

Stringing The Pearls – How to Read the Weekly Torah Portion by James S. Diamond.
The Jewish Publication Society 2008.

Rabbis repeat regularly to their congregants that there are joys to be discovered in the Torah text, and at shiurim and other study sessions make repeated attempts practically to demonstrate the truth of their words. A few may be converted but the rest remain untouched; why? At least one reason may be that to get the most from the Torah you need to follow a tried and tested system and you need to learn the system first before you put it into practice.

Stringing the Pearls is James Diamond's method for enjoying Torah study, and deriving much intellectual and spiritual nourishment thereby, and it is a highly convincing one.

The book is divided into five parts: Preliminaries: What are we talking about, Reading and Hearing, Some major approaches to reading a parashah, How to read a weekly Torah portion and Commentaries: A concise guide. The first three sections take the reader through the absolute basics of Torah study and the contents of the Hebrew Bible, assuming no knowledge on the reader's part and managing to avoid any hint of patronising – a rare achievement; the third of the three gives a sound analysis of the different scholarly approaches to the biblical text, modern, pre-modern and existential.

The fourth section is the meatiest of the five: it commences with a brief excursus on the best chumash to buy, then proceeds to explain a four step approach to reading a parashah, including what to look for in one. The section concludes with a breakdown of all the Torah parashiyot, book by book, with one parashah from each adduced as an example of the author's approach. The final part is an excursus on the many different Torah commentaries that currently exist, both in printed form and online.

Stringing the Pearls is an extremely valuable and approachable introduction to serious Torah study for the uninitiated, and a useful ideas resource for those with experience but in need of some revitalisation. Warmly recommended.

Rabbi Dr Charles H Middleburgh