

Ritual for Going on Hospice

When a doctor determines that a person has less than six months to live, palliative care through hospice becomes an option. It can be a fraught decision because, to many people, going on hospice means "giving up."

Yet going on hospice can also be the point at which a patient and his/her family can stop battling a disease and turn their focus to the question: what do you want to do with the rest of your life. As Fran Smith and Sheila Himmel write in their book, *Changing the Way We Die*, "[H]ospice is much more than a way to relieve the discomforts of dying. It is a way to live."

At this critical life-transition, the following ceremony provides an opportunity for a patient (hereafter referred to as the VIP) and his/her loved ones to honor the love they have for one another and to be inspired to spend the rest of their time together creating meaning.

Purpose: To mark the transition from *fighting against* a disease to *living for* the remaining time.

Outcome: The patient feels enveloped in the love of family, friends and tradition and is more accepting and ready to begin this last stage of life.

Process: The following is a suggested outline for an approximately 30-minute ceremony. The offerings of blessings to the VIP can be omitted to shorten the ceremony.

Items needed: *Tallit*, beads (preferably beautiful ones) that snap into a bracelet. Invited participants are asked to prepare a **brief** blessing to offer to the VIP during the ceremony.

1. After a short *niggun* to get everyone into a ceremonial mood, the leader formally welcomes everyone and says to the VIP:

As you enter this next stage of life we are here to envelop you in our love. This *tallit* symbolizes not just the love that we in this room have for you but the love and connection that we Jews have to our ancestors across the generations.

VIP is wrapped in the *tallit* by a few people in the room and is invited to say the blessing for putting on the *tallit*.

ברוך אתה ה' אלקינו מלך העולם, אשר קדשנו במצותיו, וצונו להתעטף בציצית.
Barukh atah adonai eloheinu melekh ha-olam asher kid'shanu b'mitzvotav v'tzivanu l'hitatef ba'tzitzit.

2. **Reader 1: Tradition holds that, on Shabbat evening, angels accompany us home from synagogue and to them, to our Heavenly guests, we sing *Shalom Aleichem*. This song has four stanzas, the first welcomes the angels and the last wishes them well as they depart. Today we are marking the beginning of a most sacred time in your life. We sing to the ministering angels to ask them to accompany you on this holy journey.**

3. Leader leads the singing of the first verse of *Shalom Aleichem* (sung three times, ideally to Debbie Friedman melody):

שְׁלוֹם עֲלֵיכֶם, מְלַאֲכֵי הַשָּׁרַת, מְלַאֲכֵי עֲלִיוֹן, מִמְּלָךְ מַלְכֵי הַמַּלְכִּים, הַקָּדוֹשׁ בְּרוּךְ הוּא.
Shalom aleichem, malachei ha'sharayt, malachei elyon, mi'melech malchei ha'mlachim, HaKadosh Baruch Hoo.

**Peace to you, ministering angels,
Messengers of the Most High,
Sent by the sovereign, the sovereign of all sovereigns,
The Holy One, whom we bless.**

4. Reader 2: **As Jews our most sacred time comes once a week on Shabbat. God created the world in six days and on the seventh God rested because the work was complete. The Hebrew word for complete is *shaleim* – a word that shares the same three-letter root as *shalom*, peace. One is at peace when one is complete.**
5. Leader leads the singing of the second stanza of *Shalom Aleichem*:

בּוֹאֲכֶם לְשָׁלוֹם, מְלַאֲכֵי הַשָּׁלוֹם, מְלַאֲכֵי עֲלִיוֹן, מִמְּלָךְ מַלְכֵי הַמַּלְכִּים, הַקָּדוֹשׁ בְּרוּךְ הוּא.
Bo'achem l'shalom, malachei ha'sharayt, malachei elyon, mi'melech malchei ha'mlachim, HaKadosh Baruch Hoo.

**Come in peace, angels of peace,
Messengers of the Most High,
Sent by the sovereign, the sovereign of all sovereigns,
The Holy One, whom we bless.**

6. *Reader 3: Yet we know that creation renews itself every day, in goodness. (Uv'tuvo m'chadesh b'khol yom tamid ma'asei v'reishit.)* Every day, every moment, is available to us to make it a blessing. We now offer our individual blessings to you.
7. *Leader: As each person offers a blessing we will attach our beads together to make a complete circle. This bracelet will represent our complete love for you; we hope that when you look at it or wear it you will be reminded of our loving presence in your life.* Leader invites those gathered to recite or say their prepared blessings and facilitates the creation of the bracelet.
8. When the last person has offered a blessing, the leader leads the singing of the third stanza of *Shalom Aleichem*:

בְּרַחֲמֵי לְשָׁלוֹם, מְלַאֲכֵי הַשָּׁלוֹם, מְלַאֲכֵי עֲלִיוֹן, מִמְּלָךְ מַלְכֵי הַמַּלְכִּים, הַקָּדוֹשׁ בְּרוּךְ הוּא.
Barchunee l'shalom, malachei ha'sharayt, malachei elyon, mi'melech malchei ha'mlachim, HaKadosh Baruch Hoo.

**Bless me with peace, angels of peace,
Messengers of the Most High,
Sent by the sovereign, the sovereign of all sovereigns,
The Holy One, whom we bless.**

9. Leader invites the VIP to recite the following and then to bless everyone in the room (this would also be the appropriate time for the VIP to say anything else):

**May the angel Michael be at my right,
And the angel Gabriel be at my left,
And in front of me the angel Uriel,
And behind me the angel Raphael,
And above my head the Shechinah**

**יְבָרֵךְ ה' וַיִּשְׁמְרֵךְ.
Yivarek'kha adonai v'yishm'rekha.
May God bless you and protect you.**

**יָאֵר ה' פָּנָיו אֵלֶיךָ וַיַּחֲנֵךְ.
Ya'eir adonai panav eilakha vikhuneka.
May God show you favor and be gracious to you.**

**יִשָּׂא ה' פָּנָיו אֵלֶיךָ וַיַּשֵּׂם לְךָ שְׁלוֹם.
Yisah adonai panav eilekha, v'yasem l'kha shalom.
May God show you kindness and grant you peace.**

10. Leader: **The beads of your new bracelet are not just reminders of our love but also represent the angels who we ask to hold you and escort you on this holy journey.**

Leader leads the singing of the final stanza of *Shalom Aleichem*:

**צִאתְכֶם לְשָׁלוֹם, מַלְאַכֵי הַשְּׁלוֹם, מַלְאַכֵי עֲלִיוֹן, מִמְּלָךְ מַלְכֵי הַמַּלְכִּים, הַקְּדוֹשׁ בְּרוּךְ הוּא.
Tzaytchem l'shalom, malachei ha'sharayt, malachei elyon, mi'melech malchei
ha'mlachim, HaKadosh Baruch Hoo.**

**Go in peace, angels of peace,
Messengers of the Most High,
Sent by the sovereign, the sovereign of all sovereigns,
The Holy One, whom we bless.**