



This glossary is meant to serve as a tool for Jewish professionals seeking to make their organizations and community spaces more inclusive of interfaith families. We know that language has the power to be a source of healing or hurting and we hope that this guide can strengthen your efforts in healing and community building. Language is also complicated and ever evolving. There are many different suggestions offered in this glossary. It can be helpful to use this as a guide to develop a uniform set of terms that your community can use to simplify some of these complexities and create shared culture through language. If you have any questions about this glossary generally or about specific terms and explanations, please contact Caroline Kamesar, Director of the *Interfaith Inclusion Leadership Initiative (ILLI)* at [carolinek@interfaithfamily.com](mailto:carolinek@interfaithfamily.com).

## Interfaith Glossary

**Appropriate Terms for Couples and Families:** Interfaith family/couple, Intercultural family/couple, Multi-heritage family/couple, Multi-faith family/couple, Modern family/couple, Jewish family, *Ask people how they want to identify!*

**Explanation:** These terms are descriptive and can acknowledge differences in background without being derogatory, although none are perfect. What do we mean by interfaith? As an organization, we struggle with this word and acknowledge its limitations, but it is the word we've chosen to use. Interfaith does not necessarily mean a home with two faiths being practiced, but rather where the two partners grew up with different faith backgrounds. However, not everyone has a faith. Not everyone identifies as interfaith. There is a wide range of practice, so it isn't always clear what people mean when they use the term "interfaith." There can be negative associations with its use. Some families raise their kids as Jewish and consider themselves to be simply a Jewish family.

**Inappropriate Terms for Couples and Families:** Intermarried, Inter-dating

**Explanation:** These terms emphasize the idea that there is a "normal" way to be married or dating and highlight difference. They have also become synonymous with debate in the Jewish community about interfaith relationships and may carry negative connotations. Think about why we use these words and if there are words that are more inclusive and functional.

**Appropriate Terms for Individuals:** Name the person's religion: "they're a Christian, Buddhist, Muslim," etc., Person/partner of another faith, Person/partner of a different background, Person/partner who doesn't identify as Jewish, *Ask people how they want to identify!*

**Explanation:** Although it can be a bit more cumbersome, language that describes an individual in an affirming way rather than by something they are not can be a powerful way to communicate that we see them for who they are. These terms do not take away difference, but rather highlight difference in more positive and inclusive ways.

**Inappropriate Terms for Individuals:** Non-Jew, Gentile, Half-Jew, Patrilineal Jew<sup>1</sup>, Convert, Jew-By-Choice, Goy, Shiksa

**Explanation:** When we lead with language that identifies someone by what they're not, this can be viewed as negative or derogatory and may lead to unwanted feelings of difference and isolation. Terms like "Half-Jew" and "Patrilineal Jew" suggest that the person being referred to is not fully Jewish. Once someone converts, he/she/they are Jewish and we are prohibited from sharing this information even with a term that we think is harmless. It is one thing if an individual chooses to identify this way, it is another for our institutions to place these labels on individuals without knowing how they identify. With terms like "Goy" and "Shiksa" it is important to examine their origins and ask ourselves why we continue to use these phrases. "Shiksa" comes from the biblical Hebrew word "sheekootz" which means an abomination. Although "Goy" simply means nation, this term has developed in a derogatory way and has a long history of "othering" individuals outside of the Jewish community. Are there more effective and compassionate ways to address the individuals we're considering?

**New Vocabulary for Individuals:** Supportive partner, Loving partner, *Ger Toshav*: stranger who dwells amongst us, *Haver toshav*: friend who dwells amongst us, *Ahuv Toshav*: beloved who dwells amongst us.

**Explanation:** These terms suggest a level of involvement and importance, but it must be acknowledged that Hebrew terms come with a level of inaccessibility for members or loved ones of the Jewish community who do not know Hebrew. "Stranger" may also not be the most ideal term. If you choose to use these terms, it is important that they be clearly translated and defined, so that the entire community understands them.

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<sup>1</sup> InterfaithFamily understands that institutions/organizations have different boundaries around Jewish law and ritual. We respect these distinctions, but urge institutions/organizations to be thoughtful in their use of these labels, especially in public settings.