

By Rabbi Dr. Jerry Lob

Q: Where did grandma go when she died?

A: When a child asks a question that is filled with pain, it needs to be answered on two levels.

1) The first level is a direct response to the literal question: Where is grandma now? The second level is more subtle and requires understanding of what really is the child's unspoken concern.

Where is grandma now?

This question should be answered in a straightforward way in accordance with Jewish teachings.

When God created human beings, He used earth to form the bodies, but He also gave us something more. He shared of Himself with us, and this piece of God within us is called the soul.

Life is body and soul working in harmony; death is their separation.

The body returns to earth and the soul moves closer to God.

You can tell your child that while the soul is invisible, it's still real. It is the essence of grandma and it never dies; it is eternal, like God Himself. This means that grandma's essence is still alive but she can't be seen.

Judaism teaches that deceased grandparents are present at the wedding ceremony of their descendents. So grandma is aware of her family still and will put in "a good word" for the ones she loves. And of course, love never dies.

The second level, as noted above, is much more subtle. Oftentimes children ask one question but are really asking something very different. You as parents are challenged to look beyond the spoken words. What is your child asking? Or what is your child asking for?

Is your daughter terribly afraid that you will die, or others or she herself. If so, she needs hugs and reassurance that no one else is dying now. Is your son in pain, in mourning? Is he angry at grandma for leaving him, for abandoning him and not coming to his Bar Mitzvah. Is he furious with God for taking his grandma or with you for letting her die?

Remember, pain and emotions in general don't need to be rational. Is your child depressed, confused or afraid, or all of the above? It's important that you talk with him/her and show that you're open to all questions and to any emotional response on your child's part, including confusion, fear, sadness, anger, etc. If your child would rather not talk, encourage him to write about grandma and his feelings. Sharing your feelings about your sadness can be helpful as

well.

Your child needs to know that his feelings are okay, that the pain will pass one day, and that his grandma still loves him, even if he is angry at her. The same is true for God.

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