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RABBI ISAAC HUTNER: A SYNOPTIC INTERPRETIVE BIOGRAPHY

“Not that any of us could write it, but if each major disciple of the Rosh Yeshiva were to write a book about him, each would write a different book.”

Disciple of Rabbi Isaac Hutner, the “Rosh Yeshiva”—dean—of Chaim Berlin talmudical academy

“Regardless of what you hear quoted in my name, do not believe it unless I have told it to you personally.”

Disciple, quoting Rabbi Hutner

Genesis describes Adam as having been “born” as an adult, created as a fully developed, mature being. Rabbinic commentary observes that Adam was born circumcised—a ritual, in Jewish tradition, symbolizing need for rectification, but, in the case of Adam, born without need of circumcision, a symbol of completion.¹ In encountering Isaac Hutner (1906–1980), it is as if the accounts of creation in Genesis and in rabbinic commentary were devised as metaphors for him. For example, one opens Rabbi Hutner’s letters, glancing at those written when he was sixteen.² Here, there writes neither a child nor a teenager, but an adult, and in every sense. Ideas are fully developed, and often original; sense of self is complete, but without the self-consciousness of youth; the Hebrew is remarkable for its crystalline clarity, for its rootedness in biblical metaphor, and, no less, for its control of modern Hebrew, giving the stern, austere biblical metaphor a suppleness and shading not endemic to it. One rereads the date on the letter: surely there has been a mistake. A sixteen-year-old does not write this way. But there is no mistake. Rabbi Hutner was born circumcised.

As his thought worked its way into print, as his personality left an unerasable imprint on disciples, rebellious or loyal, Rabbi Hutner

I benefitted immeasurably from comments generously offered by several disciples of Rabbi Hutner, and by his daughter, Mrs. Bruria David, on earlier drafts of this article. They saved me from many pitfalls, even as some of them disagreed with one or another of my interpretations, for all of which I am solely responsible.

performed a striking feat: he learned from a wide array of intellectual types and national styles without becoming either confused or changed. He remained always in control, learning and appropriating entire systems of thought and style yet transmuting them such that although their individual identities were clearly recognizable in him, they nonetheless constituted parts of something larger.

Rabbi Hutner embodied a problem: How can contrary, even contradictory systems of thought and life mesh without eclectic blending, or oscillation between poles? If the answer cannot be logical, it can be phenomenological: the complex and straightforward “Varshever Illui” (Warsaw prodigy) himself, born in 1906, soon to become a renowned Talmudist; and poet, and philosopher; and pietist, and egoist; and intellectual, and humorist; and private person, and public persona; and lover of Zion, and anti-Zionist; and personally liberal, and programmatically conservative; and devotee of the towering opponent of Hasidism, the Vilna Gaon, and practitioner of Hasidism itself. Rabbi Hutner once commented autobiographically on a rabbinic midrash on Adam: “Adam, it says, was created from earth gathered from all over the world. I, too, am a gathering point: from Poland, from Lithuania, from Riga, from Germany, from *Eretz Yisrael* [the Land of Israel], from the United States.”³ A panorama of influences, impinging on radical autonomy, entailed still another pair of contrary impulses: self-revelation and self-concealment. Revelation of self was possible because there was so much colorful and diverse baggage that Rabbi Hutner could set forth, layer after layer, without ever reaching the bottom layer. This he could guard from intrusive eyes. Captivating friendliness went hand in hand with unstated but clear prohibition of excessive familiarity to his person, such that the more one knew him, the less one knew, and similarly, the more one probes his writings—all of which he structured in both form and content with a clear definitiveness—the less certain one is of the ultimate perspective of the constellations of thought therein. Isaac Hutner, like all transition figures, is an enigma. In his case the quandary is deepened because we know so much about him.

I

From his early youth Isaac Hutner kept diaries and maintained an active and diverse correspondence. Self-reflection, first in relation to his own aspirations and to his self-chosen separation from his parents, and then in relation to his numerous travels and studies, was his lodestar. He entered school—a yeshiva in Lomza, Poland—

apparently for the first time, when he was fifteen. His first studies away from home launched a thirteen-year odyssey which saw him in close contact with virtually all of the major intellectual centers and mentors in the worlds of Talmud study, piety (the Musar movement), and Hasidism. Mere recitation of the itinerary, in its geographical diversity and rotation between lengthy and short pauses, gives evidence of the breadth, the urgency, and the discipline of his quest. After his brief stay in Lomza he returned to Warsaw (one-half year, until 1921); then to the Musar yeshiva in Slobodka, Lithuania (three-and-a-half years, until 1925); then to Slobodka's branch in Hebron, Palestine (four years, until 1929); then back to Warsaw (briefly, 1929); then to the University of Berlin (four months, 1929); then to Warsaw (one year, until 1930); then to Hebron and Jerusalem (three-quarters of a year, until 1931); then to Kovno, Lithuania, to write his prodigious work on naziriteship (one year, until 1932); then, for the last time, to Warsaw (one year, until 1933) where he married; then to Palestine (one year, until 1934); then to New York City (1934, until settling in Israel, late 1970s).⁴

“Slobodka”—after Warsaw, the first and lengthiest stop on the itinerary—was as much a concept and a person as it was an institution. A single, wooden building across the Niemen River in a small suburb of Kovno, Lithuania, Slobodka was a wellspring of brilliance, graduating more world-renowned Talmud scholars in the first quarter of the twentieth century than all other similar institutions combined, and molding the research method of the nonconformist, Harry Austryn Wolfson. Behind the intellectual brilliance stood Rabbi Moses Mordechai Epstein, but this was but part of the pulse in Slobodka. Wolfson was an anomaly in Slobodka in the sense that he drew his major inspiration from Rabbi Epstein. For most of the prodigies there, Talmud study—central as it was—drew its motivation and coloration from Rabbi Epstein's collaborator. The uniqueness of Slobodka was the idea of intellectual piety as embodied in “the Elder of Slobodka”—the academy's founder and mentor for nearly fifty years—Rabbi Nathan Zvi Finkel.

Secretive in the extreme, self-sufficient even earlier in life than was Isaac Hutner, the Elder, an orphan, appeared as if from nowhere at the age of fifteen, a budding scholar, counselor, and organizer.⁵ We know nothing of his early years and education. He wrote virtually no letters and published nothing, save a single, anonymous introduction to an anthology⁶ (he signed his name in code by rearranging the first letters of his names, *Nathan Zvi Hirsh Finkel*, to spell Ha-ZaFuN, “the hidden one”).⁷ Discovered in his early twenties as an emergent leader by an associate of Rabbi Simhah Zisl Ziv, the leading disciple of Rabbi Israel Salanter, Nathan Zvi Finkel studied

under Rabbi Simhah Zisl for a few years. Then he opened a precursor of the Slobodka yeshiva, when he was only twenty-seven, as if from that time forward he was “the Elder”—formative orator and educator, creative interpreter of Jewish thought from the pietistic point of view.

The Elder was always the pedagogue, revealing nothing of himself, at the same time eschewing privacy, rooming and boarding with his own students for twenty-five years, returning to his wife and family for two short periods yearly.⁸ His little need for formal privacy and comfort created certain educational advantages: a continual presence as role model; and full opportunity to glean knowledge of his students both in the classroom and in life, such that the raw data which formed the basis of his guidance and counseling was both unmediated and comprehensive. Individualized guidance was offered informatively, strongly or subtly, frequently or infrequently,⁹ always so that it could be acted upon in conjunction with full participation in the rigorous curriculum of talmudic studies; so that it enabled brilliant young pupils such as Aaron Kotler, Jacob Kaminecki, and Isaac J. Ruderman to develop in mind and differentiate in personality.

Isaac Hutner studied under the Elder from 1921 until the Elder’s death, in Palestine, in 1927. His letters testify to quantum leaps in deepening of understanding of fundamentals of Judaism¹⁰ (the progress in talmudic learning was unstated, taken for granted), but it was not just quantitatively that he learned from the Elder. In the Elder, Isaac Hutner witnessed intellectual independence, personal self-sufficiency, and an attractive relationship between self-concealment and effective pedagogy. The pedagogue’s task was not to implant his own perspective, but to refine those of his students; not to share the burden of his own spiritual failure, or the glory of his attainments, but to nurture the personality and discipline of budding disciples. If an unshakeable sense of independence—and of the value of fostering it in others—Isaac Hutner learned from the Elder, he stood in dialectical tension to him, as to all of his mentors. If he could learn much even in “fundamentals” from the Elder, he would still, it seems to me, recoil from him, both emotionally and intellectually. After the Elder’s death Isaac Hutner wrote in his typically revealing and mystifying way:

During the past year, the Elder of Slobodka worked hard to explain several fundamental perspectives which pertain to me personally, but in no way could I assimilate them, could I integrate them into my consciousness. And now, suddenly, with the death of the Elder, they have all become clear and vivid. . . . “Greater are the righteous in death than in life.”¹¹

Revealed here is Isaac Hutner's closeness to the Elder and sense of growth, including an openness to the unexpected; obscured here is the content of the "fundamental perspectives." Beyond all this there is revealed Isaac Hutner's inability to stand before the scrutiny of the Elder; illumination followed, but could not precede, his death. The quick slide into retrospective reverence ("Greater are the righteous . . .")—not insincere—highlights the difficulty of self-knowledge when demanded by a living presence. Isaac Hutner's reverence is not nostalgia. Rather, it is an expression of release, by grace, from a stubbornness which resisted even an accurate reading of his soul, for posthumous assent to the truth of the reading did not entail surrender to the reader. Reverence was easier when it was less consequential; emotional recoil was quieted when it was less important.

The intellectual recoil from the Elder stemmed from the fact that in Slobodka no intellectual inquiry (apart from Talmud study) was undertaken for its own sake. The Elder, pietist *par excellence*, turned extra-talmudic writings—aggadah, midrash, the homiletical literature, Jewish philosophy, and, of course, the medieval musar works—to lessons in character traits and personality development. All was refracted through an intelligence seeking to extract ethical and psychological insight, however tangential it might be within the text itself. Moreover, Jewish mysticism (kabbalah) was not touched at all, at least overtly. If, then, Isaac Hutner remained indebted to the Elder for opening before him the breadth of pietistic, musar literature, the pietistic perspective *per se* was constricting. A broader approach, respecting the integrity of disciplines in Jewish thought outside piety, was necessary.

When Isaac Hutner arrived in Palestine in 1925, Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kuk was at the height of his powers.¹² Ashkenazi Chief Rabbi of Palestine, talmudist, poet, philosopher, essayist, mystic, and pietist, Rabbi Kuk was a man of no little controversy. This was primarily because of his integration of antireligious, socialist Zionism into a mystical worldview in which harmony was conceived as the temporary, if positive, inclusion of opposites on the path to perfection.¹³ The controversial side of Rabbi Kuk dominated Isaac Hutner's attitude toward him years later, but as a young man his predominant interest was in learning from him. The dominant note then was high esteem and admiration. In many ways Rabbi Kuk was the Elder's opposite, notwithstanding Rabbi Kuk's own roots in the Musar movement¹⁴ and reputation as a pietist of the highest rank—an "*ish kadosh*," a holy man. The Elder was personally closed, writing nothing, teaching through the power of insight into others, while Rabbi Kuk was personally open, spilling forth in lectures and

writings that welled up so spontaneously that, for some years, he wrote only in pencil, unable even momentarily to interrupt the flow of inspiration to dip the premodern pen into the inkwell. If the Elder addressed the whole person, restricting the flow of knowledge in accord with the powers of receptivity of the addressee, Rabbi Kuk addressed the heart and the mind, unleashing torrents of discourse woven from the entire range of Jewish thought: law, lore, philosophy, poetry, mysticism, pietism, homiletics, exegesis. The Elder was a pedagogue; Rabbi Kuk, an intellectual. Isaac Hutner sought to combine the two, to become the two.

For Isaac Hutner the personal, pietistic orientation of the Elder was necessary, but not sufficient. Isaac Hutner's intellectual curiosity required validation, and it was Rabbi Kuk who provided it, bringing him to an unrestricted confrontation with Jewish mysticism and philosophy on their own terms. From Rabbi Kuk Isaac Hutner acquired breadth of knowledge, from the Elder, an awareness of the value in revealing it selectively; from Rabbi Kuk, legitimization of intellectual quest, from the Elder, the need to channel and sometimes limit another's quest. Rabbi Kuk taught the young Hutner fearlessness in intellectual search; the Elder, wisdom in intellectual transmission. Rabbi Kuk taught the need for loyalty to one's vision, and aspirations; the Elder, the need for legerdemain in making available one's intellectual integrity. Rabbi Kuk embodied ever-expanding horizons; the Elder, self-restraint in nurturing the limited horizons in most people. In Rabbi Kuk Isaac Hutner witnessed self-revelation, in the Elder, self-concealment, and he appreciated both.

II

The Elder and Rabbi Kuk planted seeds in fertile soil, but sprouts were not immediately forthcoming. Isaac Hutner wished his seedbed to body forth a greater diversity than the complements of piety and thought, and not one sprout could blossom until each root was in place. Still to be nurtured was the ground of the enterprise, talmudic study; still to be designed were a number of hues among the flowers, such as critical scholarship and Polish hasidic thought; and, most important, still to be decided was the ultimate location of the garden.

After eight years in Lithuania and Palestine, Isaac Hutner returned home for the first time in 1929, at the age of twenty-three. The reunion with parents was poignant, but the overriding tone in his letters seems to me not to be genuine tenderness, but awareness of the pain that the long absence of a son—and the lack of opportunity to observe a ripening talmudic scholar—brought to people, parents, a

generation his senior.¹⁵ Ever solicitous of their feelings, he was only too aware of how much his journeys of body and soul had transformed him. In letters which his family has chosen to publish, there is no reference to his siblings (his official biography mentions them not at all). Whatever the precise complex of his family relations, and notwithstanding his developing penchant for self-concealment, his capacity for friendship and his depth of identification with the stoppings points along his odyssey—his self-revelation—were pronounced. A few weeks after arriving home in Warsaw, he set out for Berlin, writing at that time to a friend in Hebron: “These leave-takings [from, for example, parents in 1921, Slobodka in 1925, Hebron in 1929, parents, again, in 1929] have overtaken me just a little too much. But what can I do? This is my nature. Every place where I arrive, even as but a passing guest, I take root at once; I become a citizen in the land, in the environment. Naturally that makes the parting seven times more difficult. Am I, then, to be counted among the righteous, who lack tranquility in both this world and the next? I begin to feel a little bit proud.”¹⁶

In Berlin were contemporaries of Isaac Hutner on their own odysseys, young Orthodox prodigies of a kind whom he could hardly have expected to encounter in Palestine; and there were mentors whose syntheses were different from those of both the Elder and Rabbi Kuk, and whom he had good reason to suspect would open their doors to him. There was, for example, Rabbi Jehiel Jacob Weinberg, Ph.D., then forty-four, a pre-World War I student in Slobodka who had become its first graduate to seek a doctorate (at the University of Giessen), who was the first to bring a Lithuanian approach to Talmud study to the West; and who now was Rector of the Rabbinical Seminary for Orthodox Judaism, an explicitly cross-cultural enterprise.¹⁷ Weinberg was a practitioner of what then occupied a central place on the agenda of critical Jewish scholarship, the editing of critical editions of seminal Jewish texts by collation of manuscripts and philological expertise. Two other former Slobodka students, Saul Lieberman and Harry Austryn Wolfson, were doing this, respectively, in talmudic and medieval philosophic texts (*Al ha-Yerushalmi* [*On the Talmud of the Land of Israel*] and *Crescas' Critique of Aristotle*, both published in 1929). Rector Weinberg was working in the history of Jewish law. We may suppose that in Isaac Hutner's visits with the Rector, this kind of scholarship was discussed. A few years later we find young Hutner independently taking pains to secure a manuscript of Hillel of Verona's thirteenth-century commentary on *Sifra*, a rabbinic work on Leviticus of roughly the same authority as Mishnah. The manuscript was written in Italian script, which Isaac Hutner taught himself by comparing passages

from the Talmud quoted in the manuscript with the Talmud itself, until he was able “to study it as easily as a printed book.”¹⁸ His goal was to write a commentary on Hillel of Verona’s work in order to open up study of *Sifra*.

He began work on the Italian commentary in 1934, during his last stay in Palestine, and devoted his first years in the United States to completing it. Only one small section was published, however, in 1938.¹⁹ It was one of the last of the few items that he allowed to be published under his own name, until he officially broke his silence in 1964. In setting out for Berlin in 1929, he had translated Orthodox then-athiest then-Zionist then-Diaspora nationalist then-again-Orthodox Nathan Birnbaum’s *Eternal People* from German to Hebrew as a self-written letter of introduction. When word of the translation was leaked to a Hebrew journal he refused to let it be published, eventually relenting, typically, to allow part of it to be published anonymously.²⁰ To be accepted in the East European world of talmudic scholarship—“East European” signifying a metonymy for insulated, intensive Talmud study in Eastern Europe, Palestine, or the United States—as Isaac Hutner always was, it was impolitic to be associated with literary or scholarly endeavors. Early in his career, it seems to me, he made the conscious decision neither to limit the breadth of his interests nor to pursue them any more openly than his keen sense of their tolerability among his colleagues told him was possible. In this, Rabbi Hutner was unlike Rabbi Joseph Baer Soloveitchik, whom Rabbi Hutner first met in Berlin and who was so different from him, notwithstanding their similar urge to twin intensive talmudic studies with extra-talmudic perspectives. Rabbi Soloveitchik never concealed his extra-talmudic, philosophic interests—a stance which aggravated his already natural penchant for loneliness by overtly setting him apart from that community of first-level East European talmudic scholars who should have been his natural circle. Rabbi Hutner, through public concealment of his broad interests, did gain acceptance in his natural circle, but at a price: a different kind of self-induced loneliness. He would become a lonely eminence because of a sweep and grasp that he could rarely share.

For the same reasons that he would hesitate to reveal his literary and scholarly endeavors, he would be unhesitant in revealing his talmudic abilities. It was to this task—not critical scholarship—that he turned upon his return to Warsaw from Berlin. He did not begin at once. A customary, twofold gesture—waiting, absorbing, maturing; and quick movement, sudden initiative—preceded *Torat ha-Nazir* (*Law of the Nazirite*). Its germination found him studying a year in Warsaw, then another nine months in Palestine, whereupon

he returned, full-circle, to the Slobodka yeshiva in Lithuania, promptly and intensively to undertake a work that would reflect the erudition of a scholar beyond his years. People had known him to study for nearly twenty-four hours without stop. That is apparently what he did now, learning tractate *Nazir*, setting down both analyses and original interpretations, completing the work in no more than half a year! So unfailing was his certitude that he sent every few pages to the printers as soon as they were finished, not even waiting until the entire manuscript was finished to insure that all sections correlated.²¹ Various proofs were sent to internationally renowned Talmud scholars with a request for a formal approbation. Enthusiastic replies were readily forthcoming.²²

The book marked a turning point. Rabbi Hutner would marry soon after it was published, securing not just his lifelong partner but steady financial support from his in-laws in order to allow him to develop his intellectual interests freely, unburdened by practical considerations.²³ In no small measure this was the result of the stature that the book both conferred and confirmed. Isaac Hutner would become “Rabbi”—teacher—setting his sights less on how and what to absorb from others, more on how and what to transmit to others. It was this reorientation which entailed his most radical uprooting—an uprooting, as he said, always for the sake of growth.

And so [he wrote in 1934] I am now on my way to America. Here I am, on the ship, sailing to New York. In these last years, I have been swept by the flux of events in my life, wave after wave, journey after journey, migration upon migration, and have known no rest. All these journeys, migrations, travels, all that probing—inside and outside of myself— . . . were nothing other than the result of an inner urge disturbing my peace, consuming me with its flame, beating my back with a thousand hammers and grabbing my head by its tails—goading me to find the way *to myself by myself*. I must create even the first stalks with my own hands.²⁴

As a comprehensive retrospective, unifying and conceptualizing his dense and differentiated itinerary into a single period of search, this reflection identifies one unmalleable quality which stood out even at the journey’s beginning: independence. If Europe and Palestine were most fertile ground for independence as a student, the United States would be most fertile ground for independence as a teacher, a rabbi. “I must concede that had I not been in the United States all these years—had I remained in the Holy Land—life there would not have allowed me that nonalignment [*i-hizdahut*] so essential to my spirit. . . .”²⁵

Independence, in the sense of guarding the essential self, the bottommost ego, from the insistent demand for transformation: a term not to be cherished by pietists, but to be taken for granted in

Hasidism. If in the Elder's musar Rabbi Hutner observed self-concealment, self-scrutiny, self-sacrifice, and growth and tranquility—all of which he sought to embody—he saw all this after his formative years in Warsaw, “formative” because, by sixteen, he was beyond his years. Although his paternal heritage derived from the Lithuanian pocket within the predominantly hasidic, religious sector of Jewish Warsaw, he knew the larger hasidic community of his birth. His maternal heritage was hasidic. The attractive traits of the Elder's musar he could locate in the iconoclastic, Polish hasidic eddy of Kotsk, with which an uncle was associated. He studied in the Gerer *shtibl* in Warsaw. He absorbed Hasidism's dominant view that the ego, though not to be left untended, was not to be transformed, either. Whether the hasidic ethos shaped Isaac Hutner, or merely confirmed prior inclinations, we cannot know. We do know that he was able to reconcile a Musar stress on criticizing the ego and a hasidic stress on nurturing it.

The musar practice of self-scrutiny presumed an essential psychological health, an ability to step outside the self and view it objectively, to analyze and criticize it without destroying it. However, with the passage of the generations, thought Rabbi Hutner, the presumption of essential psychological health no longer held; people had weakened. It became necessary to build ego, to foster self-regard—self-confidence and self-trust—to restore the rung of being with which the Musar sensibility had begun and from which it ascended. Implicit in all of Rabbi Hutner's writings is a clear message of encouragement: Man can achieve. Man is great. While in Slobodka this concept (*gadlut ha-adam*) had represented the foundation of pietistic devotion—the state from which an essentially healthy person could transform himself—in Rabbi Hutner's thought the concept represented the culmination, the essence of psychological health, which itself required much effort to attain. Rabbi Hutner himself spared no effort in fostering his own foundation of essential health, or self-regard. A feature unifying his letters is the pronoun “I” and the adjective “my.” He set forth the significance of these ubiquities most clearly in a letter in 1933.

I am now becoming steeped in studies. . . . Study in its various guises absorbs me, and yet I know that the essence of my personality is the life of my soul and not the life of my mind. . . . For me to live a life of the soul means to live a life of soul-creativity. For myself, I cannot imagine any realm of life of the spirit to be without creativity. But this is the rub: I am not able to be creative in the life of the soul without first taking important strides—creative ones—in study and *mada*. And so, I am stuck between the insistent claims of the soul, which penetrate to my depths, and between the command of my personality to overcome these claims temporarily, [as I pursue my studies] to build for greater soul-creativity at a later time.²⁶

