The Minhag of Not Sleeping on Rosh HaShana

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We do many things on Rosh HaShana that are intended to serve as a good omen. We enjoy apples dipped in honey, eat various simanim (symbols) and partake in luscious meals to demonstrate that we are beginning the New Year in an auspicious manner. Most of us find great meaning and enjoyment when we partake in the simanim of Rosh HaShana. There is one minhag of Rosh HaShana however, that many find to be difficult if not oppressive. RAMA (ca. 1530-1572) teaches that one should not sleep on Rosh HaShana.

There are those who are careful not to eat nuts on Rosh HaShana since the Hebrew word for nut, egoz, has the same numeric value as the word cheit - sin. Additionally, our practice is not to sleep on Rosh HaShana and this is a proper practice.

Rama Orach Chaim 583:2

Source
RAMA was not the first to note that it is improper to sleep on Rosh HaShana. Rav Yehoshua ibn Shuib (ca. 1280-1340) a student of the Rashba in his derasha for Rosh HaShana quotes a Yerushalmi that it is forbidden to sleep on Rosh HaShana. Although it is highly unlikely that RAMA was in possession of the derashot of ibn Shuib, the same Yerushalmi is cited by RAMA in his Darkei Moshe as the source for the prohibition to sleep on Rosh HaShana:

16 Much of the material for this article was gleaned from two excellent articles in the journal Ohr Yisrael. Rabbi Gedalia Oberlander’s Issur Sheina B’Rosh HaShana (volume 25 page 176-187) and Rabbi Eliezer Brodt’s Issur haSheina bRosh HaShana (volume 29 pages 146-163)

17 The derashot of R’ Yehoshua ibn Shuib were first printed in Constantinople in 1523. The first printed Eastern European edition was Crackow 1573-1575 after RAMA was no longer alive.
The Yerushalmi in Rosh HaShana teaches that one who sleeps on Rosh HaShana will have sleepy mazal. Therefore we are careful not to sleep on Rosh HaShana.  
Darchei Moshe Orach Chaim 583

Many have noted, however, that this Yerushalmi does not appear in the versions of Yerushalmi that we possess. It is entirely possible that it was found in the Yerushalmi on Kodshim which is missing, or the Yerushalmi on Nidda that is incomplete. Alternatively, some suggest that Rishonim refer to Midrashim that originate in Eretz Yisrael as Yerushalmi. A further suggestion posits that there was a book which many Rishonim drew upon titled the Sefer haYerushalmi and when citations are quoted from a Yerushalmi that we do not have, they originate in this work.

Scope of and Reasons for the Practice

Whatever the source of the custom or prohibition not to sleep on Rosh HaShana is, it is worth noting the scope of this injunction. The simple reading of all the early sources is that the prohibition extends all day. Some contend that the practice only applies in the morning of Rosh HaShana; in the afternoon however it is permissible to sleep. Although there were some who woke at dawn (alot hashachar) so as not to sleep during any of the daylight on Rosh HaShana, common practice is to continue one’s sleep after day break. Chaye Adam states that one should sit down to learn after lunch; if he or she feels tired they may put their heads down to

It is possible that there are earlier echoes of the prohibition to sleep on Rosh HaShana. In an article in Moriah 17, 199-200, page 106, Rabbi Yisrael Mordechai Peles, notes that the Etz Chaim of London (a contemporary of Maharam of Rottenberg) had a text (You are faithful to revive the sleepy) rather than (revive the dead) on the first day of Rosh HaShana. This may indicate that not sleeping at least on the first day of Rosh HaShana has a slightly earlier source.

18 It is worth noting that the Yerushalmi, as cited by R’ Yehoshua ibn Shuib, states that it is prohibited to sleep on Rosh HaShana. RAMA’s version however cites that many are cautious not to sleep and his formulation in the Mapa on Shulchan Aruch is clear that it is customary not to sleep.

19 Maharitz Chajes, Megilla 12b, cites many quotations from Yerushalmi that are not found in our editions and refers to his longer works where he makes the suggestion listed above.

20 This possibility was set forward by Avigdor Aptowitzer in his introduction to the RAVYA. It was challenged however by Rabbi Dovid Dublitzky in his more recent edition to the RAVYA (Introduction, page 12). However, Yaackov Zussman in Tarbitz volume 65 feels he uncovered fragments of a Yerushalmi of German origin that may be part of the Sefer Yerushalmi that Aptowitzer refers to. It remains unclear however, how a Spanish Rishon like R’ Yehoshua ibn Shuib would have this German manuscript of the Yerushalmi.

21 It is almost universally assumed that the prohibition or practice not to sleep applies only during the day of Rosh HaShana and not at night. Only the Divrei Chaim of Sans is cited by Oberlander in his article, page 187, as not sleeping at night. A simple reading of the Yerushalmi cited would indicate that one should not sleep the entirety of Rosh HaShana; at a bare minimum one should refrain from sleeping at night on Rosh HaShana as we are accustomed to doing on Shavuot. See Mishneh Halachot vol. 13 #80.

22 Magen Avraham 583:6 cites that Arizal said it is permitted to sleep after chatzot (mid-day). Although some argue that Arizal was permitted to sleep since he attained remarkable spiritual heights through sleep and we would not be permitted to do so, the simple reading of Magen Avraham is that Arizal said one may sleep, not simply that he himself slept. This deflates much of the argument.

23 See Mateh Efraim 584:1 and comment of R’ Shlomo Zalman Auerbach in Halichot Shlomo page 215 note 33.
sleep a bit. Many understand that Chayei Adam is permitting one to sleep at the table but not in a bed. Many cite Noheg Katzon Yosef that the minhag applies only on the first day of Rosh HaShana, not on the second day.24

BACH notes that one who reads the derashot of R’ Yehoshua ibn Shuib carefully will notice three separate reasons for the practice not to sleep on Rosh HaShana. The first reason mentioned is based on the Rambam’s famous comment (Hilchot Shofar 3:4) that the shofar of Rosh HaShana is meant to wake us from our slumber so that we do teshuva. One who sleeps is clearly oblivious to the meaning of the shofar. The other reasons cited are that it is improper to sleep while one’s deeds are being investigated. Shaat hadin (the moment of judgment) is not an appropriate time to catch some z’s. Finally, sleep implies laziness, an attribute that is very far from the ideal we try to portray on Rosh HaShana.

It would seem that those who adopt the first reason should not sleep all day on Rosh HaShana, as the entire day is termed (Bamidbar 29:1) yom teruah (a day of blowing the shofar) in the Torah. Those who adopt the second reason, that it is improper to sleep at the time of din, would be permitted to sleep after midday, since at that time the din is less intense. The practice to continue sleeping beyond daybreak adopts the third approach. One can argue that only going to sleep falls under the category of laziness; one who remains asleep is tired, not lazy. According to all the above-mentioned reasons, sleeping at night is permitted, since it is not the time of shofar or the time of din and sleeping at night is the way of the world and most certainly does not convey laziness.

Those Who Slept on Rosh HaShana

In addition to the Arizal and Chayei Adam who minimize the scope of the practice not to sleep on Rosh HaShana, there were those who slept regularly and completely disregarded this practice. BACH cites that Maharam of Rottenburg (1215-1293) slept on Rosh HaShana.25

MAHARAM was accustomed to sleeping as he did on other holidays.

BACH Orach Chaim 597

It is possible that MAHARAM slept because he did not have the Yerushalmi that is cited as the source of this practice. Alternatively, it is possible that he slept based on an understanding of how simanim work on Rosh HaShana.

The Gemara in Horiyut notes:

Now that we say that simanim are significant a person should be careful to see16 gourds, leeks and beets on Rosh HaShana.

Horiyut 12a

24 See earlier note 2.
25 The practice of not sleeping on Rosh Hashana is left out of the Levush. Additionally Leket Yosher notes that Terumat HaDeshen slept on Rosh HaShana.
Meiri asks a thought provoking question, why are the simanim not forbidden as forms of nichush, sorcery? After all, ordinarily Jews do not seek omens. He answers that the simanim are permitted since they are intended to inspire us to act properly.

And so that we do not stumble into the forbidden territory of nichush, the rabbis instituted that one should recite statements that inspire teshuva, may our merits be read etc.

Beit Habechirah, Horiyut 12a

Effectively, Meiri is suggesting that absent a yehi ratzon, a prayer to inspire proper behavior, a siman is dangerously close to nichush. Yehi ratzon prayers are only recited on positive simanim, they were not and could not be instituted for negative simanim such as not eating nuts and not sleeping on Rosh HaShana. Perhaps this is why the same Maharam of Rottenburg that BACH cites as not adhering to the practice of not sleeping on Rosh HaShana, is quoted by Kol Bo as not refraining from eating any food on Rosh HaShana.

Maharam was also careful to keep the simanim (eating gourds, cabbage and beats). However, he was not particular to refrain from eating garlic, nuts or any food item.

Kol Bo 64

Although MAHARAM eagerly embraced the positive simanim, he refrained from the negative simanim of not sleeping and not eating nuts out of concern that they would constitute nichush.

26 The parallel Gemara in Keritut 6, writes that one should be careful to eat, gourds Beats etc. We follow the practice as presented there.