were dead, he [Mordechai] brought her up as a wife for himself ..." Some modern commentators suggest that the Greek translator may have misread "*bayit*" instead of "*bat*," a difference of a small *yud*. It is more likely he was familiar with the already well-known oral tradition that was later recorded in the Talmud.

5. They were originally permitted to remain together because a woman, other than the wife of a *Kohain*, who is forced to have relations with another man remains permitted to her husband (Ketubot 51b; *Shulchan Aruch*, EH 6:10-11). Esther's living with Achashverosh was considered to be under duress (see Tosafot Ketubot 51b s.v. *asurah*. See also Tosafot *Megillah* 13b s.v. *v'tovelet*, about what Esther did to avoid ambiguous paternity). The Talmud (*Megillah* 15a, based on Esther 4:16) explains that from that fateful day when she voluntarily offered herself to Achashverosh as part of her plan to save the Jews, she was no longer permitted to return to Mordechai, and that was a personal sacrifice she made for her people.

6. See for example *The Catholic Encyclopedia* (5:556) that gives the relationship as "uncle (or cousin)."

7. See Rabbi Hershel Schachter, "Lesser-Known Laws of Torah Reading," *Journal of Jewish Music* 7:1-11, paragraph 46 where he also cites the Tosafot Anshei Shem to *Mishnayot Brachot* 2:3.

8. See R. Schachter, op cit. paragraph 48, and Tzitz Eliezer 12:40:3 who cite this with approval.

9. Interestingly, it is unclear whether this accurately represents the view of the Chayei Adam. See Tzitz Eliezer's (12:40:3) own explanation of the Chayei Adam.

10. The exception to this silence is the end of MB 142:4. There it is stated that contrary to a popular misconception, if a mistake is made in the trop and it causes a change in meaning, the section is re-read irrespective if the section includes God's Name. **JA**