

All About... Nothing

Zman Dedicates an Entire Article to Absolutely Nothing

Read about the man who saved the world by doing... **nothing**. Visit the town of **Nothing**. Learn about people who are paid to accomplish... **nothing**. The man whose expenses are **nothing**. The one who was arrested for driving under the influence when his blood alcohol level was **nothing**. A \$300,000 price tag for a drug that does **nothing**; \$39.99 for a machine that does **nothing**. How the government spends our hard-earned tax money on... **nothing**.

What existed before Creation? Nothing.

We know that *Hashem* created the world from nothing, a unique event. A fundamental law of physics called "Mass-energy equivalence" states that mass and energy are merely two different measurements of the same underlying quantity (represented by Einstein's famous equation, $E=mc^2$). Due to the conservation of mass and energy, no matter or energy can truly be created or destroyed—they only change form. We know that this principle began only after the creation of the world from nothing, and that, of course, *Hashem* remains above scientific principles.

In other words, nothingness pre-existed the world.

We use the term "nothing" all the time. "He went on and on saying nothing" describes our complaint about a speaker or lecturer who does not seem to be enriching our knowledge. "It was nothing" describes, for those fortunate enough to have missed it, our reaction to an insignificant event.

In Yiddish there is a common expression to underscore how worthless or unimportant something is, referring to it as "*gornisht mit gornisht*" (nothing with nothing). Everyone knows that $0+0=0$, so the idiom is itself a way of saying... nothing.

Unless we put forth effort to avoid this trap, our daily lives may be filled with nothing. Think of all the political rankling that leads to nothing. The Middle East peace talks that have for the last 65 years brought about nothing. The many welfare organizations that make a big deal about doing nothing (we are not impugning, of course, those that do accomplish much). Then there are the thieves who make off with huge sums of wealth, yet are caught with nothing; Saddam Hussein's weapons of mass destruction, of which we found nothing. And the list goes on.

There are many ways of saying "nothing." Yet the word itself is a conundrum. Nothing is a concept that describes a specific state, so how can that state be called "nothing"? We'll let you ponder that for a while as we move on to more of nothing.



Emblem of the Nothing company in Amsterdam.



Sign warns motorists leaving Fort Irwin, California, that there is nothing for the next 22 miles. Because of the unusual wording, this sign has repeatedly been stolen by collectors.

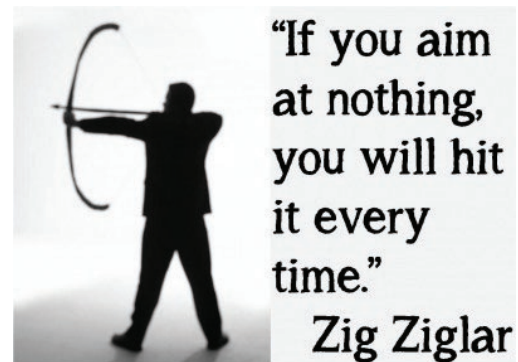
Join us, dear readers, as we share with you various incidents and episodes, facts and concepts that have to do with nothing (or perhaps, more precisely, with the word, "nothing").

Nothing Doing

Have you ever heard of a man named Stanislav Yevgrafovich Petrov? Probably not. Yet it is very possible that you owe your life to him.

Let me explain. Petrov, a former Soviet army officer, didn't do anything extraordinary. In fact, he did nothing. But that is precisely the reason why he is recognized (by those who recognize him) as a hero.

In 1983, Petrov held a pivotal position as a lieutenant colonel, highest-ranking officer at a station that tracked Soviet satellites above the United States. His job was to look out for any signs that the United States of



When you aim for nothing, you will always succeed... sort of.



A peace group in London carries out a one-day campaign annually, encouraging people to buy nothing that day and enjoy the peace instead.

America was attacking the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics. We're talking about nuclear attacks, of course. Should the spy satellites notice America launching nuclear missiles against Russia, it would be Petrov's job to press a red button to alert Soviet nuclear missile sites to launch their own nuclear missiles in counterattack.

On September 26, 1983, shortly after midnight, Petrov sat in his seat as commanding officer in his secret bunker, code-named Serpuchav-15. Suddenly, the alarms sounded and warning lights began flashing on all sides. A large screen above the red button flashed the word "START." The computer systems in the bunker had determined that the United States had just launched a nuclear offensive against the Soviet Union.

Of course, it was a false alarm, but how would Petrov have known that? This was in the early Reagan years, when the US shifted to a very defiant stance against the

threat of communism both in the Americas and in Europe. The US president spoke openly about the "Evil Empire" under Soviet communist control. The popular name of his "Star Wars" missile defense plan only underscored the negative implications of the nickname by which he referred to the USSR.

Non-proliferation and disarmament talks had disintegrated and the US was openly arming itself more and more. Consider also the constant stream of anti-American propaganda that the Soviets were fed. Why shouldn't Petrov have believed that the crazy capitalists in America had decided to do the unthinkable and launch a nuclear Armageddon?

Some historians believe that the danger in this situation was much greater than that of the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962. By now, the two countries were exhibiting much more acrimonious relations, and the weapons of mass destruction they possessed were far more sophisticated than they had been during the 1960s. The combined nuclear warheads of the two superpowers totaled over 20,000! That would be sufficient to destroy both countries 100 times over. The significant difference between the Cuban Missile Crisis and the present one, though, was that this time around the public was unaware of the danger.

Looking back and examining the information now available, a chill goes up one's spine. The Soviet leaders were truly convinced that the United States was in the process of pushing the world over the brink. Even Ronald Reagan didn't believe that the situation was as tenuous as it truly was, as he believed that the Soviets shared his view of America as a stable nation that would not attack first.

Just two years earlier, in 1981, then-chairman of the KGB Yuri Andropov (who was now Premier of the Soviet Union) had issued a secret directive to his agents around the world to look out for the slightest sign that the US was preparing for a nuclear attack. The overseas KGB offices knew that the

