

HOLDING LIAT

Director Brandon Kramer

USA | 2025

93 min. | English, Hebrew with English subtitles

Cinematography Yoni Brook, Omer Manor. **Editing** Jeff Gilbert. **Music** Jordan Dykstra. **Sound Design** Tristan Baylis. **Sound** Jim Choi. **Producers** Darren Aronofsky, Lance Kramer, Yoni Brook, Ari Handel, Justin A. Gonçalves. **Executive Producers** Elliott Joseph, Janine Frier, Alexandra Shiva. **Co-Producer** Hilla Medalia. **Production companies** Meridian Hill Pictures (Washington, DC, USA), Protozoa Pictures (New York, USA). **With** Yehuda Beinín, Liat Beinín Atzili, Chaya Beinín, Tal Beinín.

World sales Meridian Hill Pictures

Synopsis

A film that is shot truly open-endedly, in the thick of it, even though – at the outset – it was impossible to predict what would happen. Liat is forcibly abducted from her kibbutz by members of Hamas on 7 October 2023 and shortly afterwards Brandon Kramer starts filming with her family. He's right there with them, up close, as the parents Yehuda and Chaya try to deal with their fear – or to sway the fate of their adult daughter and her husband in dialogue with the authorities. As a US citizen, Yehuda flies to the USA, accompanied by Liat's son, who is burdened by more than the public attention, and Liat's sister, who will try to cushion Yehuda's temper and anger. Because even within this family views are polarised: despite his pain, the father takes a critical view of Israel's role in the Middle East conflict. He is a pacifist and will not be dissuaded from the path of reconciliation, even at the geopolitical epicentre of diplomacy and trauma. He persistently swims against the tide, takes issue with himself and everyone else and berates the Israeli government. A candid film of the hour. Insights don't come from politics, but from Liat's family. (Christiane Büchner, Barbara Wurm)

Brandon Kramer is a Washington, DC-based filmmaker and co-founder of Meridian Hill Pictures with his brother Lance. Brandon directed *THE FIRST STEP* (Tribeca, AFI DOCS); *CITY OF TREES* (Full Frame Documentary Film Festival, PBS, Netflix); and the Webby Award-winning independent documentary series *THE MESSY TRUTH* (CNN). Brandon is a Film Independent Fellow, a DC Commission on the Arts & Humanities Fellow, a regular collaborator with Kartemquin Films, and a teacher for the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts. Brandon holds a BA in film and cultural anthropology from Boston University.

Films: 2015: *City of Trees*. 2016: *The Messy Truth*. 2021: *The First Step*. 2025: *Holding Liat*.

Director's Statement

New Possibilities for Understanding

Intimacy and depth beyond the glare of the media spotlight

After October 7, 2023, my brother Lance and I contacted our extended family in Israel to check on their well-being.

When we spoke with our relative Yehuda, we learned that his daughter Liat and son-in-law Aviv went missing from their kibbutz and were presumed to be hostages in Gaza. Since Liat was one of a dozen American citizens missing, Yehuda told us that he planned to come with his family to our hometown, Washington, DC, to advocate for their release.

We did not know what was about to unfold, but we felt an imperative to start documenting the family's experience. We started by asking questions, observing, and being present in quiet moments where there often were no other cameras. Within the first days of filming, we were struck by the multiplicity of perspectives within the family on how to free hostages, end the escalating war, and find a path toward reconciliation. Liat and Aviv's captivity brought out questions about each family member's identity and their relationships with one another. Our camera became a place for each person in the family to authentically share without judgment.

We had a unique access point to create a historical record of this moment through the frame of one family. Because of our pre-existing relationships beginning decades prior to October 7th, we were able to bear witness with an intimacy and depth that could go beyond the intense glare of the media spotlight. We filmed with the family in their homes, in the halls of Congress, and backstage at demonstrations, as they were thrust into the epicenter of this geopolitical crisis. Where the story led us was a profound place we never could have imagined from the onset.

More than a year after October 7th, lives are still imperiled: with hostages still held, tens of thousands of Palestinians killed, and people across the region suffering. Our conversations about all these issues have only become more polarized, even within communities and families. By telling an intimate story of one directly impacted family, and the way they navigated differences amongst each other, we hope to open new possibilities for understanding this conflict and contribute to an end to the unrelenting violence in the region.

We are keenly aware that this film is just one family's story out of countless others, and that many important stories may tragically never be told. We hope through the family's resilience and openness, alongside other Israeli and Palestinian films that seek to broaden understanding, audiences will find room to ask deeper questions that help mark a path toward healing and reconciliation.

Brandon Kramer

An Inviting and Disarming Experience

A conversation about acting responsibly as a filmmaker and a relative in the epicenter of one of the most significant geopolitical crises of our time

*Barbara Wurm: Wonderful, Brandon, that we have the possibility to meet before the festival and the world premiere of your film **HOLDING LIAT**. This is a project that is so special as it is always full of the moment. It exists so much in an open present because you never know what's going to happen next. We are shortly before the premiere in Berlin, and it is maybe also on a larger scale a historical moment in the negotiations. The hostage question is on the front pages of current politics. Maybe you can share your feelings or your thoughts about this. Will it influence your expectations with this premiere of the film?*

Brandon Kramer: From a very early point in production, we knew we had a responsibility not only to tell this story with the highest level of care and craft, but also to ensure that we could complete the film as rapidly as possible. We're in a moment where the dialogue around this conflict is extremely polarized and the stakes could not be higher. Telling complex stories about the lived experience of people directly impacted by this crisis feels more urgent now than ever. The story in our film is one that does not fit neatly into a box, and reveals more questions than it answers. This world premiere at the Berlinale is the first of what we hope are many spaces where the film can contribute to a deeply fractured and urgent conversation.

Christiane Büchner: Can you tell us how the project started? As I understand, you are in a distant way part of the family. How early did you approach your relatives with this idea, and what did you agree on at this moment?

BK: A few days after Liat and Aviv were taken, Lance and I reached out to Liat's parents - who are distant relatives of ours. We called to check in on them, and had no intention of making a film. On that call, Liat's father told us that he was going to travel with other members of the family to our hometown Washington, DC to leverage Liat's American citizenship to try to get her and Aviv home. After that conversation, my brother Lance and I dropped what we were doing. We felt a responsibility to pick up our camera. For the past 15 years, we've been making observational films of directly-impacted people navigating complex social and political crises, and now, our relatives were thrust into the epicenter of one of the most significant geopolitical crises of our time. The entire world was discussing the hostages, and we had a unique access point to document the nuances of what this experience was like for this one family. We discussed the idea of filming with the family and they agreed that documenting their experience felt important. Liat is a history teacher, and her family believed that she would want her family's story documented for history's sake. We had no idea at that point if Liat and Aviv would survive, or where this journey would take us.

CB: At what point did you know this would be a film?

BK: We didn't know this would be a film at first. One of the first scenes we shot in DC was a conversation between Liat's father, her sister and her son. Each one of them shared divergent views about how to get Liat and Aviv home and seek an end to the broader conflict. Yehuda spoke about the need to get Liat and Aviv home and also advocate for peace and reconciliation. Liat's sister felt that this was not a time to focus on a broader political solution and that Liat and Aviv should be the only priority. Liat's son was coping with the immediate crisis of both his parents held in captivity and having barely survived the attack himself. In that initial conversation, we witnessed how trauma and politics affected the identity of these three family members. Right in front of our camera, we saw three different

generations, confronting their differences on how to handle this impossible situation. It was that moment that we realized that the complexity of what this family was experiencing is an urgent story that must be told.

BW: There was no resistance against being filmed? They were all okay with it?

BK: It was an ongoing process. One of the most challenging parts about telling this story was trying to understand how to show up as a relative to this family in crisis while also having a responsibility as a documentarian to capture their experience in all its complexity. A huge part of documentary filmmaking like this is cultivating relationships. For my brother and me, it was critical to first and foremost be sensitive to the fact that the family was going through an extraordinarily painful experience, and to have a high degree of care in the way the camera was introduced. Since we have known Liat's parents for decades, there was a lot of trust from the get-go, but filming them in the most painful moments of their lives was challenging even with a level of trust built. We had constant conversations with the family about the importance of documenting the story with editorial independence, with having the ability to follow their experience as authentically as possible, including some of the more challenging moments they were navigating. We always made clear we were never trying to exploit their pain, but to understand the nuances of what they were going through. Our mentor Gordon Quinn (co-founder of Kartemquin Films) taught us to never look down the lens of our camera at anyone, and we tried hard to carry that ethic into this film. There were plenty of moments where I pushed too hard to film a moment and I had to rebuild trust afterwards, and there were other moments where I didn't film and just showed up as a relative and sometimes regretted not having the camera. It was a constant creative and ethical line we had to walk to tell this story.

BW: I had in mind more the moments when it becomes clear that now the film opens up to present also the political spectrum of attitudes and ideologies. That's why I thought maybe some were shy than others to have their political position in the film.

BK: It was important to us to empathize with every perspective within the family, and that required building a close relationship with each person individually. Within this one family, every person had different experiences and political views that they had to confront amongst themselves. With Liat and Aviv's lives at stake, they had no choice but to face these disagreements head on. The multiplicity of views and responses to this tragedy within the family seemed to echo some of the diversity of perspectives felt in communities and families across the world on this conflict. Every family member's values and experience felt important, nuanced and not well represented by other media. We wanted the film to present the kaleidoscope of experiences that we were witnessing as authentically as possible, and how these differences impacted their evolving relationships with one another. Their family experience felt both profound and universal.

CB: How long did you film? And how did you proceed with editing?

BK: We started filming two weeks after October 7th, 2023 and filming continued until the end of 2024. Within the 54 days that Liat was held in captivity, we had documented some of the most intimate and revealing moments I have ever witnessed. Producer/Director of Photography Yoni Brook and I were basically living with the family for a majority of these days. For example, we were literally sleeping on the floor outside the family's hotel room, so we could capture the middle of the night phone calls the family received from the IDF. After Liat was released, we paused to review the footage we had captured, and reflected that we needed to begin the edit immediately, even as we knew we had to continue filming. We all agreed that we would somehow both continue production and begin the edit simultaneously without

cutting any corners creatively or editorially. These dual goals made for an extremely daunting task, which was only possible because of the extraordinary editorial work of our editor Jeff Gilbert, and the brilliant full throttle producing work of Lance, Yoni Brook, Justin Gonçalves, Darren Aronofsky and Ari Handel to create and support both production and editorial teams working simultaneously. We reached out to editor Jeff Gilbert because he edited one of my favorite films called *THE OVERNIGHTERS*, and is a master of revealing complexity and humanity in his storytelling. There was a few hundred hours of footage already filmed when Jeff started and we had only just begun to film Liat's journey returning after captivity. Once Jeff watched every minute of footage and caught up to where we were in production, his voice was an instrumental part of shaping what we decided to film in those final months of production. One of the most important guiding principles in the edit (and in production) was to always keep the frame of the film on the family. We literally had the words "Family" taped up on the edit room wall. One of the other critical values within production and in the edit was to surround ourselves with advisors with different expertises and from different backgrounds. Before every shoot and at every cut of the film, we workshopped countless ethical and creative decisions with trusted advisors to help us not only strengthen the narrative craft of the film, but also help us understand the broader political and social context which the story rests within.

BW: One of the editing decisions is to frame the film with Liat and her extraordinary vision of world politics that is also special because it goes beyond the Gaza fence. Tell us more about this scene when you film her at Yad Vashem.

BK: After Liat was released, we immediately knew that the story must shift to her point of view. We just spent nearly two months following Liat's family's journey trying to get her home. Now that she had returned, it was important to us to better understand the meaning that she was creating from her experience in captivity. Thankfully, Liat believed in what we were trying to do with this film. Amidst a flurry of interview requests from media outlets, I think Liat was somewhat relieved by the space and openness that the documentary form allows for someone to share their story. The scene at Yad Vashem happened a few months after she returned from captivity when she started going back to work. Liat is a high school history and civics teacher, and she also is a guide at Yad Vashem, the Holocaust Memorial and Museum in Jerusalem. We wanted to capture the internal and external parts of her processing her experience as authentically as possible. We did not know at the time what her views would be, and how she would express them. The story ends with these difficult questions Liat asks about empathy and peace because she is the one who went through this experience most directly, and therefore we felt Liat should have the final reflections of the film.

BW: But in addition to that, the scene when Yehuda is with the authorities, and he has this conversation with a Palestinian advocate. Can you talk about this scene as well?

BK: In this scene, we were filming with Yehuda as he walked the halls of Congress in DC advocating for Liat and Aviv's release and a path for peace and reconciliation. Yehuda had just given an interview where he was critical of the Israeli government's leadership. As he walked away from the journalist, a Palestinian man who was also walking the halls of Congress approached Yehuda. He found out that Yehuda was the father of one of the hostages and wanted to talk with him. This man had lost many members of his family in the war in Gaza. In this incredible and spontaneous moment, they both connected on a shared sense of loss on both sides of the fence. The moment is so special because there is a connection across these lines being formed in real time, but also some palpable sense of tension as well. This wasn't just a moment of kumbaya. The hurt and anger is deeply present for both of them. I think in that moment, we were able to see a rare glimpse into grief, anger, and the capacity to see one another's humanity.

CB: Maybe we go back to the beginning of our talk. What kind of realm for discussion do you expect? Coming to Germany and discussing this film in the triangle between the US, Israel, and Germany?

BK: I think Berlin is really the perfect place to premiere the film, especially at a festival that has a long history of tackling bold and important political and social issues of our time. We're deeply grateful for the Berlinale for seeing the humanity and urgency of this story, and having the courage to program the film. Some may feel that it's a lot easier to decide not to present these kinds of stories and avoid treading into these prickly, contentious topics and dialogues. The fact that the Berlinale is providing this film such a huge platform for its debut is something that we take very seriously. Given the different perspectives represented within this story, I'm hoping that the film can be an inviting and disarming experience for many different kinds of audiences and ignite a kind of constructive conversation that isn't happening nearly enough. One that confronts divergent views head on, and one that carries empathy, care and an open mind, and helps contribute to a more peaceful future.

BW: I think we completely share this hope, and we are already extremely grateful that you found also the words for this feeling and expectation we have. It's a remarkable film in many ways, but for me, the biggest challenge is to keep this thin line between completely functionalizing a film's view and sharing the hope that is connected with it.