

BRANDEIS STORIES

Rigor and empathy, hand in hand: Brandeis University's 75th Commencement

More than 1,600 degrees awarded across two ceremonies; eight honorary degrees conferred



By Steve Foscett

Photography by Dan Holmes, Gaelen Morse and Maddie Schroeder

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During a day of hugs, tears and celebrations with family and friends of the Class of 2026, Brandeis University conferred more than 1,600 undergraduate, graduate and doctoral degrees Sunday at its 75th Commencement Exercises.

With the sun shining on the audience through skylights atop the Gosman Sports and Convocation Center, President Arthur Levine told graduates they will face the daunting task of repairing the world: one of the guiding principles of a Brandeis education. But they will also have to make it better, he added, and all of it will take place during a period of drastic change.

President Arthur Levine '70

“Your generation is living simultaneously in two worlds — one that is fading away, the world in which most of your parents and professors grew up, and another that is being born, the world in which you are going to live your lives,” Levine said.

Sheryl Sandberg — philanthropist, author, filmmaker and former chief operating officer of social media giant Meta— delivered the undergraduate address. Isabel Wilkerson, Pulitzer Prize-winning reporter and bestselling author, delivered the graduate address.

‘Curiosity, humanity, belief in yourself’

While touching on themes of adapting to massive shifts in an artificial intelligence-infused workplace, confronting hatred with humanity in all corners of society, and planning a career that carves out space for surprise and curiosity, Sandberg weaved into

her keynote lessons from “The Rabbi’s Gift,” a parable about a community that transforms itself.

Sheryl Sandberg

She recounted the tale of monastery with dwindling attendance that turns itself around after monks, at the suggestion of a local rabbi, start looking at each other as if each one is the Messiah. The townspeople could feel a warmth that was not there before, and started coming back. Before long, the monastery was thriving.

“None of them believed it, but the possibility was enough,” Sandberg said. “They began to treat each other differently — with the kind of care you would show someone who might be that important.”

She said the rabbi did not tell the abbot how to save his monastery; all he could say was that what they needed was already there. Sandberg told the graduates that is true for them, too.

“Class of 2026: you already have everything you need,” she said. “Not because the road is clear. It won’t be. Not because the answers are obvious. They aren’t. But because what you carry with you into every room — curiosity, humanity, belief in yourself — is becoming rarer in this world. And it has never been more valuable.”

‘We’ve got you’

Addressing her fellow graduates, undergraduate student speaker [Khimaya Bagla '26](#) said that as much as they owe so much of their success to the amazing faculty at Brandeis, they need to also acknowledge the way they mentored each other along the way.

“That’s what Brandeis teaches,” Bagla said. “Not just that we’re capable of more than what we’ve imagined, but that this courage is sustained by the people who step in – the people who check on you, the ones who run review sessions, who bring you coffee at midnight, who say, ‘we’ve got you.’”

Graduate ceremony

Wilkerson, bestselling author of “Caste: The Origins of Our Discontents,” and “The Warmth of Other Suns: The Epic Story of America’s Great Migration,” and the first Black woman to win a Pulitzer Prize for journalism, told the graduate Commencement ceremony that as we confront the pendulum swings of history in our current moment, it is natural to look for a leader.

But one of the lessons of “The Warmth of Other Suns,” Wilkerson explained, is that the “great migration” of six million African-Americans from the Jim Crow South to cities in the North and West was a leaderless revolution. It was a testament to the power of human will – one person added to another person added to another, multiplied by millions – that people with the least material resources of any group in America were able to do what the powers of the North and the South could not, or would not, do: free themselves. And, in doing so, they freed the country of the scourge of Jim Crow, Wilkerson said.

“That means that each of us has more power than we may have allowed ourselves to believe,” she said. “If people who had absolutely nothing could do what they did in their era, imagine what people could do in ours.”

Language as a lens

Graduate student speaker [Jin Zhao MS’20, PhD’26](#), a computer science doctoral candidate, studies artificial intelligence and natural language processing, gave her fellow graduates a view of the promises and limitations of the technology from the inside out, exploring the idea that language doesn’t simply reflect reality; it helps to construct it.

Jin Zhao MS'20, PhD'26

“The language we speak and the words we choose act like a lens,” Zhao said. “They highlight certain truths while pushing others into the background. Two people can look at the same event, the same technology, or the same crisis and walk away with entirely different understandings, not because one is less intelligent, but because they are looking through different frames.”

She said the world Sunday’s graduates are entering is full of people who speak and think differently, and who frame reality in ways that will challenge them. She said the education she and her graduates received at Brandeis equips them to use their knowledge, skills and critical thinking in service of carefully listening and revising assumptions.

“Brandeis has taught us that rigor and empathy must go hand in hand,” Zhao said.

Honorary degrees, alumni celebrations

The university also Sunday conferred [honorary degrees](#) upon Sandberg, Wilkerson, and six others: Waltham Mayor Jeannette A. McCarthy; University of the People, or UoPeople founder Shai Reshef; former MIT President and higher education leader L. Rafael Reif; philanthropist and former executive Toshizo Watanabe '73; attorney, philanthropist and former Brandeis trustee and chair Meyer Koplow '72, P'02, P'05; and private consultant and former Brandeis trustee and chair Larry Kanarek '76.

Graduates were also joined at Gosman by members of the Class of 1976, who celebrated 50 years of membership in the extended Brandeis family.

Members of the Class of 1976

The Brandeis Class of 2026, by the numbers

In total, the university conferred 948 bachelor's degrees; 21 master's certificates; 564 master's degrees; and 91 doctoral degrees.

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