

Language Matters: Some FAQs

Where can I learn about the most respectful words to talk about the LGBTQ+ community?

Here are a few terms:

Lesbian (n/adj): often describes a woman who is emotionally, spiritually, physically, and/or sexually attracted primarily to women. Some nonbinary people also identify as lesbians if they feel connected to womanhood and are primarily attracted to women.

Gay (adj): describes a person who is emotionally, spiritually, physically, and/or sexually attracted primarily to members of the same gender. (Often used by people who identify as men, though others in the LGBTQ+ community may also identify as gay.)

Bisexual (adj): describes an individual who is emotionally, spiritually, physically, and/or sexually attracted to more than one gender. Can sometimes be used interchangeably with pansexual.

Pansexual (adj): describes a person who is emotionally, spiritually, physically, and/or sexually attracted toward persons of all gender identities. Can sometimes be used interchangeably with bisexual.

Asexual (adj): an umbrella category describing those who experience little or no sexual attraction. Identifying as asexual does not preclude any behavior, including dating and sex. Often abbreviated as Ace, asexual can also refer to the Asexuality Spectrum, which describes the range of experiences related to attraction. Demisexual (describing a person who feels sexual attraction only to someone with whom they have an emotional bond) and aromantic, (someone who experiences little or no romantic attraction to others) fall under the umbrella category of asexual.

All terminology provided by KeshetOnline. For more information and additional terms, check out KeshetOnline's [glossary of terminology](#).

LGBTQ or LGBTQ+?

LGBTQ+ and *LGBT* are both acceptable terms that refer to the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer community. The "+" includes all other identities that may have been left out of the acronym. It is up to the individual which version of the acronym they prefer.

Is it okay to use the word *queer*?

It depends on the context. Historically, *queer* was a derogatory term for members of the LGBTQ+ community. However, the phrases *LGBTQ+ community* and *queer community* are now interchangeable. Similarly, people who are not straight may also self-identify as *queer*. Additionally, those who are not cisgender might refer to themselves as *genderqueer*. Refer to someone as *queer* or *genderqueer* only when they identify as such.

What words can I use to be more inclusive to the LGBTQ+ community?

All families decide which words they use to refer to members of their own families. Not every family uses the same language, so when in doubt, try to find a gender-neutral term. This is both inclusive of non-binary people and inclusive of people who may be in same-sex relationships.

- *Parents* is a gender-neutral way to say *mother and father*.
- *Spouse* is a gender-neutral way to say *husband or wife*.
- *Siblings* or *family* is a gender-neutral way to say *brothers and sisters*.
- *Ancestors* or *those who came before us* is a gender-neutral way to say *forefathers and mothers*.
- To avoid having to say *he or she* or using the potentially confusing singular *they*, try pluralizing your sentence.

“Each student should practice Hebrew in his or her free time.” → “All students should practice Hebrew in their free time.”

What does *transgender* mean?

There is a distinction between *sex* and *gender*. *Sex* essentially refers to the physical characteristics that a person has. Some people are born with male physical characteristics, some are born with female physical characteristics, and some have a combination of the two. *Gender*, while related to sex, is a societal idea of how people are supposed to behave, based on their biology. When people with male parts are given blue clothes and toy cars, while people with female parts are given pink clothes and dolls, we are assigning them a *gender* based on their *sex*.

Sometimes, we get it wrong. We think, based on physical characteristics, someone is a boy or a girl, but it might turn out that their *gender* is not the one that corresponds with their *sex*. According to KeshetOnline.org, *transgender* is an umbrella term for anyone who knows they are a gender that is different than the gender they were assigned at birth. Some trans people may have a gender identity that is neither man nor woman. And for some people, their gender identity may vary at different points in their lives.

What’s the most respectful way to talk to/about transgender people?

The proper word is *transgender* or *trans*. Not *transgendered*. This implies gender is something that has happened to someone, rather than an identity.

Trans people are *assigned male/female at birth*, not *used to be a man/woman*. The gender someone was assigned at birth is private information. A trans person may choose to tell people that they are trans. Otherwise, it is not information you should share.

What is *deadnaming*?

When transgender people come out, they sometimes choose new names that fit their identity. The name that they were given at birth is then referred to as their “deadname.” Calling someone their deadname is called *deadnaming*, and it should be avoided. It’s vital to refer to people by their chosen names. For many people, hearing their deadname is traumatic. It can bring up difficult times in their lives that possibly involve oppression and personal conflict. When you use someone’s deadname, that invalidates their gender and indicates that you are not accepting who they are. When you use someone’s chosen name, that’s one way to tell them: “I’m listening to you when you tell me who you are, I accept you, and I love you.”

It’s understandable to have a hard time changing old habits by calling someone by a different name than you had previously. But the trauma induced by deadnaming is more significant.

The most important thing to remember when you’re practicing using someone’s new name and pronouns is to make a genuine effort. It takes repetition, and you may want to rehearse in private before you meet or talk to that person. It might sound a little silly, but repeating the new name out loud can make it easier to learn: “Rachel is coming to Shabbat dinner. She is bringing the kugel. Rachel is bringing her kugel to dinner. I will thank her for her delicious kugel. Rachel makes kugel with raisins.”

What do I do when I accidentally use the wrong pronouns/name?

You might notice right away that you’ve deadnamed someone or used the wrong pronouns. If you do, simply correct yourself by saying the correct name/pronoun, and move on with what you were saying. If you do not notice, someone might correct you. The best way to handle being corrected is to say a quick “thank you,” use the correct pronoun/name, and move on. Don’t make the conversation about you or put the trans person in the position of forgiving/accommodating you.

For example, the conversation might look like this:

“When Aaron lost his first tooth-”

“Her name is Sarah.”

“Thank you. When Sarah lost her first tooth...”

How do I use the correct pronouns?

Some members of the LGBTQ community prefer one (or two) pronoun(s) over another, based on how they identify. If you don’t know someone’s preferred pronouns, simply ask. It is now customary to insert preferred pronouns in signatures and in other identification.

Some people even use a combination of pronouns, including *she/they* or *he/they*. Some people’s pronouns are *they/them*. Please see Merriam-Webster for a complete explanation of [how to use the singular they](#).

Thank you for educating yourself about the most respectful LGBTQ+ language. If you have additional questions, please contact [Rabbi Lori Levine](#).