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No Way, No How, No Matter What

The Word's Worth

Michele A. Berdy's The Word's Worth

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Спору нет: I'm not arguing!

Now that we've gotten a handle on how to say нет (no), from adamant to jokey to resigned with some snark thrown in for spice, it's time to go over some нет expressions. Some of them are easy to figure out, but others don't make much sense at first glance. What does truth have to do with feet? Why are we talking about courts? And why would you think I want to fight with you? So confusing!

And let's start with something that always confuses me: similar нет expressions, for example, свести на нет and сойти на нет.

Свести на нет is used when some kind of mishap or unfortunate act cancels out something's benefits: Случайно упавшая с ручки капля чернил могла свести на нет усилия целого

дня (A drop of ink that accidently falls from the pen can wipe out the work of an entire day).

Сойти (or the imperfective form сходить) на нет is used when some action runs its course and comes to nothing. С годами надежда всё слабела, сходила на нет (Over the years hope got weaker and weaker and faded away to nothing). This can be the result of what is now called ghosting: Я не позвонил, она не позвонила, и всё как-то само собой сошло на нет (I didn't call her, she didn't call me, and it all just died out on its own).

A few нет expressions are all about the absence of something. For example, подступа нет means that there isn't access to a thing, place or person. As far as people are concerned, подступа нет suggests that the person is difficult in some way — unfriendly, proud, self-important — and it's hard to find the right way to approach him psychologically. –Ты собираешься позвонить профессору? –Да, но не сейчас. Подступа к нему нет. ("Are you planning on calling the professor?" "Yes, but now right now. I don't know the right approach.")

By the way, the answer to that is, of course, what one of my friends always says: Лесть грубой не бывает (Flattery will get you everywhere, more literally "you can never be too heavy-handed with flattery").

Another useful expression of absence is спору нет (no argument). This is what you say when your Significant Other thought that experimental play sounded good when you were buying the tickets but now staying at home to binge watch "Line of Duty" sounds much better. Спору нет! Что заказать — пиццу или суши? (You'll get no argument from me. What should we order in – pizza or sushi?)

This is also useful when you want to soothe a cranky Significant Other in a mood to moan about the Good Old Days: Конечно, раньше реки были мокрее ⊠ спору нет (Of course, in the old days rivers were wetter. That goes without saying.)

If your Significant Other continues to be cranky, you might use the expression в ногах правды нет, which sounds like "there is no truth in your legs" but just means "sit down" (there's no point in standing around): Прошу за стол, в ногах правды нет (Take a load off and sit down to eat!)

When things are a mess, you can say нет ни складу, ни ладу (something like "no sense and no harmony"). In some contexts the English phrase "no rhyme or reason" might be a decent translation: Он втайне мне, как лучшему другу, показывал свои стихи... в них не было ни складу, ни ладу, ни смысла, ни элементарной грамотности (Since I was his best friend, he would show me in secret his poems... there was no rhyme or reason, no sense, not even basic literacy.) This can refer to anything that is disorganized, even someone's poor housekeeping skills: Ввела в дом мужа, надеялась, что он станет ей опорой, помощником, кормильцем, а в доме ни складу ни ладу (She got herself a husband, hoping that he'd be her support, her helper, her breadwinner, but everything at home is at sixes and sevens.)

Let's say you're the neighbor of that woman and her disorganized husband. Despite the mess their finances are in, despite the leaky sink in the bathroom and the heater that shuts off in the middle of the night, she loves her husband anyway and knows that he will never change.

With a shoulder shrug and a sigh, she uses a phrase that sounds like “no court will change a ‘no’: Ну, что ж делать, на нет и суда нет (Well, what can you do? That’s just the way it is, and I might as well accept it). Муж мне говорил, что не было доходов — на нет и суда нет! (My husband said he didn’t have any income. Well, what can’t be cured must be endured).

But when those neighbors suddenly get their act together, pay off their debts, grow their business, invest their savings properly, you can express your amazement with this charming no phrase: Нет, ты только подумай! It means: Can you believe it? Just imagine that!

I’m not really sure what that нет is doing in there — it’s as if the speaker were telling the story of Masha and Pasha’s great reversal of fortunes and burst out, “No! I just can’t believe it.” Нет, ты только подумай, как всё совпадает (I mean, it’s just unbelievable how everything falls into place.)

If your Significant Other doesn’t quite buy the instant change of personality and wants to probe a bit when the neighbors come over, you can put your foot down with Нет, уж извини... This is something like a 19th-century Russian way of saying, “Sorry, not sorry.” Нет, уж извини, замолчать придётся тебе (Sorry, bud, but you’ve got to keep your mouth shut). Meanwhile, the neighbor’s wife has forgiven her husband for a lot, but not everything: Я много ему прощала, но простить предательство — нет, уж это извини! (I have forgiven him for a lot, but forgive betrayal? Never! That’s asking too much!)

Now he says he’s a changed man and will never do it again. But she doesn’t believe it: Нет чтобы люди так изменились (it just doesn’t happen that people change so radically). Нет чтобы is used when something never happens, however much you might want it to. Нет чтобы кто присмотрел за домом пока человек в беде (No one ever looks in when a person is having a hard time). Нет чтобы прийти да жене помочь (You’d think he’d come and help his wife, but no, never gonna happen).

And your Significant Other commiserates with another wonderful Russian double negative that English turns into a positive: Нет недостатка ленивых негодяев (There are always plenty of lazy jerks!)

Ain’t that the truth.

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