

The REALL News

The official newsletter of the Rational Examination Association of Lincoln Land

"It's a very dangerous thing to believe in nonsense." — James Randi

Volume 7, Number 10

October 1999

Facing Silliness in Springfield

by David Bloomberg

10:00 P.M., September 1, 1999: I'm sitting down to watch the news on WICS Channel 20. One of their top stories is that some people have seen what appears to be a baby's face in a tree that is about to be cut down. They even send out a reporter, who comes back with words like "mystery" (used several times) to describe it. I don't see much of a mystery – it is a knothole that, yeah, looks a bit like a baby's face when viewed the proper way. Even the reporter acknowledged that you can't really see it during the day – you have to wait until night and look from a certain angle. But it was still a big "mystery" to him.

I was happy to see the next day that the *State Journal-Register* hadn't reported on the "story."

September 3, however, brought a new issue of the paper, with a front-page story on the face in the tree. Some said it was just a knothole. Silly them! Others made leaps and bounds of illogic. One older woman proclaimed, "It's the Lord." God on a tree? Why?

Others claimed a baby had been hung in the tree by a man who thought his wife had been impregnated by a black man. Therefore, the "logic" went, the face was obviously that of the baby. Of course.

Alas, the article pointed out that a search of the archives found no evidence that such a murder ever occurred. Bah! Who needs evidence? We have a face in the tree!

There were a few skeptics mingling about the tree as well, and they were also quoted. One pointed out that "if you want to see something hard enough, you will." And, indeed, many did.

I thought the story ended there. Nope. Sarah Antonacci, one of the reporters who wrote the previous article, contacted me for comment. I couldn't believe they were actually doing a follow-up! But she told me that the owner had cut the tree down, and they knew people were going to be upset.

So I discussed some information that I had gotten from the Committee for Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal's executive director. They have two bulging files of clippings related to this sort of thing – one for "faces" and another just for "faces of Jesus."

I noted that the human mind often finds patterns in everyday items. The article gave my statements several column

inches of space, quoting me as saying: "That accounts for why people see Mother Teresa in cinnamon buns, Jesus on a tortilla, Elvis in a pizza, and Kermit the Frog on Mars." I further discussed how just because something appears somewhere, that doesn't mean there is a supernatural force behind it.

Antonacci had some great lines in her article. The headline itself, "Tree believers lose face," made me laugh. Then she began: "Had it been a movie, it could have been called 'Silence of the Limbs.'" And continued: "On Friday, the saga of the face in the 'miracle tree' ended when the tree ... was turned into miracle mulch."

Later, she wrote that some called the *State Journal-Register* and asked, "What are you going to do about it?" She noted: "The answer: Nothing."

This second article brought another story, that a man who lived next door had supposedly killed four of his neighbor's kids because they were bothering him. This one had as much evidence behind it as the previous story (which was also still circulating). Going even further, Antonacci talked to the head librarian of the Sangamon Valley Collection, who couldn't find any evidence for either tale.

Strangely, some people even called the NAACP and said the baby on the tree was "an African-American child and [they] wanted the NAACP to take a stand on it." They didn't.

The best was yet to come, though. Sunday's paper brought an editorial cartoon by Chris Britt. It shows a crowd gathered around a tree, with one man pointing and yelling, "The tree is sending us a message!!!" The message on the tree? "Get a life you fools!"

And so ended the saga of the baby-faced tree: a strange local occurrence not of mass hysteria, but of mass silliness. Back to business as usual until somebody finds an eggplant shaped like Princess Di. ☹



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Purpose

The Rational Examination Association of Lincoln Land is a non-profit educational and scientific organization. It is dedicated to the development of rational thinking and the application of the scientific method toward claims of the paranormal and fringe-science phenomena.

REALL shall conduct research, convene meetings, publish a newsletter, and disseminate information to its members and the general public. Its primary geographic region of coverage is central Illinois.

REALL subscribes to the premise that the scientific method is the most reliable and self-correcting system for obtaining knowledge about the world and universe. REALL does not reject paranormal claims on *a priori* grounds, but rather is committed to objective, though critical, inquiry.

The REALL News is its official newsletter.

Annual Membership Rates: Regular, \$20; student, \$15; family, \$30; patron, \$50 or more; subscription only, \$12.

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Predictions

- Shamans Revisited
- Conspiracy Museum
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- More Weird Web Sites
- More Book Reviews



From the Chairman

I just flew back from Dallas, and boy are my arms tired! But seriously, I thought I had some wonderful words of wisdom to impart here this month, but I'm rather tired and really can't recall what, if anything, I was going to say. I do know that we have an interesting meeting in October (see below) and that our essay contest is rolling along pretty well.

While I was in Dallas, I had dinner with some of the leaders of the North Texas Skeptics. They were very good hosts and we swapped some ideas (their December meeting is titled something like: "It's the end of the world! Can I have your car?"). Even in a large metropolitan area like Dallas, they still have some of the same problems we have with getting lots of people to meetings on a regular basis. That made me feel a little better, but I'm still going to keep trying!

In other ways, their area is very different. They have lots of faith healers and few psychics, for example. But it's always nice to swap stories with other local groups. They also pointed me to the Conspiracy Museum (across from where JFK was killed, of course), and I took some free time to go visit. My report will follow next month. Until then, we have plenty of good stuff for you in this issue!

October Meeting

As you probably recall, David Gehrig spoke on the Bible Codes at our August meeting. Well, that just wasn't enough for him. So this month, he'll be speaking on: "Holocaust Revisionism – Honest Inquiry or Thinly Veiled Hate?" It will be at 7:00 p.m., Tuesday, October 5, at the Lincoln Library in Springfield.

In this talk, David will answer the questions: Who are the "Holocaust revisionists" – those who propose that the Nazis had no genocidal program against the Jews in World War II? What are they saying? What is their motivation? What can we do about it?

David has debated numerous revisionists and looked into their claims. He will address the pseudoscience, pseudohistory, and pseudologic used by revisionists in their assertions. He will examine the standards of evidence they use in their work, and look at the history of some of the organizations and people who put forth these claims.

Don't miss this meeting! Yeah, I know, I always say that. And I always mean it. But in this case, I mean it twice as much. I'll see you there! ☹

From the Editor

David just flew in from Dallas, and I just flew in from Montreal. I spent a week there with a friend from Colorado, seeing the sites and relaxing. Unlike David, I managed to entirely avoid thinking about the nuttiness we cover each issue. It was good.

Alas, when I returned, I found that all of the nuttiness was still here right where I left it. I guess it will take more than a week-long vacation to get rid of it.

This issue features David's cover article about the latest "I saw a face, so it must be a miracle" oddness, this one happening right here in Springfield. I'd like to take these people outside some time, point their eyes up at the sky, and have them count how many miraculous things they see drifting by in the clouds. Perhaps this common childhood pastime ought to be made a required activity to immunize people against getting overly excited when they see these things.

We also have a new article from Martin Kottmeyer, this time a rather brief one about a rather obscure legendary photograph. Oddly enough, after I read it, I thought a bit and began to suspect that I remembered hearing about the photograph that he discusses. Do I really remember it, or do I just imagine that I remember it? Heck if I know!

Lastly, we have another installment of David's REALLity Check column, as well as more book recommendations. ☹

Thoughts

At least every now and then, we should provide the evidence and let the reader draw his or her own conclusion. This converts obedient assimilation of new knowledge into personal discovery. When you make the finding yourself — even if you're the last person on Earth to see the light — you never forget it.

— Carl Sagan,
"No Such Thing as a Dumb Question,"
The Demon-Haunted World

I have steadily endeavoured to keep my mind free so to give up any hypothesis, however much beloved (and I cannot resist forming one on every subject), as soon as facts are shown to be opposed to it.

— Charles Darwin

There is no prescribed route to follow to arrive at a new idea. You have to make the intuitive leap. But the difference is that once you've made that intuitive leap you have to justify it by filling in the intermediate steps.

— Stephen Hawking

REALLity Check

by David Bloomberg

Well, this month we have still more overflow from last month, because there was overflow from the month before! Maybe someday the media will give me a breather, but not yet. In fact, I suspect there will be more overflow for next month.

Bad Data Causes Cancer

More bad news for proponents of the idea that electromagnetic fields (EMFs) cause cancer: a federal probe found that the main scientist whose data had been used *faked* at least some of the crucial evidence (*New York Times*, 7/24). Whoops!

According to the probe, the scientist eliminated data that did not support his conclusions. According to one of the investigators, "If he hadn't gotten these results, nobody would have paid any attention" to the claims about EMFs causing cancer.

Earlier studies had not found that EMFs could not be linked with cancer, as some had claimed, and the media have often uncritically reported (see "REALLity Check, Vol. 4, #11, Nov. 1996). This finding puts another stake through the heart of such claims.

Music to My Brain?

And also in the realm of claims that can't be backed up, the *New York Times* reported that the so-called "Mozart Effect" may fall into the same category.

This effect, which has also been promoted uncritically in the media (hmmm, I see a pattern), was supposedly that playing classical music for 2-year-olds makes them smarter. In fact, both Georgia and Florida governments were so taken by this claim that all new mothers in the former get classical CDs paid for by the taxpayers, and all state-run schools in the latter must play classical music for toddlers every day.

While I have nothing against Mozart (although I play Rush, Pink Floyd, and Queen for my toddler), I was a bit, well, skeptical of these claims. It seems I was right. The Mozart Effect was actually studied on college students, not toddlers, and the "effect" (better performance on a specific spatial imagery task) lasted only a few minutes. To make matters worse, the studies never actually involved brain research, only behavioral tests. Finally, attempts to reproduce the results have failed. Hoo-boy, that's a lot of strikes against it.

So I guess I'll just stick with classic rock instead of classical.

He Must've Had a Good Lawyer

This headline from the *State Journal-Register* (8/27) was just too good to pass up: "Court clears God of sending threats."

It seems that James and Janice Peterson, in Lake County, sent threatening letters to judges and other officials. But they

appealed because they said they were just sending God's message – after editing them for grammar and spelling. I guess English isn't God's first language, so he needed a little help in that department.

Again: No Evidence

In yet another blow against those claiming Gulf War Syndrome is a physiological (rather than psychogenic) disease, yet another presidential panel said they cannot find any reason for the illness, according to an AP article in the *Chicago Tribune* (8/28). Furthermore, they ruled out the use of depleted uranium in some U.S. weapons as a possible cause.

Of course, the National Gulf War Resource Center, a veteran's group, immediately denounced these findings as an "incomplete whitewash and failure." I wonder if it was a "failure" because it didn't agree with their preconceived notions about depleted uranium.

Pretty much the best recommendation they came up with was to track claims of symptoms and try to correlate them with possible genetic explanations. This might show, they said, why some people got sick while others did not. I'm all for this, but I still think the politicians are dancing around the most obvious answer because of the perceived stigma involved in saying this is a psychological problem and should be treated as such, at least until there is some actual evidence showing otherwise.

The Mozart Effect was actually studied in college students, not toddlers, and the "effect" lasted only a few minutes.

Slow News Day

What do you suppose the top news was in Bloomington, IL, on September 13? Crime? A huge hurricane? Politics?

Nope. Their top news story, at least according to the web page of *The Pantagraph*, was about the late **Greta Alexander**. They never explained why – it wasn't the anniversary of her death; nobody made any new predictions based on her writing; etc. But there it was, in all its credulous glory.

The article, by **Nancy Steele Brokaw**, didn't break any new ground. We've been here before, folks, and we'll probably be here again.

As usual, Brokaw recited the standard catch-phrases. "She aided police departments and search parties across the nation." "Greta rarely received pay for the police work she did." Etc. She even quoted a police officer who said "Greta Alexander has extraordinary psychic powers. That statement is based on facts." Alas, Brokaw didn't talk to any skeptics. The closest she got was admitting that Greta "was not always successful" in helping the police, giving one specific example in which she "offered little concrete help." But that example was quickly passed over and ignored.

The article noted, among other things, what a nice woman she was. Fine, I have no problem with people being nice. But

that really doesn't have anything to do with whether or not she had psychic powers.

It also noted she had appeared on the TV shows *Sightings* and *The Other Side*. While true, I wouldn't exactly describe either of these shows as paragons of media or investigative standards.

Unfortunately, as long as people continue to make claims about her, we must continue to point out the flaws. To some, this will look like we're speaking ill of the dead. But as long as they prop up a dead person as an example of great mystical powers, we must continue to point out the flaws in their arguments. So I wrote a letter to the *Pantagraph* (a copy will appear on www.reall.org). I'd appreciate it if any of our Bloomington/Normal-area residents can keep an eye out for any responses that letter might spark.

(More information on studies of Greta's claims can be found in my article: "Greta Alexander's Legacy: An Objective Look at Her Claims," September 1998, Vol. 6, #7.)

The Business Side of Risky Business

The *State Journal-Register* reported that the final lawsuit against **Monsignor Norman Goodman** has been dropped (9/14).

As I've reported previously ("Risky Business," October 1998, Vol. 6, #8; "REALLity Check," August 1999, Vol. 7, #8), Goodman, former pastor of Holy Family Catholic Church in Lincoln, IL, had been accused of with molesting a number of altar boys. They had sued him, using terms like "recently recovered memories" to describe the case. When I pointed out, in a letter to the *State Journal-Register* and the *Lincoln Courier*, that use of repressed memories in such a trial is risky, at best, I was contacted by somebody close to the case who claimed that the accusers had always known they'd been abused, but just hadn't realized the psychological affects. To me, it always looked like a way to slip around the statute of limitations, and a judge apparently agreed, dismissing all but one of the cases.

Now that final case has been dropped. In doing so, **Fred Nessler**, the attorney for the plaintiffs, noted "all the plaintiffs received a sizeable settlement from the diocese." Maybe I'm jumping to conclusions, but that looks to me like he's saying it was all about the money, not proving these things actually happened.

The diocese did, indeed, settle out of court. Alas, as we have seen too many times before (witness breast implant cases), just because somebody settles doesn't mean they are admitting guilt. Goodman has continually insisted upon his innocence, and, when talking to a reporter for this story, even referred to the false accusations made against **Cardinal Bernardin** a few years ago.

The few times I've been contacted by those associated with this case on the plaintiff's side, they have been less than helpful. At first, I received nasty messages on the REALL answering machine. Later, I got an e-mail which made claims about how they had "proven" their case (referring apparently to the settlement with the diocese) and offering to debate me, but

then not responding when I took up the offer and asked some questions. Even the person familiar with the case could not explain to me how the complaint could claim "recently recovered memories" and yet not be a recovered memory case.

But now that the suit is dropped, we'll never get to see the evidence, whatever it may have been. Some will presume Goodman to be guilty, and, according to his statements quoted in the article, he recognizes this. We, however, can only point to other cases of repressed memories and note that the scientific evidence is not on their side, and they chose to be vague in their filing and finally drop the one remaining suit because they already had gotten their money.

Another Repressed Memory Court Case

Speaking of repressed memories, our far-West correspondent, **Randy Alley**, sent in an AP article from the *Seattle Times* (9/3) about a case practically in our backyard. The article reported that a jury in Wisconsin awarded \$850,000 in damages to a woman for false memories of her childhood implanted by a psychiatrist.

The psychiatrist, **Dr. Juan Fernandez III**, was found negligent in his care of **Joan Hess**, who said he led her to believe she had more than 75 personalities and was sexually abused by a cult, including her parents, as a child. Of course, she also supposedly had sex with animals, saw babies killed and eaten, the whole nine yards. Hess' attorney said, "In my view, there is no defense for this kind of therapy." MSNBC further quoted him as saying, "If that means that this is now a message that this stuff has to stop, I hope the message is delivered." Well, I hope so too, but that message has been sent numerous times and some people still keep sending it back marked, "Return to sender."

Who Knew?

Randy also sent a short blurb from the same paper, same date, on a woman who worked for the Los Angeles County Department of Public Social Services, and who pleaded no contest to using her boss's phones to make \$120,000 in calls to a psychic hotline. Yes, you read it right – *one hundred and twenty thousand* dollars!

She was placed on five years probation and required to pay \$98,000 restitution (I'm not quite sure how \$98,000 makes up for \$120,000, but I'm not a lawyer).

She said she made about 2500 calls to the hotline in a two-year period. Apparently, nobody ever mentioned handcuffs in her future.

Nursing and Nonsense

I have to admit, I was a little shocked to see the *State Journal-Register* featuring an article in their "Health" section on nurses who use "mind/body" methods (8/30). After all, this is the same paper who took St. John's Hospital to task for their use of unscientific methods like this. In looking more closely, I

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While Jim Wrestles with the Thunderbird....

by Martin Kottmeyer

It was twenty minutes before airtime and Marlin Perkins was in the Lincoln Park Zoo running through a quick rehearsal for the upcoming edition of *Zooparade*, his 1950s show about animals that was the forerunner to *Wild Kingdom*. He was planning to show how the venom of a timber rattlesnake was extracted and he was giving the cameramen an idea of where they should be to get their shot. He later realized that he didn't really need to be doing this with the actual snake, but hindsight is twenty-twenty. He began to handle the rattler but in the rush of things he failed to get a proper grip on it. The snake turned and sank a fang into his left middle finger.

One of the keepers quickly put it back in the cage and Perkins grabbed a knife from his pocket to open up the puncture and suck out the venom. More cuts and suction cups were applied, this being the standard emergency procedure of the time. He was quickly taken to the hospital and another person had to take over. The substitute did the venom extraction and mentioned the very same snake bit Perkins earlier. Perkins said it was the very worst accident that ever happened during the run of *Zooparade*. It took him three weeks before he was released from the hospital.

The story doesn't end there. As Perkins tells it, "An interesting after-reaction to this episode is the fact that even today I meet people who in all seriousness tell me that they sat there in front of their television receivers and watched that rattlesnake sink his fangs into my finger. At first, I used to correct them and explain I wasn't on the show that day, that the bite occurred before we were on the air. But these people are so sure in their own minds that they have seen this thing happen that I now just let it pass and don't try to correct them. Perhaps this shows the power of suggestion." (Marlin Perkins, *My Wild Kingdom*, E.P. Dutton, 1982, pp. 118-9)

This pleasant little anecdote I guess could be called false memory spontaneously generated. What sprang to my mind on reading this was the longstanding Thunderbird photo mystery. I first heard about it in one of Daniel Cohen's paperbacks *Monsters, Giants, and Little Men from Mars* (Dell, 1975, pp. 172-8.) People swear they have seen a photo of a Thunderbird killed in 1886 out around Tombstone, Arizona and tacked up on a barn. Six men with outstretched arms provide scale for the size of the monster. Researchers have sifted through back issue files of numerous magazines in hopes of finding it, but the helpful leads by all the witnesses never pan out.

The saga of the Thunderbird photo was revived in the pages of *Strange* magazine around 1990 and has generated recurring comment by people who try to provide the lead that will bring the photo to light again. (Issues #5, #6, #7, #11, #12, #15, #16, #19) Reading one of those articles, I spent a couple days rummaging through issue runs of *Beyond*, *Fate*, *Saga*, and *Pursuit* and found nothing. I didn't find it and admit it was probably a longshot given that my collections were far from extensive. Yet the continuing failure to find it has

prompted others to thoughts that this is an odd twist on false memory syndrome, specifically David W. Dera and J. Ellsworth Weaver in *Strange* issue #16 (1995).

It is notoriously difficult to prove a negative and a hazard to proclaim one. State it categorically and the next day the devilish thing will pop up in somebody's attic, you fully expect. Still, false memories evidently do happen out in the wild without the assistance of therapists. The unreality of the Thunderbird photo is thinkable. ☹



The Newlywed Game

By David Bloomberg

The story Martin relates here about people who are absolutely certain they saw something that they couldn't have seen is similar to an urban legend that has been around for quite some time, and was recently debunked in *TV Guide* (7/24/99).

The supposed incident happened on the Newlywed Game in the 1970s, when host Bob Eubanks supposedly asked contestants for the strangest place they'd ever made whoopee. According to the legend, one contestant gave, as *TV Guide* said, "a shocking reply of uh, great anatomical accuracy."

In fact, numerous people claim they have seen this particular clip, and are absolutely sure of it. The John & Liz show on WYMG, a couple months ago, even had a listener bring this up and several others called in to say that they, too, had seen the clip. The problem is, as *TV Guide* notes, "This wasn't live television. This wasn't TV in the outlandish age of *South Park*." Even if somebody *had* said it, there is no way a 1970s TV show would have aired it!

Simply put, it didn't happen. It was not on the show. None of these people who absolutely believe they have seen it ever saw it. It is an urban legend, but one that has somehow caused false memories of a non-event to form in the minds of some people. ☹

Book Recommendations

By David Bloomberg

Ok, at the sarcastic urging of Editor Wally, I have changed my scale to go from 0 to 5 stars. So there. [Who says one man can't make a difference? — Ed.]

The Meme Machine, by Susan Blackmore (Oxford University Press, \$25): Blackmore takes Gould's idea of a "meme" and goes into greater detail. A meme is the replicator of ideas (while a gene is a biological replicator), according to this theory. She provides some interesting ideas, such as brain size expansion being fueled by memes in early human days. There is certainly some speculation, but she uses some good scientific procedure in setting out ways her theory can be proven or disproven. The reader might want to ignore the last few pages, which get a bit weird. As we found in our July meeting, which featured a videotaped lecture by Blackmore on this topic, there is some heated debate about her theories. Overall, call it ★★ ★

The Science of Star Wars, by Jeanne Cavelos (St. Martin's Press, \$22.95): This is a book that perhaps should never have been written. By the author's own admission, Star Wars is a fantasy tale, not hard science fiction. So why follow in the footsteps of others who have written similar books about science fiction — and done so better? The author uses some horrible "experts" who promote pseudoscience as if it were real, and mentions failed parapsychological experiments as if they could tell us something about "The Force." If you want good books on this type of subject, check our Lawrence Krauss' *The Physics of Star Trek* and *Beyond Star Trek*. ★

Little Green Men, by Christopher Buckley (Random House, \$24.95): The only (self-described) fiction book in the list — at least for now — Buckley's novel is a hysterical parody of Washington, D.C., politicians and pundits, but an even funnier look at ufology. The most unbelievable characters are based on real-life ufology leaders, and whether you're familiar with these characters or not, you'll enjoy the humor. ★★ ★

Rocks of Ages: Science and Religion in the Fullness of Life, by Stephen Jay Gould (Ballantine, \$18.95): Gould, well known for tackling creationism among other things, addresses the areas of science and religion. His premise is that they can co-exist by respecting a principle he calls "NOMA" — Non-Overlapping Magisteria (or domains of authority in teaching). He addresses historical problems and creation/evolution as well. Creationism, he says, is not a battle between religion and science, but a political battle between those who favor NOMA and those who oppose it. ★★ ★

Eat, Drink, & Be Merry: America's Doctor Tells You Why the Health Experts Are Wrong, by Dr. Dean Edell with David Schrieberg (HarperCollins, \$25): Edell is known for his radio show and TV news spots, where he gives out honest and

straightforward advice on medical questions. This book runs along the same lines. He forthrightly discusses fad diets, alternative medicine, media portrayals, and other health topics. He bases his answers in science, which he calls, "that force which has lifted us from the dust and the darkness." He pulls no punches — even at the media, his own bread and butter. If I could recommend that a random person read just one health book, this would be it. I think it deserves to be a classic. ★★ ★

The Demon-Haunted World: Science as a Candle in the Dark, by Carl Sagan

(Ballantine, trade paperback, \$14): As most of you know, this is not a new book. Rather it is one I started when it came out, some 4 years ago, and finally finished just recently. But it is a classic. It should be required reading for every college student (or maybe even high school). It lays out the tenets of skepticism and critical thinking, using ongoing examples to put things in proper perspective. Sagan was truly at his best here, perhaps in part because he knew it would be his last word on the subject. ★★ ★



(Continued from page 5)

saw that it wasn't written by anybody on the SJR staff, but was distributed by the Religion News Service. Hmmmm... And the big photo at the top of the story showed people performing Reiki ("a form of therapy using healing touch") on a guy. All in all, it didn't look good.

Most of the article focused on nursing schools that are teaching spirituality. In fact, a good part of it really didn't say anything too terrible. It talked about integrating spirituality, such as meditation or religion, with treatment. Ok, nothing much there to complain about.

Ah, but it also discusses an alternative therapy class, which the teacher said would "connect commonly practiced alternative and Eastern medical techniques — such as acupuncture or Reiki ... — to their religious roots." I think they lost me there. I mean, either the stuff works or it doesn't, no matter what its "roots" are.

But, as we should all expect, the article didn't bother to really discuss whether these treatments actually work or not. It's apparently more important to connect them to their religious roots than to scientific medicine. ☹

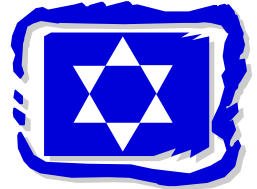
Our Next Meeting

Holocaust Revisionism
Honest Inquiry or Thinly Veiled Hate?
Presented by David Gehrig

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