

Sermon: Telling a Different Story
Sunday, October 11, 2026
First Unitarian Church
The Rev. Sarah C. Stewart

We begin with memory. We honor those who are no longer here, those who were lost to the brutality of their fellow human beings. We honor the communities of life and growth and remembrance that hold their stories.

On this Indigenous People's Day weekend, we honor the American Indian communities of Massachusetts and America. Here, where we live and worship, is the ancestral home of the Nipmuc. The Nipmuc, the Massachusett, and other Algonquin peoples made their home in what is now southern New England. Even before the Pilgrims landed at Plymouth Rock, these communities had been decimated by illness from trading with European seafarers. By 1620, although still numerous, the Algonquin nations were weakened. Europeans took their land and held it in private ownership, a concept unknown among the Algonquin. Across the country, the new United States displaced Native communities, killed Native people, waged war against them as enemies, and defaulted on its treaties. Today, American Indians in New England have organized to preserve their cultural heritage and seek recognition as legal tribes. Despite the horror, Native American communities persist.

On this week that marks three years since the Hamas attacks on Israel, and the beginning of the all-out destruction of Gaza, we remember those who have lost their lives in the terror. We remember the 1,219 Israeli citizens killed and the 251 taken hostage on that day, some of whom died in custody. We remember the Palestinians who have died during Israel's military response, over 75,000 people as of today, many of

them women and children. We remember the hundreds of Palestinians killed by Israeli airstrikes in the past year, during a supposed ceasefire. We honor Palestinian villagers in the West Bank, whose villages are being destroyed by Israeli settlers.

People have lived on the land that is now Palestine and Israel for 1.5 million years. It has been home to Muslims, Christians, Jews, and Druze; Asians, Arabs and Africans; lived under empire and colonialism and brief periods of freedom. Today, Palestinian communities continue to live, work and send their children to school in Gaza and the West Bank. Despite the horror, the Palestinians persist.

And we cannot invoke the existence of modern Israel without remembering those Jews and others who died in the Holocaust, that attempt by Nazi Germany at the destruction of a people and a religion. We remember those who had learned to expect the violence of pogroms. We remember those who were herded into ghettos and deported to camps, to work or simply to die. We remember the starving bodies, the terrified spirits, the children who survived alone among their families, those who tried to hide, those who put themselves in greater danger so that someone else could live, those who could not bear up under the violence, those who had no chance. As one example, 60,000 Jews lived in Vilnius, Lithuania before World War II. 6,000 Jews were able to gather there after the war ended. Still, today, Jewish communities thrive around the world. Last week was Sukkot, and millions of Jews built their booths and ate outdoors to celebrate the harvest in peace. Despite the Holocaust, the Jewish spirit and people persist.

All of this memory must be with us as we in America wonder what we can do about the violence and destruction in Gaza and the West Bank. Not only the memory of

the Holocaust and the creation of the modern state of Israel after the war; not only the wars between Israel and its neighbors, financed by the United States; not only the displacement of the Palestinians already living on that land, which Palestinians call the *nakbah*; but also the displacement and destruction of native peoples here in the United States, begun in the 17th century and continuing to this day. We cannot know what to do without understanding who we are and who we have been. Yet we are not bound by history. We can still act today, grounded in our deepest values of repentance, respect, and love for our neighbor.

I want to acknowledge the thick and binding web of historical choices and mistakes, grounded in intolerance and fear, that have brought the United States, Europe, Israel and Palestine to where they are today. We could ask why, at the end of World War II, surviving European Jews were not given land in Germany as reparations for the Holocaust. There was a Jewish Zionist movement, which hoped for a modern Jewish state in Israel, and that hope was a powerful motivator for many Jews all over the world. But it was also convenient for Germany and Europe as a whole, to invite Jews to move out of majority Christian nations and take over land that belonged to faraway Arabs. It was convenient for the United Kingdom to be able to give up the Palestinian mandate, which it could no longer afford to maintain. Zionism was heartfelt for many Jews, but it was also a relief valve for European problems. Europe (and the United States) outsourced their responsibility for reparations to the Jewish people after the Holocaust. The history of ethnic hate and war from that day to this is too long to tell.

Today, there are things I try to keep in mind about the nation of Israel. First, the Israeli people are not a monolith. Some Israeli citizens are Palestinian; most of those

Palestinians are Muslim, but some are Christian. Some Israeli Jews are ethnically Arabic. Among Israeli citizens, Prime Minister Netanyahu is deeply unpopular. Protests against his policies have drawn hundreds of thousands of people. Many Israelis do not support his government, just as not all Americans support the actions of our own deeply unpopular president. Netanyahu's government targets Jewish Israelis who agitate for Palestinian freedom. Netanyahu himself is corrupt and probably criminal. There is evidence that he was warned about the Hamas attacks of October 7 and did nothing to stop them. And, most importantly to me, Israel is a nation acting as a nation, not as a representative of all Jews. When our country attacks Iran or Venezuela, we do not think that means all Americans approve of those actions. When there is tension over a Protestant march in Northern Ireland, we do not assume all people of Irish descent living in America are part of the conflict. Israel and Judaism are two overlapping but different things.

One thing I cannot say here, one thing I can't countenance, is the proclamation by Americans that Israel as a nation shouldn't exist. It is too close to anti-semitic propaganda going back generations in Europe and America. Jewish philosopher and Holocaust survivor Hannah Arendt wrote that humanity's hope lay in the fact that new people are born all the time, people who haven't had a chance to experience the hate of past generations, people who are not bound by their parents' woundedness, people who can dream something new. Some of those new people who have been born since 1948 were born in Israel; some of those work with Palestinians for peace; the land may not have belonged to their grandparents, but it is now their home. We can imagine a two-state solution or a multi-ethnic Israel, even if those possibilities seem more distant than

ever. But it is not for Americans to say, standing here on this land, that Israel shouldn't exist. By that logic, the United States should not exist. And perhaps here is where we can find our deepest truth and face our own American complicity in the colonial project of deciding whose land is whose.

In 2014, after years of sustained peace between Israel and Palestine, a Hamas kidnapping gone wrong left three young Israeli people dead. Israel responded with retaliatory violence against all Palestinians. Hundreds of Palestinians were killed. In horror, Jewish-American philosopher and pro-Palestinian activist Sarah Schulman wrote and tweeted and documented the violence in Palestine and the seemingly willful ignorance of it in America. She felt that everything she was doing was not enough. She wrote, "How could this be happening? But of course I knew. I knew that it started with one person scapegoating another. And it grew when that person's bad group joined in. And it festered even further, when all the people around them said and did nothing. Then suddenly, it was genocide (239)." She is describing how all us-versus-them thinking becomes the loss of a people. This must have been what happened here in America, as European communities displaced and blamed and scapegoated and killed Native Americans. Perhaps encounter led to conflict; but conflict hardened into racism and supremacy and in-group thinking.

Israeli journalist Gideon Levy wrote in the Israeli newspaper *Haaretz* in 2014, "The youths of the Jewish state are attacking Palestinians in the streets of Jerusalem, just like gentile youths used to attack Jews in the streets of Europe... These are... Netanyahu's offspring. For five years now they have been hearing nothing but incitement, scaremongering and supremacy over Arabs... Not one humane word. No

commiseration or equal treatment (quoted in Schulman 218).” Whenever people, especially young people, believe a story of fear and hate and never hear a story of brotherhood and common cause, the result is violence. It happened here as American Indians were killed. It happened in Europe as Jews were gathered in the streets of Europe to board trains to the camps. It is happening in Gaza today. I believe the best thing we can do as people of goodwill, the thing that is grounded in our values, the thing that is honest about our ability to make change, is to tell a different story.

We can offer that humane word. We can lift up our commitment to pluralism. We can refuse to participate in demonizing Jews or Muslims, and stand up against hateful speech against Jewish and Muslim communities in the United States. Saying something like, “I don’t believe all Jews support what Israel is doing,” or, “The Islam I know here in Worcester is a religion of peace”—those statements matter. They help to tell a different story. They create room for understanding and repair to take place. Proclaiming our own religious values makes a difference. Working for political change in the United States makes a difference. The simple idea that our nation should not sell weapons to warmongers is gaining traction in America. Almost 60% of Americans have no confidence in Netanyahu to do the right thing in his country. This time, unlike in 2014, the suffering Gazans are making their voices heard in America. We want a different story. Israel will hold its first elections since October 7 later this month. Israeli citizens may want to tell a different story too, and vote Netanyahu out.

Here in on this land, we strive to tell a story of inclusion, ethical religion, and the power of love to overcome hate. We acknowledge the Native communities living here in Massachusetts, in New England, and across the country. We step back and question

ourselves anytime we begin to think of some group as “those people.” We allow ourselves to feel horror and lament murder without allowing that lament to harden into hatred. We remember the love in our own hearts, and the greater love that holds us, and we look at our neighbor—our Jewish neighbor, our Muslim neighbor, our Native neighbor, our immigrant neighbor—as one who is held in that same love. And we pray for peace, here and abroad. Holy God, may our swords be beaten into ploughshares, and may we put down the weapons of war. May we resist the call of hate and cultivate the works of love. May we regard all people with loving-kindness. May we trust that you love us all and want us to love each other. Amen.

Sources

Schulman, Sarah. *Conflict Is Not Abuse: Overstating Harm, Community Responsibility, and the Duty of Repair*. Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp Press, 2018.