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Terror Victim's Widow Mired in Immigration Battle

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The Israeli widow of a rabbi murdered during the 2008 terrorist attacks in Mumbai is locked in a fight with U.S. immigration officials who may block her from visiting her eight children here.

Michael Wildes, a partner in the New York firm Wildes & Weinberg and former mayor of Englewood, said Frumet Teitelbaum came to his office two weeks ago in tears. The eight children she had with her late husband, Brooklyn-born Rabbi Aryeh Leibish Teitelbaum, are staying with the rabbi's family in Brooklyn while attending school. Frumet Teitelbaum had been using a tourist visa to regularly travel between her home in Israel and New York to see her children, whose ages range from 2 to 14.

Until two months ago.

Michael Wildes is representing Frumet Teitelbaum, widow of Rabbi Aryeh Leibish Teitelbaum, who was killed in the 2008 terrorist attacks in Mumbai. Teitelbaum had been shuttling between her home in Israel and New York to see her children when customs officials restricted her visa.

When Teitelbaum flew into John F. Kennedy Airport on Feb. 2, customs officials cited her for overuse of her tourist visa, according to Wildes. An agent marked Teitelbaum's visa, Wildes said, so that she could not extend her stay or apply for permanent residence.

"This is contrary to the law and humanity, frankly," Wildes said. "He should have encouraged her to apply for a green card rather than use a visa."

A U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement official declined comment, citing ICE's privacy policy.

"She presented herself as a widow of a U.S. citizen who was gunned down by terrorists and [the customs official] purposely took this action," Wildes said. "I would hope it has nothing to do with the way she physically appeared or any other preconceived intent, but rather an over-exuberant officer."

Teitelbaum's visa is set to expire this month. Wildes told The Jewish Standard last week that he expects to have her residency application completed this week and he hopes to have a green card for Teitelbaum within seven months. He said he would make use of a law enacted in response to the Sept. 11 attacks that grants families of terror victims the right to residency.

Teitelbaum will be permitted to remain in the United States after her visa expires while the process continues, he said.

Ari Felberman, head of government relations in the predominantly Satmar Village of Kiryas Joel in Monroe, N.Y., wrote to Sen. Chuck Schumer (D-N.Y.) in February asking him to intervene on Teitelbaum's behalf. Calls to Felberman were not returned by press time. Frumet Teitelbaum is related to the Satmars' Teitelbaum dynasty.

"We are working with immigration officials, advocates of the family, and their attorney to support her application for legal status so that she can regularly visit and be with her children," Schumer said in a statement to the Standard last week.

"We have a very strong case and I believe we will be favorably adjudicated," Wildes said.

The Teitelbaums were living in Jerusalem in 2008 when Aryeh Leibish Teitelbaum went to Mumbai to work as a kosher food supervisor. He was visiting Chabad's Nariman house there when it became one of 10 sites hit during a three-day attack by an Islamist Pakistani group. Teitelbaum was one of six Jews killed in the attack, which left 166 dead and hundreds injured.

Wildes said he has been approached by family members of other victims of the massacre and he is weighing whether to join an effort to seek damages. A motion could be filed, he said, to seize or freeze any assets in the United States belonging to the terrorist groups or the government of Pakistan if the government is linked with the terrorists.

"If these militant factions are sponsored by any government or corporate entity we would seek redress," he said.