

"**Picking Up Stones**" is an 80-minute one-woman theatrical piece written and performed by Sandra Laub that confronts the Israeli-Palestinian conflict through the personal lens of an American Jewish woman processing the aftermath of October 7, 2023, and the subsequent Gaza war. Her personal struggle centers on maintaining Jewish identity while Israeli policies contradict her values and facing antisemitism from multiple directions while holding conflicting truths.

### Structure and Artistic Approach

The play uses stones as its central metaphor, representing grief, memory, and historical weight. Sandra collects, arranges, and rebuilds with stones throughout the performance—echoing Sisyphus' eternal task. She embodies multiple characters through costume changes, voice modulation, and physicality, channeling diverse perspectives from both sides of the conflict. The story is not 'linear' or chronological, but like her 'jumble of stones' is accumulated like sediment through emotional capacity—the capacity to face the horror and trauma of October 7th and the destruction of Gaza. The flexible and simple staging incorporates scenic panels that surround Sandra, expressing the fragility of human life against the destruction of war. The sound design features Hebrew and Arabic music, protest sounds, and war audio.

### Character Voices and Perspectives

- Sandra channels an extensive range of voices, including: Israelis and Palestinians, contemporary characters and historical figures (including Golda Meir)

### Major Themes

The play explores **historical trauma and memory**, connecting the Holocaust, the 1948 Nakba, and current violence to examine how generational trauma shapes both Israeli and Palestinian identities.

**Motherhood and shared humanity** emerge through recurring images of Jewish and Palestinian mothers protecting children and grieving losses. The **cost of occupation** is documented through settler violence, checkpoints, home demolitions, and dehumanization on both sides.

### Key Narrative Threads

The performance addresses the conditions leading to the Hamas attack on October 7th, the Nova music festival massacre, kibbutz destruction, and hostage-taking. It presents Palestinian testimonies about Gaza's bombing campaigns, displacement, and the killing of over 20,000 children. Israeli trauma is explored through multiple voices describing October 7th's psychological impact and the impossible choices between rescuing hostages and continuing warfare.

### Core Ethical Dilemmas

The play refuses simple answers while examining fundamental questions about **proportionality**: What constitutes an appropriate response to October 7th? It juxtaposes Israeli forensic evidence of "400 body parts... families burned alive" against Gaza's destruction and 20,000+ dead children, forcing audiences to sit with competing moral claims rather than resolving them.

**Occupation versus security** forms another central paradox: Can Israel be both democratic and an occupying power? Through characters like Hagai, who admits that after October 7th "something in me is

sealed for their children and their suffering," the play examines how occupation corrupts Israeli society while questioning whether security requires dehumanization.

### **Historical Justice and Competing Narratives**

The play presents the tension between **the right to exist and the right to return**. An Israeli character argues that Jews "jumped from a burning building" (the Holocaust) and landed on Palestinians—"Sorry"—but survival justifies the cost. Palestinians counter that they shouldn't pay for European antisemitism. Both the Nakba and Israel's War of Independence are presented as equally valid historical traumas, asking whether contradictory narratives can simultaneously be true.

### **Language and Moral Categories**

The work troubles distinctions between **resistance and terrorism** questioning whether all violence is equivalent and where clear moral lines should be drawn.

### **American Jewish Complicity and Identity Crisis**

Sandy represents the crisis of **diaspora responsibility**. She gives Hagai, former director of the Jerusalem Intercultural Center, a cap -"Shalom/Salaam. He responds. "It's nice. But it's a dream." The play asks whether one can criticize Israel without abandoning it, or support Israel without endorsing all its actions, suggesting that American Jewish silence enables problematic Israeli government actions.

### **Breaking Cycles of Trauma**

Through stories of **generational moral injury**—from Michal's ex-husband's Lebanon experience to their son's Gaza deployment—the play examines how violence perpetuates itself. Israeli teens declare Palestinians are "all animals," while Palestinian children aspire to martyrdom, raising questions about breaking cycles of dehumanization when each generation's trauma justifies the next generation's violence.

### **The Play's Ethical Position**

While avoiding simple answers, the work ultimately argues for several principles: **shared humanity** (demonstrated in the nursing room scene where Jewish and Palestinian mothers help each other), **accountability** (Israel must examine its conduct regardless of Hamas actions), and **memory without exploitation** (Holocaust remembrance should create empathy for all suffering, not justify Palestinian oppression).

The play concludes with a vision of reconciliation and a parting of ways, as Abraham's two sons Issac and Ishmael do. Sandy invokes "Derech Eretz" (civility/the way of the land) and affirms faith in both Hebrew and Arabic. The final image of Sisyphus pushing a rock containing a peace sign captures the work's position: peace work is absurd, endless, and essential. The core message remains: "Two peoples, one piece of land, no one's going anywhere," arguing for coexistence born of necessity, empathy, and the exhausting but vital work of recognizing the other's humanity.