

# ***The Dybbukast***

## **Season 2, Episode 6: "The Temple Bombing"**

### **Transcription**

**An actor reads from *The Temple Bombing*:**

What does it mean, "A temple has been bombed"? It is possible to describe the physical damage. This much the eye can see. But what does such destruction do to the soul of the beholder? This was a message to all the bewildered and confused people of America: Terror is at hand. We have the means to spread that terror and to rule by force. Law is dead. We are the law.

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**Host Aaron Henne:** Welcome to *The Dybbukast*, the show in which we ask: What do poems, plays, and other creative texts from throughout history tell us about the times in which they were written, and what do they reveal about the forces still at play in our contemporary societies? I'm Aaron Henne, artistic director of theatre dybbuk.

In this episode, presented in collaboration with the Atlanta-based congregation, The Temple, we will be exploring the bombing of that institution's building, which took place in 1958, and the ways in which that incident overlapped with issues of belonging, assimilation, and civil rights. Throughout the episode, you will hear readings from *The Temple Bombing*, a play written by Jimmy Maize, which premiered at the Alliance Theater in 2017. It was inspired by the book of the same name by Melissa Fay Greene. At the top, you heard the words, as featured in the play, of Rabbi Jacob Rothschild, spiritual leader of The Temple at the time of the bombing.

And now, Season Two, Episode Six: "The Temple Bombing."

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**Actor 2:** *This is the story of The Temple Bombing the way I remember it, and the only way I know how to tell it: as a rabbi's wife, as a citizen of Atlanta, as an actress, as a historian. This play is made of interviews, letters, court transcripts, my husband's sermons, and my own memories of the events leading up to and following October 12, 1958.*

**Aaron:** In the play, this is how Janice Rothschild Blumberg, author, historian, and widow of Rabbi Jacob Rothschild, introduces what will take place. In addition to the book by Melissa Fay Greene, which I brought up earlier, Janice's recollections also served as a source for the play. We will hear from Janice herself later. First, Dr. Catherine Lewis, Professor of History at Kennesaw State University, will share with us about the history of Jews in the South, with a focus on Georgia, and then, specifically, on Atlanta.

**Dr. Catherine Lewis:** The first Jews came to Savannah in 1733 and other families soon followed. Now they were building communities and institutions and businesses around the state. And when Atlanta's Terminus, that railroad terminus of 1837, was established, that turned the attention inward. Add to that in 1854, a yellow fever epidemic, and that of course would impact the coastal communities of Georgia. That also drew families into Atlanta. Now, early Jewish immigrants were mostly from Germany, and, by 1850, as we come close to the Civil War, there were 26 Jews in Atlanta. A second wave is going to come just a little bit later from Eastern Europe after the assassination of Czar Alexander II in Russia in 1881.

So I'm often asked how The Temple came to be. And it's got a great story. Rabbi Isaac Leiser of Philadelphia's Knesset Israel was touring Atlanta and finding no synagogue. He urged our friends in Griffin, Newnan, Athens, Marietta, and Atlanta to form a union and to meet for public worship. Now, Reverend Jacob Rosenfeld from Savannah's Mikvah Israel, which is, of course, one of the most historic Southern synagogues, joined Rabbi Leiser, and he led some early High Holy Day services in Atlanta. This would have been about the 1860s. So let's fast-forward just a few years to 1867. Rabbi Leiser's back. He returns to Atlanta to conduct the wedding of German immigrants, Emilie Baer and Abraham Rosenfeld. And again, he encourages the local Jewish population to

establish a congregation. Heeding that advice, attorney Samuel Weil files a petition in Superior Court, April 1, 1867. And that forms The Hebrew Benevolent Congregation, which becomes known as The Temple. Now, there are 66 charter members. They're very active in this community, and they play a significant role in the commercial life of the city. Just like Jews throughout America, frankly, and throughout the South, they did not necessarily face virulent antisemitism that they might have seen in Europe.

In the first decades, The Temple shifted back and forth between Reform Judaism and more conservative observance. There were six rabbis in this very early period representing different traditions. But the congregation's permanent commitment to the Reform Movement would not come until 1895, with the hiring of American-born David Marx. His tenure would mark the beginning of five decades of stability for The Temple in Atlanta. He stays 'til 1946. So think about what he would have led his congregation through: the turn of the century, World War I, the Progressive Era, World War II. I mean, it's really quite an extraordinary tenure.

**Aaron:** And now, we will hear from Janice Rothschild Blumberg, who, as I previously mentioned, is a historian and the widow of Rabbi Jacob Rothschild, as well as a long-time member of The Temple.

**Janice Rothschild Blumberg:** My time there really goes back beyond my own birth because my great-grandfather was probably its first ordained rabbi. He was the first leader that they had. That illustrates my roots in the congregation. And because of that, even though my family — my parents — were not at all active in the congregation, I still got special attention from the rabbi — the rabbi being David Marx. And when my husband-to-be came to Atlanta in 1946, Dr. Marx was the only rabbi that three generations of us had ever known.

**Catherine:** The Temple welcomed his successor, Pittsburgh-born Rabbi Jacob Rothschild. Rabbi Rothschild sought to revive Jewish practices and traditions, reflecting the change in the Reform Movement broadly throughout the United States. He challenged members who celebrated Christmas and began hosting Hanukkah celebrations for religious school students. And in 1947, he used his Rosh Hashanah

sermon — this is just two years from the end of World War II — and he decides to emphasize the message of racial justice, a theme that would define his time at The Temple.

**Actor 1:** *Somehow, the Negro's demand for self-fulfillment brings unhappiness to the white man. He resists with all the power at his command. He perverts the law for his own purpose. He puts a stocking over his face and shoots into a house of God. He burns a cross crowned by a Negro's hat. Moderates view with alarm and point fingers of scorn at these acts, but nothing is done. The law either cannot or does not act.*

**Actor 3:** *I mean, he's on a crusade. Our congregation doesn't want to hear about civil rights.*

**Actor 4:** *We want him to talk about the Bible.*

**Actor 1:** *We must do more than view with alarm the growing race-hatred that threatens the South.*

**Actor 4:** *I get infuriated with these sermons. He's acting more like an ultra-liberal social worker than a religious leader.*

**Actor 1:** *Injustice, inequality, the loss of human rights anywhere challenges the basic principles of Jewish ethics. The problem is ours to solve and the time for the solution is now.*

**Catherine:** This is a bold stand, starting, as I said, in the sort of post-war period, all the way through his tenure. And the following year, the sisterhood and the couples' club sponsored programs in support of social action and civil rights. Now, attorney Morris Abram, who was a very well-known member, and the Reverend Dr. Benjamin E. Mays, who is president of Morehouse, spoke about the moral and legal aspects of segregation, again, showcasing how much the Jewish community played a role in this very important conversation. Rothschild met with protest after having Mays and his wife to a dinner with sisterhood members, right? This is still a period of Jim Crow, but his

message was clear: The struggle for civil rights for African-Americans was a moral and a religious issue. And he was not going to be silent. In response to a confrontation over the public school integration of Little Rock, in Arkansas, in 1957, *The Atlanta Constitution* and *The Atlanta Journal* and the *Congressional Record* would publish the Minister's Manifesto, mainly authored by Rothschild and signed by 80 Christian clergy.

**Actor 5:** *"In presenting our views for the consideration of others, we can speak only in a spirit of deep humility and of penitence for our own failures. We cannot claim that the problem of racial relationships has been solved even in the churches which we serve. And we are conscious that our own example in the matter of brotherhood and neighborliness has been all too imperfect. We do not pretend to know all the answers. We are of one mind, however, in believing that Christian people have a special responsibility for the solution of our racial problems."* November 3, 1957.

**Catherine:** So that's just a very quick snapshot of the kind of engagement that he was involved in. And he pulled that congregation along — some people willingly, some people not so willingly — and this is what's going to ultimately lead to the events surrounding The Temple bombing. And on October 12th, 1958, white supremacists placed 50 sticks of dynamite by the northern entrance of The Temple, destroying one of the building's outer walls. Nobody was harmed but it was a major turning point in The Temple's history.

**Janice:** We were notified by the janitor, who was weeping when he called at 7:30 in the morning to say that he had found this huge hole in the side of the building. There was a double door there by the driveway for an additional entrance, and the blast had gone through the door and destroyed everything in its path, which was the auditorium and a lot of the Sunday School rooms on the second floor above it. However, the rabbi's study and the sanctuary, which was a good bit to the right of where the blast was, was saved because there was a vault to keep papers and money, I suppose, whatever — but that was impenetrable unless you had the combination. And so that saved everything — the really beautiful, historic sanctuary itself.

**Catherine:** Leaders from outside the Jewish community stood in solidarity with the congregation, reflecting the recognition of the importance of social justice. Atlanta Mayor William Hartsfield visited the site of the bombing.

**Actor 6:** *This shocks and amazes us. Atlanta has prided itself on being a beacon of tolerance and racial and religious decency in the South.*

**Catherine:** Atlanta's fascinating because, unlike Birmingham or Montgomery or Charleston or some of these other deeply Southern cities that really struggled with civil rights, and, sort of, what their role was going to be, and experienced great violence because they did not have enlightened leadership, Atlanta's leadership was really fairly thoughtful and realized that segregation is bad for business. And that's what made Atlanta such a significant city, because of enlightened leadership, notably about race.

**Actor 6:** *Looking at this terrible demolition, I cannot help but realize it is the end result and payoff of a lot of rabble-rousing in the South. Whether they like it or not, every rabble-rousing politician is the godfather of these cross burners and dynamiters who sneak about in the dark. It is high time that decent people of the South rise up and take charge. A reward of a thousand dollars will be offered by the city of Atlanta for information leading to the arrest and conviction of the perpetrators.*

**Catherine:** And newspapers around the nation published an image of him standing with Rabbi Rothschild.

**Janice:** As I was absent-mindedly watching him rush back from the bedroom to the bathroom, to shaving, to this and that — you know, getting dressed. And he had left a sports shirt hanging on the back of one of the chairs or something, and he grabbed it. And I remember myself saying, "Wear a coat and tie. There might be reporters". And he roared back at me, "What do you think this is? This is an emergency. It's not a fashion show". But he did it. And the funny thing was this picture of him and Mayor Hartsfield examining the rubble, one of the New York papers had the caption under: "Mayor Hartsfield and the hatless rabbi." So I said, "So how would you have felt if you hadn't even had a tie?"

**Catherine:** If you look at the significant markers in the history of Jewish life in Atlanta, certainly The Temple bombing is one of the most important in 1958. But equally important is the incident surrounding the brutal murder of Leo Frank. Now I'll take you back in time to Confederate Memorial Day, April 26, 1913, when 13-year-old Mary Anne Phagan was found murdered in the basement of the National Pencil Company. The Jewish superintendent of the factory, Leo Frank, who was an active Temple member, was arrested for the crime. And the events that followed one of the most sensational trials of the century led to Frank's conviction, and then also the events lead to the commutation of his death sentence and eventually his subsequent lynching on August 17, 1915.

These events surrounding Leo Frank polarize Atlanta. They captured the attention and sympathies of national and international audiences, and, ultimately, they had far-ranging social, legal and cultural changes, not just for the Jewish community, but also for the South, and, frankly, for the nation.

**Actor 3:** *A former sheriff, two judges, a clergyman — no one was ever charged. There was no justice. My father said hundreds of people came to see his body, just hanging there.*

**Actor 7:** *And they took photographs and sold them as postcards. Did you know they cut up the rope and sold it the next day for \$5 an inch at Five Points?*

**Actor 3:** *And his nightshirt. And branches from the tree.*

**Actor 5:** *People bought all of those souvenirs. And they'd get passed down through generations. I look at people on the street and wonder who still keeps one.*

**Jimmy Maize:** For me, the real heart of the matter is: How do you take a stand? How do you reconcile, sort of, real past trauma?

**Aaron:** That was Jimmy Maize, the writer and director of the play, which, as I said at the beginning, premiered in 2017. Jimmy spoke with us about the piece and the historical and social investigations with which it was engaging.

**Jimmy:** Leo Frank's trial really drove a defining line in between race and religion, I would say. No longer was the Jew in the South safe because they were German Jewish, right — as white. But rather, like, the religion aspect of that trial was so polarizing that turning public opinion against Jews for their beliefs, as opposed to their appearance. And so, all of a sudden, this community in Atlanta was on high alert, right? Like, oh, well, then we need to change our behavior, because it's actually something in our control.

**Actor 5:** *"Let us not go out of our way to cling to religious anachronisms, thereby making ourselves strange to our neighbors. Let us release our grip on Judaic antiquities. Let us make our religion a private matter."* From a sermon delivered by Rabbi David Marx.

**Jimmy:** And in this story specifically — having to do all the way back with the lynching of Leo Frank, who is a member of The Temple — something that is really deeply embedded in a community psyche: How do you overcome things like that in order to do what's right, or to take a stand, or to go out of your comfort zone, especially for another demographic or another minority or another group at risk in your town?

**Actor 1:** *Our first duty is not to allow ourselves to be intimidated. What we do makes no difference in how we are treated. Whether we speak our conscience or hide and remain silent, we will be attacked. We have a duty therefore to speak out on the basis of our religious commitments. We need not lead, but we dare not remain silent.*

**Jimmy:** Leading up to the production and during the production, there were defamation and destruction in Jewish cemeteries happening. What was happening in the national dialogue at the time was ever informing how we looked at the piece. These voices of then — we were calling them alt-right but, really, as we know them as white supremacy — was being, if not egged on, certainly given a platform at that time.

And as we still feel the reverberations, you know, today, we knew that that wasn't something that we wanted to shy away from in the portrayal of George Bright, who was the first to stand trial. Referring to, you know, why Jews were stoking or moving us towards, you know, communist state or, you know, communist sympathizers, George Bright would say, well, this was printed in this newspaper, therefore it's real. It's facts. And just — I remember that year, this idea of being in a post-truth or find-your — pick-your-own truth — era of fake news. Might-as-well- be truth.

**Actor 8:** *Gentlemen, I deeply appreciate the opportunity that you have afforded me. This is the first act of kindness that I have seen since I was picked up Monday afternoon. Where is the justice department, Mr. Eisenhower, who have such beautiful statements concerning civil rights? I ask you, where are my civil rights today? I did not even get a right to see my accusers at the indictments. Now I am just dumbfounded, amazed, that somebody would accuse me of the bombing of The Temple.*

*Just dumbfounded. Now I will say this, and this is public knowledge, there has been brewing a threat of the integrationists to break the barrier of segregation in this city. And I have been active in voicing my opinion for the continuance of segregation. I have been active in voicing my opinion of our liberal government, which has taken us down a dangerous road to socialism and eventually communism.*

*But I'm wholly innocent of the charges being brought against me, and I know that, in the end, truth will be on my side and God above won't let anything but a just verdict be rendered in this case.*

**Jimmy:** Melissa Fay Green donated a lot of her papers that she used in writing the 1996 book that this is inspired by. You know, in reading Melissa's book for the first time, I was just blown away by the number of surprises. You know, every page, I was like, oh my gosh, you got to be kidding me. I would say the largest — one of the largest is just Reuben Garland, who, if you know the piece at all or Atlanta history, he's a very famous lawyer.

**Actor 4:** *Well, hello, gentlemen. Your Honor, gentlemen of the jury, this is an innocent man. He was arrested because he participated in a picketing, and, all the time, Mr. Bright was an innocent bachelor-man who felt compelled to work for what he considered a good cause: separation of the races. We're going to show you who really bombed The Temple. It was the state's star witness, L.E. Rogers. He bombed The Temple as part of a plot to collect the reward money.*

**Jimmy:** So theatrical. So, almost, a dying breed of the real Southern dandy who'd dress to the nines and be flashy and bring his theatrics to the courtroom in a way that was anything but legally sound, but was integral to his technique and success as a lawyer.

**Actor 4:** *This man is afflicted with insanity and suffers from hallucinations and imagination. The father of three idiot children; and it is an affirmative statement of men of medicine everywhere that no man can have three idiots in succession and be normal.*

**Jimmy:** Other things were truly fascinating too. Like I mentioned earlier, the language of George Bright.

**Actor 8:** *Socialistic doctrine has officially been proclaimed throughout this nation. We have, through our forefathers, died before for our sacred principles. We can, if necessary, die again.*

**Jimmy:** The things that he said actually just seem to be out of a sort of Trump administration playbook.

**Actor 8:** *Immigration should be restricted to select white individuals.*

**Jimmy:** That was echoing the language of some people in our leadership today.

**Actor 8:** *At one night during the trial, one of the top Jews of the Anti-Defamation League was asked on the witness stand when the trouble between Gentiles and Jews began. As he apparently attempted to evade the question, a loud clap of thunder*

*sounded outside and shook the courtroom as if demanding that the truth be spoken. As soon as the roar of the thunder subsided, the Jew uttered, "Since the beginning of history".*

**Janice:** The community came out wholeheartedly to support us just unbelievably. Well, I think the community had changed a great deal.

**Actor 1:** *And the next morning we got up. We were still here. We sent our kids to school and we went to work, when on my desk, I found these:*

**Actor 2:** *Dear Rabbi, all the members of First Presbyterian Church write to assure you that the prayers of our people support you and your people in this distress.*

**Actor 5:** *Beloved friends, the entire church family of Custer Avenue Baptist joins together to extend a loving hand of sympathy and understanding.*

**Actor 7:** *Dear friends, the Brookhaven Methodist Church wishes to extend any help that may be needed, and we express our hope that churches of all faiths will join hands to condemn such bombings.*

**Janice:** When I wrote about this, I called it the bomb that healed because I felt that it was like lancing a boil. The overwhelming support did so much to make the old-timers who remembered Frank to get over this trauma.

**Catherine:** I think The Temple bombing transformed the congregation and made social justice an absolute central pillar of The Temple. And if you know anyone who was a member of The Temple or knows its history knows that that has really, since Rabbi Rothschild's time, been quite significant.

**Actor 1:** *If terrorism is allowed to run rampant, if equality is denied any segment of our population, then no minority is safe. Unless we are willing to fight for the ideals of our religion and our democracy, a generation that comes after us may be in greater danger than our own.*

**Catherine:** So, the result of The Temple bombing, of course, was it was very lucky that no one was hurt, but it was, of course, a great act of domestic terrorism. And I can reference so many others. Think about the 16th Street Baptist Church, right in Birmingham. I mean, there were literally dozens and dozens of examples of this kind of vigilante violence that was rooted in white supremacy.

**Jimmy:** There's a pivotal moment in the play where Janice, going through archives and letters, comes across a letter by a woman named Annie Moore that was written to Ralph McGill, the editor of the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, talking about how she lost her father and her mother to a bombing and how so many other bombings were terrorizing the Black communities of the South but not receiving the same amount of coverage or attention as The Temple.

**Actor 9:** *Dear Editor Ralph McGill, "And now the heathens rage and the people imagine vain things". These words came to me when I read the expressions of horror and shock at the bombing of the Jewish temple in Atlanta. Certainly bombings are not new to the South. My knowledge of such awful expressions of hate is quite broad and will ever remain quite real, for my name is Annie Moore, and it was my father and mother who lost their lives in the bombing of our home at Mims, Florida, Christmas Day, 1951. He was State Director of the NAACP. My sister and I were in that house on that dreadful night and escaped with our lives. I remember quite well that no large sums of money were offered for information leading toward the apprehension and conviction of the ones responsible for this tragedy. No governor spoke, no president urged the FBI to investigate to the fullest and report to him. No policemen stood on 24-hour guard over us who remained. I also remember many other bombings since that fateful day — a school in Nashville, Tennessee; Jacksonville, Florida; and Clinton, Tennessee; and several churches in Montgomery, Alabama. Now I don't remember the voice of good old Ike or the governor of Georgia registering shock that such a thing could happen in the good old South. But now the heathens rage. Why? They have campaigned on hate. Now, why, all of a sudden, do these men condemn a bombing? Could this be the reason: The Jew, while hated, is nevertheless white? With sympathy and love, Annie Moore*

**Jimmy:** Do the congregants of The Temple have a similar experience to their Black neighbors? And the answer is no, but, in some parts, yes. And that'll always be a case-by-case examination.

**Catherine:** In the American South, think about the composition of juries. Think about the Jim Crow era, where white supremacy was embedded in American life.

**Actor 6:** *We have reached a verdict, your Honor. We the jury find the defendant, George M. Bright, not guilty.*

**Jimmy:** There is an alliance built on a collective otherness and also a collective trauma and grief. The African-American community came to the aid of The Temple and vice versa. You know, they made this alliance and now, to this day, still gather and sing, "We Shall Overcome," and hold hands, and remember both 1958 and beyond. And yet, the work is never done.

**Actor 2:** *These pews became full every week. At Jack's funeral in 1974, they were packed as if it were Yom Kippur. I looked and saw Coretta Scott King, Martin Luther King, Sr., Jimmy Carter. I saw the descendants of The Temple founders, the descendants of Leo Frank, my own children. All of the stories from across the years, the young and old.*

**Catherine:** What's interesting about the history of The Temple — it's as if we're watching an Olympic race. This is how I always think about it. Like I'm watching the 4x4 relay in the Olympics, and that each generation of The Temple simply hands the baton to the next one. And nobody drops the baton, right? Nobody stops the race. Everybody feels an obligation to push forward. And there really is no finish line. But the sort of push toward racial justice, the push toward doing the right thing, the push toward community building has kept that race going for more than 150 years.

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**Aaron:** Thank you for listening to this episode of *The Dybbukast*, “The Temple Bombing”. Featured in this episode were actors Cassandra Blair, Rachel Leah Cohen, Joshua Wolf Coleman, Joe Jordan, Julie Lockhart, Clay Steakley, Rena Strober, Jon Weinberg and Mark McClain Wilson. Readings were primarily taken from the play, *The Temple Bombing*. In addition, we included a selection from a letter signed by Christian clergy as published in 1957. Thank you to Dr. Catherine Lewis, Janice Rothschild Blumberg, and Jimmy Maize for sharing their insights.

Our theme music is composed by Michael Skloff and produced by Sam K.S. Story editing is led by Clay Steakley, with support from Julie Lockhart and from me, Aaron Henne. The series is edited by Mark McClain Wilson. Please visit us at [theatredybbuk.org](http://theatredybbuk.org), where you will find links to a wide variety of materials which expand upon the episode’s explorations. And if you want to know more about theatre dybbuk’s work in general, please sign up for our mailing list on that same website on the contact page.

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**Actor 1:** The events of the bombing are etched unforgettably in our memories. Yet somehow the horror, the confusion and fear have receded far into the background.

**Actor 2:** One must place each piece of the puzzle into position; to reconstruct, to rebuild.

**Actor 1:** It seems peculiar to say that something good could come from so evil an act. And yet, out of that bombing, there did come the demonstration of a city's heart. If

those who planted the bomb hoped to divide our citizens and spread distrust and hate, they certainly misread the temper of Atlanta.