Mental Cataracts: Thoughts for Parashat Mikketz

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Angel for Shabbat, Parashat Mikkets

by Rabbi Marc D. Angel

I recently had cataract surgery on both eyes and the transformation in vision has been amazing. Before the surgery, I thought I was seeing things as they were. After the surgery, I realized that only now am I actually seeing things in their true brightness and color. The cataracts had darkened my lenses so that I became accustomed to seeing things inaccurately. Once clear lenses were implanted, my world brightened considerably.

It occurred to me that we not only have to deal with cataracts on our eyes but also must confront "mental cataracts." We grow accustomed to thinking in certain patterns, making assumptions, having biases…without even realizing it. It is as though our minds are colored with ideas that block us from seeing clearly. We don't even realize that our intellectual perception may be impaired.

This week's Parasha tells of Pharaoh's dreams that caused him great concern. In one dream, seven thin cows ate seven fat cows. In the second dream, seven thin stalks of corn consumed seven healthy stalks. Pharaoh called his wise men and magicians but none could interpret the dreams. Why were they stumped? Although they might not have gotten all the details correctly, they could easily have realized that the dreams portended a disaster of some sort.

Perhaps these wise men and magicians had "mental cataracts." They had entrenched assumptions that blocked them from seeing clearly. They were programmed not to upset Pharaoh. If Pharaoh had a few bad dreams, maybe he'll have better dreams soon. If indeed the dreams portend a disaster, it's best not to tell Pharaoh since he will not be pleased and may imprison or execute us if he is unhappy with our words.

Pharaoh then turned to Joseph, an imprisoned Hebrew slave. Joseph interpreted the dreams and offered a practical plan of action. He saw clearly that the dreams forewarned a famine and he was not afraid to tell the truth to Pharaoh.

Pharaoh was amazed by Joseph's clear thinking. While all his sages had "mental cataracts," Joseph could see reality clearly. He spoke cogently and fearlessly.

Dr. Silvano Arieti, in his book *The Will to Be Human*, described what he called "endocratic surplus." This refers to ideas, values, and biases that we have internalized from our parents, teachers and society at large. We adopt attitudes and behaviors without evaluating for ourselves if they are valid. We go

through life assuming that we see things correctly but we actually have “mental cataracts,” blockages that we don’t realize are preventing us from seeing clearly. If we are aware of the problem, we can adjust our attitudes and behaviors accordingly.

It is easier to have cataracts removed from our eyes than to eliminate “mental cataracts” from our minds. But proper vision—physical and intellectual—demands both operations.