

State Department, which feared that once here they would try to remain by demanding asylum. Wildes refused to take no for an answer. He took tremendous personal risks and experienced many sleepless nights, but in the end he succeeded.

Rabbi Moshe Sherer, late chairman of Agudas Yisrael of America, helped place the Iranian boys in yeshivas. The boys married in America (many of them to Iranian girls Wildes helped bring in) and established homes. Wildes takes tremendous satisfaction knowing that there are hundreds of fine Jewish families, today marrying off their grandchildren, who remained true to the Torah thanks in great part to his efforts.

## Cast Your Bread Upon the Water

After a year at HIAS, a former professor named Elmer Fried approached Leon Wildes with an offer. There was a demand for more lawyers who specialized in immigration, and Fried suggested that they open their own firm to practice immigration law. Wildes accepted.

It is worth noting that when Leon Wildes first became an immigration lawyer there were only a handful of immigration attorneys in New York and a total of just 400 in the entire US. Most of Wildes' training came from his hands-on experience representing clients. In fact, much of the academic material on the subject studied in America's law



When he first began practicing immigration law, Leon Wildes never dreamed that one day immigration would become one of the hottest political issues in America.

schools today was written by Leon Wildes. Today, there are 50,000 immigration lawyers in America, and immigration has become a broad field—especially since the changes that resulted from the 9/11 attacks.

While sitting in his office one day, Leon Wildes received a phone call from a fellow lawyer, a Torah-observant Jew in Cleveland who was struggling to bring his foreign-born grandchildren to America. Others had already invested much effort in the case, without success, and a less devoted lawyer would have turned it down. Wildes, however, decided to give it a try by calling the district director of the immigration office in Cleveland.

When he called the office and asked for the director, Wildes was informed that the director had just retired and had not yet been replaced. "Then let me speak to the assistant director for citizenship," he asked instead.

"He is now on vacation."

"So who's running the office?" Wildes asked.

He was told that a deportation officer was now the chief supervisor. Eventually, he was put through to someone named Inspector Kovalchik. When Kovalchik picked up the phone, Wildes told him, "You know, in our town there was a family named Kovalchik that owned a store that sold..."

"...furniture," the inspector finished his sentence. "Are you from Olyphant?"

"Yes!"

It was a stroke of *hashgachah*, because Kovalchik had told Wildes that even though his job as a deportation officer did not include granting resident status to foreigners, nevertheless since Wildes came from his hometown he agreed to work on it.

One week later, Kovalchik called Wildes. "Tell me, who was Harry Wildes?"

When Leon explained that Harry was his father, the inspector told him that he had spoken to his mother who still lived in Olyphant. She was already in her nineties, but she still recalled vividly how she had once bought clothing for \$2.98 and presented a \$20 bill as payment. Harry Wildes had mistaken it for a \$10 bill and calculated the change

accordingly. Later that night, he realized his mistake, and the senior Wildes traveled half an hour to her home to pay back the remaining \$10. Harry Wildes had once more earned his reputation as an honest Jew.

The *hashgachah* is worth highlighting. *Hashem* arranged that the highest post at the immigration office in Cleveland was to be vacated at that exact moment so that Leon Wildes would deal directly with the inspector from his hometown. Having heard from his mother the type of honest person he was dealing with, Inspector Kovalchik threw himself whole-heartedly into the case.

## Who Is John Lemon?!

In 1960, now with a decade experience as an immigration lawyer, Wildes moved his office into a skyscraper at 515 Madison Avenue on the Lower East Side of Manhattan. The office is still at the same location over 50 years later, though now it is actually an expanded complex of numerous offices and cubicles. The office employs a large staff of clerks and secretaries and includes other prominent lawyers, such as Leon's son Michael.

For our interview, we met the father and son in their headquarters, which has hosted many prominent figures over the years. It did not start out that way. When he launched his offices, Leon Wildes was entering a fairly new field and most of his clients were impoverished immigrants who could not afford more than modest sums for his services. All that changed dramatically one day when an old friend from law school who worked as legal advisor for a large music producer called him about a client named John Lennon. Lennon and his wife were fighting for resident status while the State Department wanted them deported.

"If you want, Leon," the friend told him, "you can come with me to meet him today. He's a very important client of ours."

Wildes did not know that this was one of the most famous musicians in the world, so he sheepishly asked his friend, "Excuse me, but who is John Lemon?"



Skyscraper where the Wildes law offices are located at 515 Madison Avenue on Manhattan's East Side.

It was 1972. Lennon had a history of minor entanglement with the law in his native UK and the US government was using that as a basis for deporting him.

The issue ran much deeper than just a bureaucratic tangle, however. President Richard Nixon himself was desperate to throw the musician out of the country, because he was very active in the anti-Vietnam War movement, and his iconic status among the American youth made the federal government view him as a threat. Furthermore, Nixon was running for reelection that year, and he feared Lennon would galvanize young voters against him. (1972 was the first year that 18-year-olds were permitted to vote.)

As soon as they met, Lennon was impressed by the Jewish lawyer's integrity. He was particularly impressed when Mr. Wildes refused to touch non-kosher food. He immediately retained Wildes as his lawyer. Wildes tried to dissuade Lennon, arguing that he was not powerful enough and he could not see how he could possibly win the case. But Lennon only became more convinced that he wanted to stick with the Jewish lawyer.

When Lennon asked Wildes for his home phone number, he replied, “It comes with a condition: I don’t answer the phone from Friday night through Saturday night.” In a media interview, Lennon later reported that he had a choice to hire a prominent liberal lawyer instead, but he chose Wildes because he trusted him as a religious man.

It was a difficult legal battle, complicated by the fact that Wildes was fighting an administration that—as the public learned later—had no qualms using very aggressive tactics against its enemies.

“Fortunately, I didn’t know at the time who I was starting up with,” Leon Wildes says. “If I had, I probably would have reconsidered taking the case.”

First, Wildes contacted the director of the federal immigration division in New York, who he was on very friendly terms with, and asked him to grant a six-month humanitarian extension for Lennon and his wife. The basis for this was that Lennon’s wife had not seen her eight-year-old son from a previous marriage for several years and now she finally had the opportunity to spend time with him.

The next day, the director called Wildes back and told him, “Leon, because it’s you they will receive an extension for one month. But not more. You should know that the atmosphere in Washington is poisoned against them. Get them out of America as soon as possible.”

Wildes kept requesting extensions in order to draw out the legal procedures and buy them more time. He even sued Attorney General John Mitchell, a sworn Nixon lackey. (Mitchell would later be convicted and spend time in prison as a result of his involvement in the Watergate scandal.) The battle dragged on for five years, but it ended in victory. Lennon and his wife were issued green cards, permitting them to remain in America indefinitely.

The victory led to greater transparency on the part of the US immigration system. It also paved the way for many immigration protocols, including President Obama’s recent “Deferred Action Plan.”



Michael Wildes delivers a lecture on immigration law for the course his father used to teach.



Michael always held his father Leon Wildes in utmost respect.

Under this plan, certain illegal immigrants who entered the country at a young age and are not deemed a security risk can receive permission to remain in America.

Due to Lennon’s celebrity status, newspapers across America and Europe provided extensive coverage of the case. Everyone involved was quick to give credit to Leon Wildes. The high-profile case brought Wildes and his firm into the limelight, ushering in a period of increased success. People from all over began turning to him.

Wildes was also hired as law professor at Cardozo Law School of Yeshiva University, where he speaks annually about that particular legal case. (Eventually, Michael took over this position from his father, and he holds it today.)

In 1970, Leon Wildes was elected president of the American Immigration Lawyers

Association. Today, his name is legendary as one of the leading authorities in the field. He is sometimes referred to as the dean of all immigration lawyers.

## Apple Does Not Fall Far from the Tree

When Michael Wildes was growing up in Forest Hills, Queens, his father was already a legend. Michael holds his father in the highest esteem.

“Whenever there was a holiday I went with my father to his office,” Michael Wildes told *Zman*. “I remember like yesterday how my mother packed up the kosher sandwiches for us in silver foil—there were no kosher restaurants back then—and then I spent the entire day cutting up paper and doing other jobs around the office. And if I was good, I received a gift of a thick law book overnight....”

Michael Wildes studied at the yeshivah in Riverdale and then went to law school with the intention of following in his father’s footsteps. He was one of the students in his father’s class at Cardozo. He was a good student and in his free time he assisted his father at the office.

But that still wasn’t enough to satisfy the energetic Michael. He joined the New York Police Department as an auxiliary police officer. After graduating law school, he worked for the office of the US Attorney and became a federal prosecutor.

“That job didn’t bring in much money, but I got up early and came home late and helped drive drug dealers and underworld figures who threatened the public peace out of the United States.” (Michael Wildes was among the federal prosecutors who prosecuted Congressman Mario Biaggi of New York for accepting \$872,000 in bribes and had him sentenced to 2 1/2 years in prison.)

This created an odd situation. Michael worked hard to evict some of the people his father was trying to help remain in the country! It went so far that he often found himself reading legal papers that his father

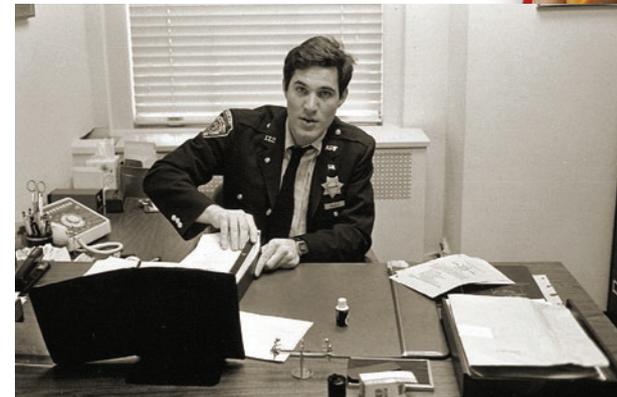
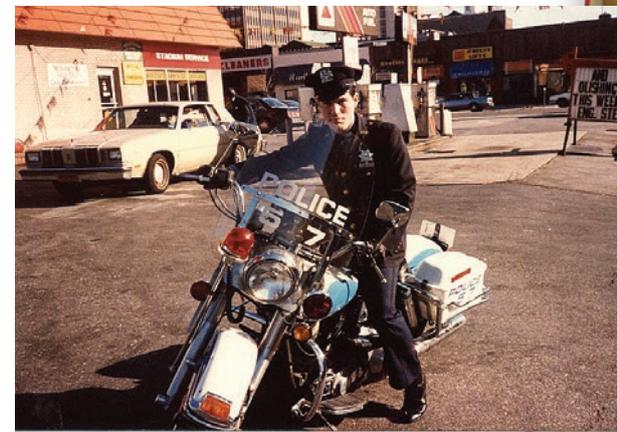
had written against the government position he was now pursuing!

“Many times people asked me, ‘Are you related to the lawyer Wildes?’ and I answered, ‘I am. He’s my father ....’”

This experience not only gave Wildes a solid background in the immigration law field from a prosecutor’s perspective, but he also gained valuable insight into the opposite perspective from his father. This proved to be of great benefit for him in the next step of his career.

After working as a federal prosecutor, Michael Wildes decided to switch over to the defense and joined his father’s law firm. It was not an easy transition.

*I was torn inside when I left the government. At work in the US Attorney’s office I had the ability to remove a fair number of bad people from the streets, something I could not do as a*



Michael Wildes during his tenure in the NYPD.

defense lawyer. But then I realized I also had a tremendous opportunity now, as an immigration lawyer, to help protect lives by representing people who had information against terror groups or underworld figures.

I had the privilege of appearing in Congress in 1999 in support of antiterrorism laws because we pointed out how future terrorists had entered America and spent time here thanks to their status as students, diplomats and so on. At the same time, we saw that there were people who had critical information that could fight terror or criminal groups.

## Jewish Immigration Cases

Over the years, the Wildes have represented countless Jews: Iranian, Russian, Yemenite and others. Agudas Yisrael and other organizations keep the numbers of Leon and Michael Wildes handy.

Sadly, 25 years after the collapse of the Soviet Union, there are countries where Jews still cannot observe their religion openly. One is France, where it is dangerous in many parts for a Jew to appear in public with a *yarmulke*.

“My recommendation to the Jews in such countries,” Michael tells us, “is ‘Get out of there!’ I meet constantly with clients from France. Unfortunately, you can’t receive asylum in America if you come from a country like France. But the Jews there must be very sensitive to their surroundings, and I tell them that it’s a situation of, ‘And a new king arose who did not recognize Yosef’ [Shemos 1:8].”

When we noted that 20 years ago no one could foresee the situation in France today, Michael replied, “I don’t agree with that. I had clients who were involved in the intelligence field and they clearly warned world leaders that the climate was changing in unison with the demographic situation. Sadly, the world responded with silence.”

His Jewish clients are not limited to those from unsafe countries. Many Jews from friendly countries have become entangled



Michael Wildes with Rabbi Genack of the OU and Senator Bob Menendez of New Jersey.



Artist's rendition of Michael Wildes appearing before a federal court in Washington.

with Immigration Services and its infamous bureaucracy. These included an orphan from Brazil whose only family members live in the US; a young man from *Eretz Yisrael* who is engaged to an American girl who wants to live in America; a family whose father is British, mother is Canadian and whose children were all born in and study in the United States; a family whose American father was murdered in a terror attack and their Israeli mother was barred from entering America, and more.

The father-and-son Wildes team fought for them in court, often avoiding a potentially devastating deportation at the last second.

“There were several cases where we were able to help people who unwittingly crossed the line or in cases where people were here with sick children or who were suffering from medical conditions, and having to deal with lawyers added pressure to their difficult situation. We managed to

help some *rabbanim* and *melamdin* who had come here on an R-1 visa, for religious workers, and then got entangled in the complex immigration codes.”

Michael is not the only Wildes to continue a family tradition. His younger brother, Rabbi Menachem Wildes, fulfilled their father Leon’s childhood dream of entering the rabbinate and bringing others closer to Torah. He leads a community as the rabbi of a shul in the fashionable Upper West Side and runs a program known as the Manhattan Jewish Experience, which includes classes for beginners and *Shabbos* and *Yom Tov* experiences.

Even in the area of immigration law it looks like the Wildes family tradition may continue for another generation. Michael has a son who hopes one day to follow in the footsteps of his father and grandfather. May the Wildes all continue to see success in their efforts to help Jews practice their religion proudly and freely, and to help Jews and others in their time of need. ■



Michael Wildes discusses immigration with former president Bill Clinton.



Zman correspondent Y. Lefkowitz at the interview with Leon (sitting) and Michael Wildes in their law offices in Manhattan's East Side.

## Mayor Wildes

Michael Wildes’ enthusiasm to help others knows no bounds. As a teenager he took the unusual step of joining the *chevrah kadishah*, the Jewish burial society, and he has been an active member of Hatzolah for 22 years. He has been known to run out of his office in the middle of meeting with a client to respond to a Hatzolah call, leaving his father to take over for him.

In 2013, Michael used his EMT qualifications to help an 80-year-old woman who suffered a stroke while flying on American Airlines. The airline later rewarded him with bonus miles.

After running to Hatzolah calls for a few years, Michael Wildes decided to run for something else: city council in his home town of Englewood. (His political interest dates back at least to 1984, when he gave up his summer vacation and traveled to Washington

to work for Congressmen Gerry Ackerman and Geraldine Ferraro.)

After two terms as a city councilman he decided to run for mayor. Wildes became the first Torah-observant mayor in America.

“I was sworn in four times on four *Chumashim* that belonged to four different grandfathers [of mine].”

As mayor he presided over 30,000 residents, among them a Jewish community of approximately 9,000, as well as several other ethnic groups. Wildes extended himself to establish positive working relationships with the leaders of all communities.

In developing this communal harmony, Mayor Wildes created a great *kiddush Hashem*. In one example, after he arranged to place sidewalks in the Jewish neighborhoods of

Englewood so people could walk safely to shul and to friends on *Shabbos*, he also made sure to secure critically needed funding for improvements in the local public schools.

After serving two terms, Wildes decided he could not proceed with his busy law career and care for his growing family while acting as mayor as well. For now, he has given up politics, though he may return once his children are grown.

In addition to his careers in law and politics, Michael Wildes also sits on a number of boards. He is a member of CSS, a government committee that deals with protecting shuls and religious institutions across America. He is also a member of the Committee on Present Danger in which he serves alongside former CIA Director James Woolsey and former Connecticut Senator and vice presidential candidate Joe Lieberman. He has been suggested as a candidate for other political positions and some speculate that he will run for Congress one day. Wildes states that he will wait until his children are old enough to take over the firm before he considers such options. ■



Wildes at his first city council meeting as mayor.



Mayor Wildes speaks at a parade in Englewood for American servicemen.

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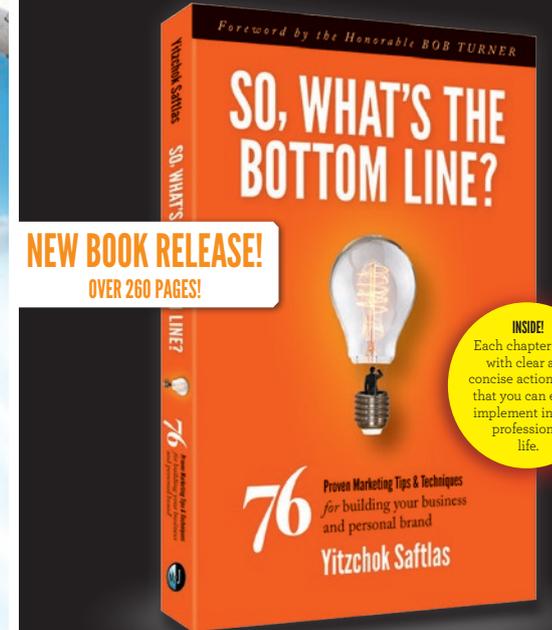
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