

You shall not ascend with steps upon My Altar. (20:23)

This simply means that when we build the ramp leading up to the Altar, it must be made smooth and inclined – not with ascending levels (*Rashi*). Otherwise, the *Kohen* would be compelled to take wide steps, which might lead to his humiliation. The word *maalos* has another meaning: qualities, attributes, aspects concerning an individual which, so to speak, elevate him, make him stand out. The *Chafetz Chaim*, *zl*, applied this other definition to a homiletic rendering of the *pasuk*.

When the *Kenessiah Gedolah* took place in Vienna in 1923, the *Chafetz Chaim* made a great effort to attend. Frail, and of an advanced age, he felt that the nascent Agudath Israel movement needed everyone's support. In his eyes, however, he was attending as a spectator – not as the senior sage of *Klal Yisrael*.

As the elder statesman, he was asked to grace the proceedings with his insights. The *Chafetz Chaim* demurred, refusing the honor of speaking before the foremost Torah leaders of that generation. The presidium asked again – only to be refused once again.

Finally, the *Chafetz Chaim* relented and explained the reason that he had previously declined. *V'lo saaleh b'maalos al Mizbechi*, "You shall not ascend/approach the Altar (or any position of honor), based upon your *maalos*, attributes." This is an exhortation to a *Kohen* that when he ascends to the *Mizbayach*, he must remember that he has been selected to represent the nation – not because of his personal *maalos*, qualities; nor do his ethical character traits play a decisive role in his being singled out for this honor. It is only due to his pedigree. His father was a *Kohen*. He is a *Kohen*. This is why he was chosen to represent *Klal Yisrael* in offering the *korbanos*, sacrifices. "When I was asked to address the assemblage, I questioned your reasons for selecting me. When you attributed it to my erudition, I vehemently demurred. I am not a *lamden*, learned scholar. Again, when you focused on my righteousness, I declined, because I am neither pious nor righteous. It is only after you pointed out that I am a *zakein* and *Kohen*, old and a member of the Priestly family that I accepted. Longevity is a gift from G-d. *Kehunah* is an inheritance from my father. It is as a result of these two attributes, which are unique gifts from the Almighty, that I will address you."