

Sleep in Talmudic times

Source Sheet by Zahavit Shalev

Is sleep a pleasure or a waste of time? What's the difference between sleeping and napping? What is segmented sleep and why did everyone do it in pre-industrial times?

Moderation in all things

Gittin 70a

Eight actions are **difficult** for the body and the soul to handle **in large** amounts **and** are **beneficial in small** amounts, **and they are:** Traveling on the **road**, engaging in the **way of the world**, i.e., engaging in sexual intercourse, having **wealth, work, drinking wine, sleep, hot water, and bloodletting.**

גיטין ע' א

שמונה רובן קשה ומיעוטן יפה ואלו הן
דרך ודרך ארץ עושר ומלאכה יין ושינה
חמין והקזת דם

Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai's good habits

Sukkah 28a

Apropos the character traits of Rabbi Eliezer, the Gemara cites character traits of his teacher. The Sages **said about Rabban Yoḥanan ben Zakkai**, the teacher of Rabbi Eliezer: **In all his days he never engaged in idle conversation; and he never walked four cubits without engaging in Torah study and without donning phylacteries; and no person ever preceded him into the study hall; and he never slept in the study hall, neither substantial sleep nor a brief nap and he never contemplated matters of Torah in alleyways filthy with human excrement, as doing so is a display of contempt for the Torah; and he never left anyone in the study hall and exited; and no person ever found him sitting and silent, i.e., inactive; rather, he was always sitting and studying; and only he opened the door for his students, disregarding his own eminent standing; and he never said anything that he did not hear from his teacher; and he never said to his students that the time has arrived to arise and leave the study hall except on Passover eves, when they**

סוכה כ"ח א

אמרו עליו על רבן יוחנן בן זכאי מימיו
לא שח שיחת חולין ולא הלך ד' אמות
בלא תורה ובלא תפילין ולא קדמו אדם
בבית המדרש ולא ישן בבית המדרש לא
שינת קבע ולא שינת עראי ולא הרהר
במבואות המטונפות ולא הניח אדם בבית
המדרש ויצא ולא מצאו אדם יושב ודומם
אלא יושב ושונה ולא פתח אדם דלת
לתלמידיו אלא הוא בעצמו ולא אמר דבר
שלא שמע מפי רבו מעולם ולא אמר הגיע
עת לעמוד מבית המדרש חוץ מערבי
פסחים וערבי יום הכפורים וכן היה ר'
אליעזר תלמידו נוהג אחריו

were obligated to sacrifice the Paschal lamb, and **Yom Kippur** eves, when there is a mitzva to eat and drink abundantly. **And Rabbi Eliezer, his student, accustomed** himself to model his conduct **after his** example.

Rabbi Zeira's good habits

Megillah 28a

The Gemara presents a similar incident: **Rabbi Zeira was once asked by his disciples: In the merit of which virtue were you blessed with longevity? He said to them: In all my days, I was never angry inside my house** with members of my household who acted against my wishes. **Nor did I ever walk ahead of someone who was a greater Torah scholar than me. Nor did I ever meditate** upon words of Torah **in filthy alleyways**, as doing so is a disgrace to the Torah. **Nor did I ever walk four cubits without** meditating on words of Torah **or without** wearing phylacteries. **Nor did I ever sleep in a study hall, neither a deep sleep or a brief nap. Nor did I ever rejoice when my fellow stumbled. Nor did I ever call my fellow by his derogatory nickname [hanikhato]. And some say that he said: I never called my fellow by his nickname [hakhinato], i.e., even one that is not derogatory.**

מגילה כ"ח א

שאלו תלמידיו את ר' זירא במה הארכת ימים אמר להם מימי לא הקפדתי בתוך ביתי ולא צעדתי בפני מי שגדול ממני ולא הרהרתי במבואות המטונפות ולא הלכתי ד"א בלא תורה ובלא תפילין ולא ישנתי בבית המדרש לא שינת קבע ולא שינת עראי ולא ששתי בתקלת חבירי ולא קראתי לחבירי (בחניכתו) ואמרי לה (בחכינתו):

What is dozing?

Pesachim 120b

GEMARA: [a discussion about eating the Avikomen] **What are the circumstances of dozing?**

פסחים ק"כ ב

גמ' רבי יוסי אומר נתנמנמו יאכלו נרדמו לא יאכלו היכי דמי נתנמנמו

Rav Ashi said: One is asleep but not asleep, awake but not awake, when, if they call him, he will answer, but he is unable to provide a reasonable answer. And when they later inform him of what happened, he remembers it.

אמר רב אשי נים ולא נים תיר ולא תיר כגון דקרי ליה ועני ולא ידע לאהדורי סברא וכי מדכרו ליה מדכר

The Gemara cites a related episode: **Abaye was sitting before Rabba, and he saw that Rabba was dozing off** after he had begun to eat the final obligatory piece of *matza*.

אביי הוה יתיב קמיה דרבה חזא דקא נמנמ

He said to him: Is the Master sleeping?

אמר ליה מינמ קא נאים מר אמר ליה

Rabba said to him: I am dozing, and we learned in the mishna: If they dozed, they may eat from the Paschal lamb, but if they fell fast asleep they may not eat from it.

מינומי קא מנמנם ותנן נתנמנמו יאכלו
נרדמו לא יאכלו:

How long is a nap? (1)

Sukkah 26a

The Gemara asks: **And how long is a brief nap? Rami bar Yehezkel taught: Equivalent to walking one hundred cubits.**

סוכה כ"ו א

וכמה שינת עראי תני רמי בר יחזקאל כדי
הילוך מאה אמה

How long is a nap? (2)

Sukkah 26b

Apropos the duration of a brief nap, the Gemara cites that **Rav said: It is prohibited for a person to sleep during the day longer than the duration of the sleep of a horse. And how long is the duration of the sleep of a horse? It is sixty breaths long.**

סוכה כ"ו ב

אמר רב אסור לאדם לישן ביום יותר
משינת הסוס וכמה שינת הסוס שיתין
נשמי

Abaye said: The sleep of the Master, Rabba, is like that of Rav, and that of Rav is like the sleep of Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi. And that of Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi is like that of King David, and that of King David is like that of a horse. And that of a horse is sixty breaths.

אמר אביי שנתייה דמר כדרב ודרב כדרבי
ודרבי כדדוד ודדוד כדסוסיא ודסוסיא
שיתין נשמי

Sixty breaths of a horse: some say it is approximately three minutes (Rabbi Menahem Azaria of Pano.) Others hold that it is half an hour. Yet others hold that it is three hours, and still others say it is six hours. (Rashi.)

Sukkah 26b

The Gemara relates: **Abaye would sleep during the day for a period equivalent to the time it takes to enter from Pumbedita to Bei Kuvei.**

סוכה כ"ו ב

אביי הוה ניים כדמעיל מפומבדיתא לבי
כובי

Rav Yosef said of him "How long will you sleep, sluggard? When will you arise from your sleep?" (Proverbs 6:9).

קרי עליה רב יוסף (משלי ו, ט) עד מתי
עצל תשכב מתי תקום משנתך

Night - a good time to sleep or to study?

Eruvin 65a

Rav Yehuda said: Night was created only for sleep.

עירובין ס"ה א

אמר רב יהודה לא איברי ליליא אלא
לשינתא

Rabbi Shimon ben Lakish said: The moon was created only for Torah study by its light.

אמר רבי שמעון בן לקיש לא איברי
סיהרא אלא לגירסא

When people said to Rabbi Zeira: Your teachings are exceedingly sharp, he said: I derived them during the daytime.

אמרי ליה לרבי זירא מחדדן שמעתך אמר
להו דיממי נינהו

Rav Hisda's daughter said to her father, Rav Hisda: Doesn't the Master wish to sleep a little?

אמרה ליה ברתיה דרב חסדא לרב חסדא
לא בעי מר מינן פורתא

He said to her: Days that are long but short will soon arrive, and we will sleep a lot.

אמר לה השתא אתו יומי דאריכי וקטיני
ונינום טובא

Rav Nahman bar Yitzhak said: We, Torah scholars, are day workers,

אמר רב נחמן בר יצחק אנן פועלי דיממי

The Gemara relates that **Rav Aha bar Ya'akov would borrow and repay.**

אנן רב אחא בר יעקב יזיף ופרע

Daytime naps - what's your excuse?

Bava Metzia 83b

The Gemara relates a story that involves rising early. **Rabbi Elazar, son of Rabbi Shimon, found a certain officer [parhagavna] whose responsibility was to arrest thieves. He said to the officer: How are you able to arrest them? Aren't they likened to beasts, as it is written: "You make darkness and it is night, in which all the beasts of the forest creep forth" (Psalms 104:20)? There are those who say that he said to him a proof from this verse: "He lies in wait in a secret place as a lion in his lair, he lies in wait to catch the poor; he catches the poor when he draws him up in his net" (Psalms 10:9). Since the wicked are so devious, perhaps you apprehend the righteous and leave the wicked alone? The officer said to him: But what should I do? It is the king's edict [harmana] that I must arrest thieves, and I am perform-ing my job to the best of my ability.**

בבא מציעא פ"ג ב

ר' אלעזר ב"ר שמעון אשכח להווא
פרהגונא דקא תפיס גנבי אמר ליה היכי
יכלת להו לאו כחיותא מתילי דכתיב בו
תרמוש כל חיתו יער איכא דאמרי מהאי
קרא קאמר ליה (תהלים י, ט) יארב
במסתר כאריה בסוכו דלמא שקלת צדיקי
ושבקת רשיעי א"ל ומאי אעביד הרמנא
דמלכא הוא

Rabbi Elazar, son of Rabbi Shimon, **said** to him: **Come and I will instruct you how you should do it. At the fourth hour of the day enter the tavern. When you see someone drinking wine, holding his cup in his hand, and dozing, inquire about his background.**

If he is a Torah scholar and is dozing, having risen **early** to study.

If he is a daytime laborer, assume that he rose **early** and **performed his work.**

And if his work is at night drawing copper wires.

And if none of these, he is a thief - arrest him.

אמר תא אגמרך היכי תעביד עול בארבע
שעי לחנותא כי חזית איניש דקא שתי
חמרא וקא נקיט כסא בידיה וקא מנמנמ
שאול עילויה

אי צורבא מרבנן הוא וניים אקדומי קדים
לגרסיה

אי פועל הוא קדים קא עביד עבידתיה

ואי עבידתיה בליליא רדודי רדיד

ואי לא גנבא הוא ותפס

Segmented and biphasic sleep

“Sleep We Have Lost: Pre-Industrial Slumber in the British Isles” by Roger Ekirch (2001)

Until the modern era, upto an hour or more of quiet wakefulness midway through the night interrupted the rest of most Western Europeans []. Families rose from their beds to urinate, smoke tobacco and even visit close neighbours. Remaining abed many persons also made love, prayed, and, most important, reflected on the dreams that typically preceeded waking from their first sleep. (p344)

Wild Nights: How Taming Sleep Created Our Restless World by Benjamin Reiss (Basic Books 2017)

So perhaps what we have seen in the past two hundred years is a small blip in the long history of sleep. Sleep, for most of human history, was social; it was generally distributed in several chunks throughout the day and night; and its duration and patterning varied greatly depending on the season, natural lighting, the availability of resources, and other environmental cues. Only since the industrial revolution has sleep become privatized, packaged into one standard time slot, and removed from nature’s great rhythmic cycles of temperature and light. (p56)

