**Chapter 9: Conclusion and Observations on Rabbi Yitzchak Hutner’s Thought and Legacy**

This final chapter is a conclusion in which I will discuss the findings of my research and use them to define Rabbi Hutner’s thought, before attempting to characterize Rabbi Hutner himself and concluding with some thoughts about his legacy.

**9.1 The Foundations of Rabbi Hutner’s Thought**

In this study, I have attempted to ground my investigation of Rabbi Hutner’s thought historically and theologically by setting his work within its temporal context and providing an intellectual-conceptual infrastructure and hermeneutical key with which to develop broad and precise intellectual and textual research. To this end, I set the following aims: (1) To prove that Rabbi Hutner’s writing is esoteric and to identify the type of esoterism that characterizes his writing and the motivation behind it; (2) To identify Rabbi Hutner’s sources and, in this context, to answer the following questions: (a) Which intellectual connections can be identified and anchored in historical evidence, beyond a reliance upon mere thematic or associative similarity?; (b) Which of these is critical to Rabbi Hutner’s thought?; (c) How do they function within it? (3) To assess the degree to which the thought presented in the *Pachad Yitzchak* books can be considered systematic and to identify and analyze the focal points of this thought and the fundamental problems which the ideas formulated within it are intended to solve; in light of this, to formulate a hermeneutical key with which to correctly interpret Rabbi Hutner’s thought. The following is a summary of my conclusions concerning these questions (not necessarily in the order they were presented).

Rabbi Hutner’s esotericism: Concealment and self-censorship are motifs that run like a thread through Rabbi Hutner’s life, from his youth until his final days. They are reflected in all his writing including several articles that he wrote in his youth. He hid his translation of Nathan Birnbaum’s book, publishing only a small part of it anonymously; he removed Rabbi Kook’s approval from his scholarly work, *Torat Hanazir*; he hid his edition of Rabbeinu Hillel’s Commentary on the Sifra, a work on which he toiled for four years, producing an edition in a style inspired by the editing projects of the Rabbinical Seminary in Berlin; he removed his name from an article that was different from other articles that he wrote during the same period and published in the same forum only in its containing a reference to “a scholar from the other nations” and its discussion of a theme popular with contemporary philosophers. The common denominator of all these cases is that they involve figures and content that were on the outer fringes of Lithuanian-Orthodox legitimacy, some of whom (Rabbi Kook and the Rabbinical Seminary) were eventually completely excluded from this camp. Rabbi Hutner secluded himself from the eyes of the public until his final years, refrained from expressing himself and from participating in gatherings and politics, and took care about what was said in his name, to the extent that he instructed his students not to believe anything said in his name unless they heard it from him personally. He took these measures for a reason; his unusual ways, the eccentric characteristics of his yeshiva and educational method, his significant and unconventional engagement with philosophy, and his connections to Hasidism on the one hand and the Haskalah on the other were a kind of known secret, that inspired an ambivalent and to some extent critical attitude towards him from his contemporaries within the leadership of the yeshiva world. Even his philosophical articles were initially published for fifteen years under a cover of very strict anonymity, with a disclaimer printed at the bottom of every page, and with very limited circulation. The turning point occurred only at a later stage in his life, close to the death of the only person to whom Rabbi Hutner deferred and with whom he did not dare to contend: Rabbi Aharon Kotler, the extremely domineering, militant, and most senior leader of the yeshiva circles in the United States. At that point, Rabbi Hutner began to publish his writings as books, under his own name, and in as wide a circulation as possible, of his own volition, while, at the same time, giving more public exposure to his beliefs and increasing his presence within the community. The picture arising from all of these details is that Rabbi Hutner must be characterized as someone with a tendency to conceal content that was liable to arouse negative reactions from his peer group, especially its leader. Rabbi Hutner censored himself consistently for social reasons; consequently, the esotericism that one would expect to find in the *Pachad Yitzchak* books is social-philosophical – the concealment of content to avoid social sanctions.

The hermeneutical key to understanding Rabbi Hutner: To assess the degree to which Rabbi Hutner’s thought is systematic, to identify its focal points, and to formulate the hermeneutical key necessary for its correct and precise interpretation, I reconstructed what I call the intellectual infrastructure of his thought. This act of reconstruction revealed that Rabbi Hutner’s thought is built upon the combination of two principles: the teleological principle and the dualistic principle. The teleological principle is constructed on the model formulated by Ramchal in his theological writings: Reality has two purposes, an anthropocentric purpose, and a theocentric purpose. In the framework of the anthropocentric purpose, God, who is beneficent by nature, treats man with beneficence by creating conditions that enable him to receive the greatest possible amount of joy. According to Rabbi Hutner’s development of these concepts, the pinnacle of joy is true existence. True existence lies in being similar to the source of existence, God; it is an independent and eternal existence. The aspiration to be like the source is implanted in the essence of man by his being the image of God; this is the similarity of the form to its creator, the obligation of *imitatio Dei.* This type of existence is not entirely possible for man, but the closest level of this kind of existence that man is capable of achieving is by earning his existence. God’s greatest lovingkindness is expressed in creating for man the possibility of earning his existence so that he sustains himself; this is lovingkindness-law (*hessed-mishpat*). The anthropomorphic purpose is that man will truly exist.

In the framework of the second purpose, the theocentric, the world is created for the honor of God, who creates the conditions that allow His honor to be revealed to the fullest possible extent. Honor (*kavod*) means the recognition of importance, and to increase honor means to ascribe importance. The fullest revelation of honor occurs when it is voluntary and in situations in which it is not obvious. The essence of increasing God’s honor lies in performing elective acts for the sake of heaven. Remarkably, Rabbi Hutner grants primacy to elective acts over commandments in the context of bestowing importance to reality. He connects the service of God to two opposite systems: good versus evil, and sacred versus profane. The first is linked to commandments and transgressions and the second to elective acts. He defines the victory of the sacred over the profane as the greatest desire of the servant of God. Sacred means having importance and profane means neutral and devoid of importance in itself. In performing elective acts for the sake of heaven, man grants importance to reality. The theocentric purpose is that reality will have importance.

The dualistic principle is constructed according to the metaphysical system developed by the Maharal of Prague: The world is comprised of an upper spiritual layer and a lower material layer. Between them lies a chasm that prevents the realization of the purpose of the worlds dependent upon the connection between them. Through his choices and the power of his intellect, conditional upon the Torah, Man can bridge the dualistic chasm. The power of choice (free will) is the result of man’s creation from a combination of the upper and lower worlds. When a person chooses good, especially when performing elective acts for the sake of heaven, he connects the higher and lower spheres. The power of intellect is man’s most essential characteristic, by which he recognizes God’s sovereignty and identifies the lower level of reality as subordinate to the upper layer, like the body in contrast to the purpose, and he thus again bridges the dualistic chasm. The use of the powers of choice and intellect to bridge the dualistic chasm is conditional upon the Torah study, which endows man with “elective intellect”, the ability to determine how his performance of elective acts can be for the sake of heaven. The Torah also has the quality of uniqueness, meaning that it extends over everything that is connected to it, enables its study, or derives from it, so that they become part of it. Torah study is therefore the beginning of the bridging of the dualistic chasm and the condition for it, to which everything returns. By combining the teleological principle from the school of Ramchal with the dualistic principle from the school of Maharal, the act of bridging the dualistic chasm becomes identical to granting importance to reality; there is thus an appearance of the realization of the theocentric purpose; in this way, man earns his existence, and, therefore, there is an appearance of the realization of the anthropocentric purpose.

The amalgamation of the two principles was clearly expressed in Rabbi Hutner’s understanding of the world-to-come based upon Nachmanides’ eschatological system. For Rabbi Hutner, the world-to-come is identical in its format to this world, except that the dualistic chasm is negated and the connection between the upper and lower worlds is whole and continuous. In the world-to-come, people are resurrected and live eternal lives, and thus the anthropocentric purpose is realized; they necessarily choose the sacred and the good and thus the theocentric purpose is realized. Therefore, man’s obligation in this world, in Rabbi Hutner’s thought, can be formulated as an attempt to realize a state of “as in the world-to-come”, to live in such a way that the dualistic chasm is reduced as much as possible in the life of the individual through his choices and intellect.

My examination of how Rabbi Hutner formulates the two purposes of creation, the structure of reality and in their wake, man’s purpose and his essential characteristics, revealed two central focal points of his thought: existence and importance. The purpose of the world and the pinnacle of human aspiration is to achieve true existence and to bestow importance on reality. From the positive, we can infer the negative: the issues that concerned Rabbi Hutner and around which his thought coalesced were the problems of false existence and the pointlessness of existence. Rabbi Hutner connects existence and importance with a third concept: uniqueness, and in doing so positions them as the fundamental problems for the life of the individual and connects them to the human aspiration to be unique. This dynamic raised associations with existentialist philosophy, which developed and became established in Rabbi Hutner’s lifetime and reverberates with ideas found in his journal entries and correspondence from his youth. An analysis of Rabbi Hutner’s three fundamental issues as they function in his thought, and in light of complementary content from his apocryphal writings, revealed that the connection to existentialism is compelling. Rabbi Hutner’s response to the finitude of existence is anxiety, which is a response to the meaningless of existence, whereas the stability of existence indicates for him existential certainty; the concept of importance functions in Rabbi Hutner’s thought similarly to that of seeking meaning in the sense of seeking value, when the possibility of meaning is dependent, as in existentialist thought, on the possibility of choice and the negation of determinism. The concept of uniqueness (*yechidut*) functions similarly to the aspiration for authenticity, meaning the striving for singularity, because Rabbi Hutner pinpoints the essence of singularity in man’s intellectual activities, as the expression of his uniqueness through original insights in his Torah study. Rabbi Hutner makes original insight and individuality into the essence of Torah study without which it loses its fundamental quality. This process parallels Rabbi Chaim of Volozhin’s reinterpretation of Torah study – turning a primary value into the supreme value by placing it at the top of the hierarchy of values. The three focal points of Rabbi Hutner’s thought are conditional upon each other because importance cannot be ascribed to an existence lacking stability or uniqueness. Thus, to be precise, the fundamental problems in Rabbi Hutner’s thought form a kind of triangle whose top is importance (meaning, value, the life of the individual) and two legs are existential certainty and uniqueness-authenticity. It can thus be said that Rabbi Hutner is an Orthodox thinker, with existentialist tendencies, who seeks meaning.

The definition of the fundamental problems (importance, existence, and uniqueness) along with the recognition of the sense and meaning of the concepts woven around them (lovingkindness, pleasure (joy), truth, *imitatio Dei*, honor, elective acts, free will, intellect [knowledge], and Torah) produce the hermeneutical key which must form the basis for any analysis of Rabbi Hutner’s thought and the perspective from which to interpret it.

Rabbi Hutner’s sources and their place in his thought: even after the turning point and publication of his writings, the motif of concealment remained a prominent characteristic of Rabbi Hutner’s writings in that he concealed his sources and explicitly refrained from completing lines of thought having serious ramifications. This can be seen from a comparison of his books, the *Pachad Yitzchak* series, with the apocryphal writings containing his thought published posthumously and from the thematic similarity of his thought to ideas from a variety of sources that he conceals. The question of Rabbi Hutner’s sources has two aspects: the first is their identity and the second is their function within his thought and influence upon it. His known sources include first and foremost the Maharal of Prague, Nachmanides, the Vilna Gaon, and others including Rabbi Jonah Gerondi and Maimonides. Rabbi Hutner’s approach to his revealed sources is characterized predominantly by selective adoption. For example, he adopts from Maharal his neutral dualism regarding matter-spirit and body-soul, expressed in the separation paradigm, yet leaves behind the contentious dualism, expressed in the deficiency paradigm, and with it any expression of negativity to material things, the body, or this world. He similarly adopts Nachmanides’ apocalyptic understanding of the world-to-come, the least rationalist among the Jewish traditions on this subject, yet with a very minimalist approach: he reduces the apocalyptic dimension to the lowest possible level, removes any reference to a negative approach to material things, and constructs the world-to-come as a mirror image of this world without the dualistic chasm.

Regarding hidden sources, the findings of this research indicate that the most crucial source absent from previous research literature on Rabbi Hutner’s thought is Ramchal. From a historical examination, it transpires that Rabbi Hutner engaged with Ramchal’s thought and was even involved with the publication of his writings in the second half of the twentieth century. Ramchal’s teleological principle, formulated in his systematic writings, *Da’at Tevunot* and *Derech Hashem*,anchors Rabbi Hutner’s thought. The fundamental problems of Rabbi Hutner’s thought, existence and importance, and the strategies for addressing them, are formulated and justified from the development of the philosophical principles established by Ramchal, along with other themes present in the *Pachad Yitzchak* books, including the retroactive discovery of the good. Ramchal’s importance to Rabbi Hutner’s thought cannot be exaggerated. Nonetheless, the nature of Rabbi Hutner’s use of Ramchal’s thought must be examined. The two purposes formulated by Ramchal, the anthropocentric and the theocentric, undergo significant transformations in the *Pachad Yitzchak* books. The anthropocentric purpose is developed and enhanced. The totality of its parts, perfect lovingkindness as the ability to earn lovingkindness, the acquisition of perfection, emulating the creator, and the receipt of pleasure are preserved, yet they are clarified and reloaded with content from a perspective focused entirely on the essence of existence. In this, Rabbi Hutner identified and actualized the latent potential in the framework that Ramchal created. In the case of the theocentric purpose, the transformation is even more acute. The format is similar, but Rabbi Hutner omits Ramchal’s central focus, uniqueness, and replaces it with the proliferation of God’s honor in the sense of bestowal of importance on reality. This change can be explained by the centrality of the system of the opposites “sacred-profane” in Rabbi Hutner’s thought in contrast to the centrality of the system of the opposites “good-evil” in Ramchal’s thought. For Ramchal, the highest goal is the negation of evil to reveal the good, while for Rabbi Hutner, the highest goal is joining the profane to the sacred, that is, connecting that which lacks importance on its own, the creation, to the source of importance, God.

Ramchal is unique among Rabbi Hutner’s hidden sources in that, on the face of it, there was no reason to conceal him, and it is perhaps because of this that this source has not yet received attention. In contrast to Hassidic and philosophic sources, Ramchal has a distinguished place in the Lithuanian-Orthodox canon, and we would not expect Rabbi Hutner to suppress the fact of his influence on him. An investigation of Rabbi Hutner’s ties with projects for the publication of Ramchal’s books led to the conclusion that the answer is connected to Rabbi Hutner’s position on the issue of interpreting the Kabbalah as a metaphor, of which Ramchal is among the most prominent representatives; in Rabbi Hutner’s time this approach, based upon Ramchal, was interpreted radically. It appears that Rabbi Hutner believed that Ramchal did in fact hold the radical approach attributed to him on the issue of Kabbalah as metaphor and regarded Ramchal’s systematic writings as a product of this approach, with which he personally disagreed. Rabbi Hutner thus wanted to borrow profusely from Ramchal’s thought, without thereby indicating support for his approach to the interpretation of the Kabbalah (as Rabbi Hutner understood it).

In this context, I would like to emphasize the importance of the methodology used in this research. The act of reconstructing Rabbi Hutner’s intellectual infrastructure, which involved the systematic reading of all the *Pachad Yitzchak* books, and the revelation of the platform that gives meaning and justification to the ideas developed within it uncovered the teleological principle and pinpointed it as a foundational principle of his thought. In Ramchal’s systematic writings, the centrality of the teleological principle is clear: Ramchal declares his intention to discuss it and explains this principle in an organized manner. However, in Rabbi Hutner’s writings, complementary discussions on this issue are scattered throughout in the context of discussions of other subjects, so that the matter easily escapes attention when an examination is made through a preexisting focus on a specific subject. Only an integrative perspective of the big picture, to speak figuratively, only by mapping the forest before examining the trees, with the aid of evidence discovered in the framework of historical research, revealed the foundations, and enabled this basic discovery.

The most obscure issue regarding Rabbi Hutner’s thought is the question of his general philosophical sources: with which sources was he familiar and to what extent? In what way are they present in his thought? This was the most difficult question to answer and even after the completion of this study, firm conclusions cannot be reached. The thinker who appears to be the most likely candidate as a philosophical source of Rabbi Hutner’s thought is Martin Heidegger. In the historical chapters, I established that Rabbi Hutner was actively interested in secular studies and studied them, at the very least autodidactically. The period for which we have the most solid evidence of this study, including a period of between a year and two years in which he was in Berlin and present, in one sense or another, at the university, corresponds to the period of the emergence and growth of Heidegger’s fame and popularity. In Rabbi Hutner’s early publications, we found explicitly contemporary themes such as the fragmentation of science and the problem of the popular media, both subjects for which Heidegger was an outstanding spokesman. An analysis of the focal point of uniqueness in Rabbi Hutner’s thought revealed that, to the extent to which we can ascribe to Rabbi Hutner existentialist tendencies, the idea of authenticity is expressed in his thought with emphases similar to those outlined by Heidegger and different from those of other thinkers such as Kierkegaard and Sartre. All these factors strengthened the identification of Heidegger as the source of influence on Rabbi Hutner which had been indicated by the thematic similarity between them.

To better understand how sources from outside the world of Torah could function within Rabbi Hutner’s thought, I devoted a chapter to the examination of his approach to external wisdom, how he understood the relationships between Torah-based knowledge and non-Torah-based knowledge, and his approach to secular studies. I found that Rabbi Hutner’s approach to the relationship between Torah and external wisdom, which he developed based on Maharal’s approach (from the perspective of the separation paradigm) corresponds to the separate domains approach according to which Torah and external wisdom preside over completely distinct areas of knowledge and wisdom and therefore cannot contradict each other. External wisdom is concerned with reality as it is, while Torah relates to reality as it should be and the best ways to expedite its renewal. In his language, external wisdom examines reality, while Torah is the wisdom that creates reality. Thus, in principle, it is possible and even desirable to accept external wisdom as truth in all that is related to their domains; however, when the subject under discussion is in the realm of the sacred, religious obligation, or metaphysical matters, all connected to the renewal of reality, these disciplines lack access to the relevant information expressed in the Torah, which is capable of providing the complete picture. The basic way in which external wisdom could function within Rabbi Hutner’s thought, therefore, is as a platform understood to be fundamentally correct, upon which is erected a supplementary level that only knowledge acquired by revelation can provide, in a way that corresponds to Rabbi Hutner’s general neutral dualistic outlook, according to which the Torah and external wisdom are each connected to one of its sides. On the question of his attitude to secular studies, we found that Rabbi Hutner’s approach is ambivalent, on the one hand supportive, yet on the other hand dismissive, with both sides deriving from the same source – the value that he ascribes to them. He sees in external wisdom a source for the empowerment of Judaism and the individual Jew and, in certain ways, the revelation of the will of God, yet at the same time, a rival to the Torah, a possible alternative source for knowledge that establishes reality, which again emphasizes the centrality of the search for meaning in his thought. From here derives his position that legitimizes his own engagement with secular studies, his ambivalence to the possibility that his students and yeshiva students in general would engage with them, and his negative attitude to Jewish ideologies that obligate everyone to study secular subjects as a religious value and without restrictions.

An analysis of second-order lines of thought and concepts (not foundational as in the intellectual infrastructure, but rather the second level built on top of it), renewal, constancy, eternity, and a new meaning of the concept of truth, demonstrated that the three principles comprising Heidegger’s most famous principle, being-towards-death, are present in Rabbi Hutner’s thought: the principle of future consequences and the two components of authenticity, the existential totality and the singularity that enables it. These are developed in connection with Rabbi Hutner’s fundamental concepts by linking them to Torah study and creating a conditional relationship between these concepts and the Torah, on one hand, and, on the other hand, the religious principle rejected by Heidegger – the idea of eternal life. The way that Rabbi Hutner constructs these concepts facilitates the formation of a theme parallel to being-towards-death emerging from his thought: being-towards-eternity. The double awareness of the certainty of both death and the resurrection of the dead inspires man to live in a state of constancy (the Hutnerian parallel to Kierkegaardian-Heideggerian idea of existential eternity), linked to the Torah, that identifies existential eternity with absolute eternity (rejected by Heidegger). In this way, he creates a pattern similar to Heidegger’s that builds upon itself another level, so that instead of being limited only to the establishment of contingent meaning and wrestling with anxiety, it aspires, by presenting a theological element, to establish an absolute meaning which instills hope, vitality, and joie de vivre; thus, in similarity to the Heideggerian format, he conditions this possibility on authentic life, in which its totality-constancy is contingent upon a singularity-uniqueness capable of uniting all the appearances of an individual’s life under his unique stamp. This format is possible because of the nature of the Torah to spread over every area of human life motivated by Torah study, including the area of one’s most unique behavior, his elective acts, and because his intellect, the situs of Torah learning, is the place wherein the essence of his singularity is embedded. Thus, by virtue of the Torah, which creates in man existential eternity and connects him to divine eternity, man acquires true importance and eternal existence while actualizing his singularity. In this context, I characterized Rabbi Hutner’s thought as post-existentialist theology in that it revolves around existential problems as they are developed in the existentialist framework yet deviates from this framework in its methodology, its aspirations, and the degree to which it can allow itself to adopt the latter’s conclusions. This conforms to the general model of the relationships between Torah and external wisdom in Rabbi Hutner’s thought: the adoption, in principle, of the platform established by wisdom that investigates reality, until the stage when it is required to present a complementary level above itself, derived from the Torah, which creates reality.

In addition, I discussed the rabbinical sources found in the background of Rabbi Hutner’s thought: the Mussar movement, with an emphasis on the Alter of Sobodka; Hassidic thought, with an emphasis on Chabad; and the Kabbalah. The common denominator of all these sources is that their content undergoes significant changes in the framework of Rabbi Hutner’s thought, sometimes critical changes up to the point of a complete reversal of the original meaning. The essence of the influence of the Alter of Slobodka and the Mussar movement in general on Rabbi Hutner can be identified as the presentation of an educational, pedagogical, and leadership role model. In everything connected to intellectual influence, the Alter’s approach and worldview and the fundamental concepts with which he engaged were a source of inspiration. However, the content with which Rabbi Hutner imbues them is his own and original and includes a level of focus and clarity that has no parallel within the Alter’s thought.

In the context of Rabbi Hutner’s hidden Hassidic sources, it appears that Rabbi Hutner adopts thought patterns and concepts from Hassidic thought but imbues them with his own content, sometimes even reversing the original meaning. This dynamic occurs because his basic intuitions contradict many of those characterizing Hassidic thought. The idea of immanence, the acosmistic tendencies (in their radical as well as moderate versions), principles of equalization and negation, and similar ideas characterizing Hassidic thought are diametric to the lines of thought characterizing Rabbi Hutner, expressed in the fundamental questions of his thought and his approach to them. In the context of his approach to Kabbalah, it appears that the Kabbalah was part of his life but not significantly present in the thought that he chose to publish, beyond its theological reduction and adaptation: the formal adoption of kabbalistic patterns and concepts for the sake of formulating his theology while stripping them of their theosophic and theurgic content, which was irrelevant to his thought. On the contrary, we found that Rabbi Hutner recoiled from the idea of spreading kabbalistic ideas by reformulating them in accessible language, but rather took care to compartmentalize the concealed and the revealed. Regarding the content that should be concealed because of its social significance, Rabbi Hutner believed that it is correct to use esoteric writing, to conceal much more than is revealed, in a manner that hints to the wise person who knows how to fill the gaps from his own understanding and reveal the meaning on his own. However, regarding content that is esoteric by nature, such that its content inherently mandates its concealment, Rabbi Hutner believed that it is correct simply to leave it hidden. However, he did not refrain from using formal kabbalistic patterns or developing from them theological applications free of any esoteric content.

In the absence of an established hermeneutical key, or given a different hermeneutical key, one might understand how Hassidic and kabbalistic sources function in Rabbi Hutner’s thought and influence it very differently. However, familiarity with the intellectual infrastructure, the focal points, and the fundamental questions of Rabbi Hutner’s thought does not allow interpretations of his thought as acosmistic, unio-mystic, or rejecting material reality, despite the presence of sources in the background that would seem to indicate otherwise. These interpretations contradict his existential tendencies, such as the striving for singularity and search for the meaning of the individual’s life, do not correlate with his position that the purpose of reality is to earn true existence and bestow importance on reality, and are not compatible with his neutral dualistic outlook.

To this we must add another fundamental characteristic of Rabbi Hutner’s thought: on the one hand, the adoption of the less-rationalistic traditions in Jewish thought as the framework for the development of his thought, and on the other hand, the tendency to minimalize the irrational in the framework of those traditions. This was expressed in the apocalyptic-minimalism that characterizes his conception of the world-to-come and the rational-maximalism in the framework of his spiritual-naturalistic outlook – the way he formulates logical and coherent explanations for how the Torah and commandments produce their spiritual impact. This tendency accords with the existentialist tendency to explain human existence, to the extent possible, in terms of human experience and in the often-repeated words of Rabbi Hutner, “to explain things according to our principle” while attempting to oppose, to the extent possible, evasive explanations that deviate from it.

Rabbi Hutner’s thought is characterized, therefore, by the incorporation of trends, ideas, and existentialist and rationalist aspirations, within an Orthodox Jewish theological structure, to the greatest extent possible within the necessary limits, and, on the other hand, the incorporation of theological systems and concepts from a mystical context into thought that is focused on the question of the meaning of individual existence, thereby redefining them appropriately. The “limits” are maintained here, in this context, through language, wording, and conceptual adaptations that succeed in keeping the content of his thought within the lines of Orthodox thought, and, through esoteric writing, preventing the possibility of their infiltration into society by word of mouth.

**9.2 What Type of Thinker was Rabbi Hutner?**

Before concluding, I would like to present a few thoughts concerning the findings of this study.

What type of thinker was Rabbi Hutner? Lithuanian-Orthodox? A devotee of the Mussar movement? A kind of Hassidic rebbe? A covert kabbalist? An existentialist? All these labels are used occasionally to describe him. The answer is complex. The label “Lithuanian-Orthodox” thinker would appear to be the most appropriate, least problematic, and simplest of these characterizations. His core sources are canonical, and he demonstrates the most prominent characteristic of Lithuanian Jewish thought: the centrality, if not complete supremacy, of Torah study. However, it is difficult to define him simply as a Lithuanian-Orthodox thinker because of all the factors I have listed and examined throughout this study.

Was he a devotee of the Mussar movement? Rabbi Hutner grew up in the framework of the Mussar movement and was deeply influenced by the Alter of Slobodka. However, he distanced himself from this framework in several important aspects. First, in his understanding of humanity and education, he rejected the perspective of Rabbi Yisrael Salanter, the founder of the movement, and his students that man’s dark powers rather than his conscious rational abilities produce his behavior. Second, in consequence of this, he neither himself practiced nor mandated in his yeshiva practices such as the recitation of Mussar literature in a state of excitement, a set time for the study of Mussar literature, the use of receipt books, and so forth. Instead of this, he believed in appealing to the intellect and emphasized the development of a worldview as a way of advancing in the service of God and as its central component. Third, and most conspicuously, he devoted himself to writing his thought, an activity that his teachers did not invest time in, value, or, for the most part, believe in. Nonetheless, he deeply internalized an essential component of the Mussar movement, perhaps the most essential: the importance, if not necessity, of emotional experience for learning to be internalized and lead to the enhancement of divine service. The tension between this understanding, the value that he attributed to writing, and his aspiration to publish his thought led him to reimagine the written sermon as a device utilizing rhetorical tools intended to maximize the inspiration and pleasure derived from reading it, thereby producing emotional imprinting, similar to the experience involved in a live talk. One of the unique characteristics of his writing, therefore, owes its existence to the Mussar movement.

Was Rabbi Hutner a kind of Hassidic rebbe? Here, it seems to me that the answer is simpler and, in essence, negative. In effect, it appears that Rabbi Hutner treated Hassidism inversely to how he treated the Mussar movement. In the context of the Mussar movement, Rabbi Hutner discarded most of the formal characteristics while retaining the essential core; in the Hassidic context, Rabbi Hutner, through the years, increasingly adopted formal characteristics, such as melodies, special forms of dress, and so forth; however, he did not function as Hassidic spiritual leader. He did not take upon himself any aspect of mediation or any other function whatsoever in his students’ divine service and did not perform religious acts for their spiritual benefit, or the reparation of the world, or anything else of this kind. Similar to the pattern of his adoption of Hassidic thought, its form and some of its meanings are there, but its intuitions and foundations are absent.

Was he a covert kabbalist? We can say with certainty that Rabbi Hutner studied Kabbalah, engaged with it, and supported the publication of kabbalistic writings. However, his thought cannot be called kabbalistic, and to the same degree he cannot be called a “kabbalist”.

Was he an existentialist? I have already expressed my opinion on the ease with which the label “existentialist” is attributed to various authors of different periods because their writings contain content reminiscent of existentialist themes. Specifically, regarding Rabbi Hutner, this labeling is somewhat justified. Nonetheless, from a hermeneutical approach that prefers precise and exact definitions and concepts over broad concepts, I am careful to describe him as a thinker with existentialist tendencies or as a post-existentialist. Here too, Rabbi Hutner partially adopted existentialist ideas and modified their conclusions when unable to reconcile them with rabbinical tradition. Rabbi Hutner engages with the peripheral points of existentialist thought, its conclusions and derivatives, but his investigations are not philosophical. He is not satisfied with wrestling with existential problems considered insolvable by the existentialists; he insists upon solving them by introducing a metaphysical-theological dimension not included in the existentialist arsenal. He places authenticity primarily in the intellectual sphere, in contrast to the emphasis on the dimension of action in the existentialist school. Furthermore, the essence of the framework in which he was active –Orthodox Jewish theology and its accompanying way of life – are incompatible in several ways with important existentialist principles.

Rabbi Hutner’s general description of himself is thus also very relevant specifically to his thought: “collected from all corners of the earth”. However, two unifying principles imprint all aspects of his thought. The first is Orthodoxy. Both in the less-conventional content of his thought and in those elements influenced by non-Orthodox content that Rabbi Hutner buried in his writings, he never disassociates himself from the principles of Orthodoxy and its keynotes. The second principle is his search for meaning. Many thinkers were active in the age of the search for meaning. Rabbi Hutner chose to grapple with this question through the existentialist approach, and even if it is not possible to define him as an existentialist par excellence, he certainly is a thinker for whom the question of meaning lies at the core of his thought. I, therefore, see fit to characterize him as an Orthodox thinker belonging to the age of the search for meaning.

**9.3 Rabbi Hutner’s Legacy**

In conclusion, I would like to share some thoughts about Rabbi Hutner’s legacy.

We can delineate two clear directions, two aspirations that can be ascribed to Rabbi Hutner in light of his activity and how he lived his life: remaining within the Orthodox camp and addressing it, even at the price of conformity and self-concealment; and providing a response to the confusion caused by the search for meaning among Jews, and in particular Orthodox Jews, by formulating thought characterized by esoteric writing, because of the first aspiration. At the time of this writing, forty years have passed since Rabbi Hutner’s death and about fifty years since he began to publish the *Pachad Yitzchak* books, and my feeling is that, as of today, he succeeded remarkably in the first aspiration, but less so in the second.

One of the most famous passages written by Rabbi Hutner is a letter that he wrote in response to a student who expressed despair about his religious and moral failings. In response, Rabbi Hutner wrote the following:

רעה חולה היא אצלנו שכאשר מתעסקים אנו בצדדי השלמות של גדולינו, הננו מטפלים בסיכום האחרון של מעלתם. מספרים אנו על דרכי השלמות שלהם, בשעה שאנחנו מדלגים על המאבק הפנימי שהתחולל בנפשם. הרושם שלך על גדולי ישראל מתקבל כאילו יצאו מתחת יד היוצר בקומתם ובצביונם. הכל משוחחים, מתפעלים ומרימים על נס את טהרת הלשון של בעל החפץ חיים זצ"ל, אבל מי יודע מן כל המלחמות, המאבקים, המכשולים, הנפילות והנסיגות לאחור שמצא החפץ חיים בדרך המלחמה שלו עם יצרו הרע - משל אחד מני אלף.[[1]](#footnote-1)

This letter is often cited, and the editors of a volume of his letters and writings saw fit to publicize it widely. However, regarding Rabbi Hutner himself, those close to him do not act accordingly. Dalfin described how during his research on Rabbi Hutner he encountered a blanket of secrecy and opposition from his close students and family members and sometimes complete refusal to speak to him, while some told how they had been hurt in the past by their willingness to speak about Rabbi Hutner. In the course of my research, I discovered unequivocal proofs of the censorship of evidence of Rabbi Hutner’s engagement with secular studies, for example, and the concealment of biographical information, some of which have been discussed in this book. Those who see themselves as responsible for his legacy feel, so it seems, that there is still a need to conceal Rabbi Hutner and to shield him from criticism, to maintain his legitimacy so that he will not be canceled retroactively.

Rabbi Hutner successively maneuvered his interactions with different entities and imposed upon himself a large degree of conformity. There is however one area in which it seems that he did not allow the critical eye of others to deter him: education in his yeshiva. Rabbi Hutner wanted to instill in his students the importance of individual education and he allowed students from various backgrounds and ideologies to study in his yeshiva, from fanatical Hasidim to members of the religious Zionist youth group, Bnei Akiva, and students at the Conservative seminary. In this context, I will mention a short, but, I think, very ironic anecdote. The calendar that the Rabbeinu Chaim Berlin Yeshiva put out for the year 2009 included a picture showing a bird’s eye view of the beit midrash. The picture shows an impressive view of a full beit midrash teeming with students. However, the picture contained one detail not immediately apparent at first glance but problematic for those publishing it: one lone student in the beit midrash is not wearing a white shirt like all the others, but rather a blue buttoned shirt. In the calendar of the following year, the photograph was doctored digitally so that the student’s offensive shirt appeared white like the others. This short anecdote is not necessarily representative of what remains of Rabbi Hutner’s educational approach, but it seems to me that it contains a certain symbolism.

What of his thought? The *Pachad Yitzchak* books have a certain readership and there are several pockets of activity about his writings. His son-in-law, Rabbi Yonatan David, continues in his path and also formulates thought on “words of Torah on the laws of moral attributes and the duties of the heart”. Nonetheless, it is not clear to what extent Rabbi Hutner’s thought has spread within the yeshiva and Haredi worlds. Dalfin received the impression that yeshiva students are not particularly interested in his thought.[[2]](#footnote-2) When I asked recent graduates of the Rabbeinu Chaim Berlin Yeshiva if there is a significant engagement with his books in the yeshiva, I received an essentially negative answer. In the course of my research, I encountered many cases in which yeshiva students presented Rabbi Hutner’s ideas or even summarized complete discourses, in Haredi internet forums or various books. I discovered that they successfully paraphrased the written words, but entirely missed their hidden meanings. To this I would like to add the feeling that came over me when I spoke with students of Rabbi Hutner and read things written about him: everyone spoke with admiration, appreciation, and love about the “Rosh Yeshiva”, as they are careful to call him, and strongly emphasized the special relationships that he developed with them. However, many of them did not give much attention to the discussion of his thought. I recall that I asked one student to tell me what, in his opinion, is the central issue of Rabbi Hutner’s thought, and he had no answer, beyond saying that its primary subject matter is the holidays. It seems to me then that there is reason to wonder if Rabbi Hutner’s thought reverberates significantly among his intended readership, and if not, whether it is because the confusion from which he wished to rescue them has not in fact affected them, or if he succeeded too well in hiding the fact that he is addressing it. However, there seems to be an awakening of engagement with his thought in non-Haredi frameworks: the clear majority of research on Rabbi Hutner’s thought, increasing with time, has been published in frameworks identified with Modern Orthodoxy, such as Yeshiva University’s journal, *Tradition*,and *Hakira*; almost all the research papers about him have been written at Bar-Ilan University. There is also an awakening of interest in the *Pachad Yitzchak* books in Israeli yeshivot identified with religious Zionism, usually through the intermediation of rabbis of American origin teaching in them. It thus appears that Rabbi Hutner’s thought is acquiring an audience specifically among Orthodox movements characterized by wrestling with modern perplexities. In any case, time alone will reveal the full impact of his thought.

1. *Pachad Yitzchak: Igrot Uketavim,* 128. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Dalfin, *Rabbi Hutner and Rebbe*, 159. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)