



When Marilyn Monroe Became a Jew

As told through her rabbi's newly-released letters

The couple stood under the *chupah* (wedding canopy), she in a simple beige dress and a veil dyed to match, he in a dark suit and thick-framed glasses. Just hours before the wedding, Marilyn Monroe had signed a certificate of conversion. Decorated with stark modernist line drawings of menorahs and the Ten Commandments, it attested that Monroe, “having sought to join the household of Israel by accepting the religion of Israel and promising to live by its principles and practices, was received into the Jewish Faith on July 1, 1956.” Shortly after, according to press reports, Miller and Monroe “drank wine, exchanged rings, and the bridegroom crushed a goblet in memory of the destruction of Jerusalem by its ancient foes.” Robert Goldberg, a Reform rabbi at Congregation Mishkan Israel, then located in New Haven, Connecticut, married them as two Jews.

Years later, Rabbi Goldberg would tartly tell his congregation that no other act—neither his public denunciation of McCarthyism nor his other subversive political activities (which earned him a thick FBI file)—had gained him the same level of recognition as did converting Monroe and officiating at her wedding to Miller. Indeed, commentators at the time and historians since have not been kind to him. Morton Miller, Arthur’s

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MARILYN MONROE AND ARTHUR MILLER ON THEIR WEDDING DAY, 1956.

cousin, characterized Monroe’s conversion as “perfunctory.”

Rabbi Goldberg wanted the record to reflect that he took the process of conversion seriously and had not simply been wooed by Monroe’s fame or sex appeal. Shortly after Monroe’s death in the summer of 1962, he began to write letters to Dr. Jacob Rader Marcus, the head of the Reform Movement’s American Jewish Archives in Cincinnati (see sidebar), setting out the facts of Monroe’s conversion and marriage to Miller. Rabbi Goldberg requested that the letters be “put in a sealed envelope and opened some years later.”

Here are excerpts from two of them, never before published.

August 24, 1962
Dr. Jacob R. Marcus

Dear Jake:

...In the late spring of 1956, I met with Arthur Miller at his home in Roxbury, Connecticut. He had recently been divorced from his wife Mary Miller and told me of his plans to marry Marilyn Monroe. I had known Arthur for some years and his cousin Morton Miller, who also lived in Roxbury, was a member of this Congregation....Arthur said that Marilyn was interested in becoming Jew-

ish and that they would like me to perform their wedding ceremony, in Roxbury, on July 1st. He made it clear to me that in no way did he make this demand on Marilyn....

I met Marilyn with Arthur at her apartment in New York at Sutton Place and 57th Street. I don’t remember what I expected but I was struck by her personal sweetness and charm. She seemed very shy. [She] said that she had no religious training other than some memories of a Fundamentalist

Protestantism which she had long rejected. She indicated that she was attracted to Judaism by being impressed with Jewish people that she knew, especially Mr. Miller. She said that she was aware of the great characters that the Jewish people had produced and that she had read selections from Albert Einstein’s *Out Of My Later Years*....She indicated that she was impressed by the rationalism of Judaism—its ethical and prophetic ideals and its concept of close family life.

After that meeting we met a number of times and she read a few books that I gave her. These included *What Is A Jew?* by Morris Kurtzer, [Abram Leon] Sachser’s *History of the Jews*, Milton Steinberg’s *A Partisan Guide to the Jewish Problem*, and the Conversion Manual of the CCAR [the Reform rabbinic organization Central Conference of American Rabbis]. We discussed the contents of these books, in part, and I attempted to answer her questions. Marilyn was not an intellectual person but she was sincere in her desire to learn. It was also clear that her ability to concentrate over a long period of time was limited. However, I did feel that she understood and accepted the basic principles of Judaism.

Because of the press publicity, in order to keep the marriage ceremony on July 1st a private one, Arthur and Mari-