overwhelming majority of the greater Israelite nation. In their minds, the exile in Babylon was the great purifying experience in the life of Israel. The Bible records that Jeroboam, upon becoming king of Israel, set up golden idols in Bethel and Dan, probably in an attempt to rival Jerusalem's hold on Israelite religious life. But figurines of a Canaanite goddess have been discovered by archaeologists in Jerusalem, indicating that even in Judah people worshipped more than one god. Monotheism was embraced for the first time in Babylon, and the cultic practices that had angered God and caused all of Israel's problems in the first place were supposedly left behind for good. But the Judeans who remained at home had continued living their lives and practicing their religion much the same as always. This religion could be best described as an ecumenical blending of the various gods. So it was better for everyone, the Bible’s writers probably figured, to say that they were only few, and the exiles many. The lives of the people in Judah didn’t fit the ideological point of the story they wanted to write.

The text of the Bible does contain some hints that the full story of the exile hasn’t yet been told. In the Book of Jeremiah we find the principal remaining record of the first few years following the destruction of Jerusalem. It is clear from the text that quite a few Judeans have not been exiled. There’s Gedaliah, a former high-ranking officer under the previous government, who agrees to accept an appointment by the Babylonians to rule what is left of Judah and sets up his administrative center in Mizpah, north of Jerusalem. Joining him are at least five Judean officers as well as their soldiers who, Jeremiah relates, eluded capture by the Babylonians during the battle over Jerusalem and now are in Mizpah ready to swear allegiance to the new regime. Many of the Judeans who had fled across the border to neighboring Ammon, Moab, and Edom come back. And despite the fact that a huge conflagration has supposedly just ended, enough of the economic infrastructure remains intact that these returning farmers are said to have brought in a great harvest after their homecoming, with an abundance of wine, oil, and fruits.

There is even a hint of the tensions that will arise in the future between those who stayed home and the exiles who return from

Some archaeological excavations in cities in Judah found pottery and other material attributed to the years of Babylonian rule. But the changes in the pottery were so slight and incremental that most archaeologists had trouble distinguishing between when the destruction ended and the Babylonian occupation began. The American archaeologist William Frederic Bade, who dug at biblical Mizpah for five seasons between 1926 and 1935, didn’t turn up any occupation layer that seemed to belong to the exile period. It was only sixty years later, when a graduate student of archaeology named Jeffrey Zorn was going through Bade’s old records and field plans, that it became evident Bade had misidentified several structures, causing him to miss an entire occupation level in his reconstruction of Mizpah’s history. The missing layer turned out to be the Babylonian period.

Mizpah, Zorn found, was the key site for understanding what had gone on inside the country during the fifty years after Jerusalem’s
destruction. In the Bible, Mizpah has a long and disquieting history, beginning well before the Babylonian conquest. The best-known biblical story about the city involves a Levite traveler and his concubine, who is savagely raped and murdered by a gang of men who are members of the tribe of Benjamin. Seeking revenge, the Levite takes a sharp knife and cuts the dead woman's body into twelve pieces, then sends the pieces by messenger to all the tribes of Israel, all the tribes except Benjamin. They all meet at Mizpah, in Benjamin's territory, and from there set out on a grisly civil war that results in the near destruction of the entire tribe of Benjamin. Later, Saul, who is also from the area controlled by Benjamin, becomes the leader of the Israelites and chooses to muster all the tribes at Mizpah for a battle against the Philistines. Eventually Saul will be replaced by David, just as Mizpah is to be superseded by Jerusalem.

But Mizpah had been much more than a biblical crossroads to mayhem and bloodshed. During the period of Babylonian rule, Mizpah had flourished, as had the entire region of Benjamin. This picture, created by Zorn's reconstruction, was in complete contrast to what had previously been known about the so-called exilic period. The clues were all in Bade's site plans. Bade had died a year after his last season of digging at Mizpah, probably due to overexertion brought on by the sheer number of his work commitments. He had been a close friend of the naturalist John Muir, and had worked with him on various conservation efforts in California. After Muir's death, Bade had agreed to be the literary executor and ended up writing a ten-volume biography of Muir and editing his collected works. The money he earned from that mammoth project had gone to fund the Mizpah dig, along with funds from his rich wife and wealthy friends. Before he died, Bade had managed to clear almost two-thirds of the eight-acre Mizpah site. He and a team of more than 150 locals excavated 672 rooms, 387 cisterns, and 71 tombs. More than 23,000 different objects had been catalogued, 15,000 of which were actually drawn. A final report of his findings was never published, but his friends did publish two large volumes of results after Bade died.

One summer, in preparation for a new job as coordinator and tour guide at the Bade Institute of Biblical Archaeology in Berkeley, California, Zorn had been reviewing a large-scale study of the plan of the site. He had been hunting through the museum's archives and come across a more detailed field plan that Bade had prepared. In comparing the two plans, he started noticing certain irregularities. For one thing, the large-scale plan showed a wall that seemed to run down the center of a house. According to the field plan, the house lay on top of the wall, meaning the house had been built at a later time. In another area, he noticed that directly inside the inner gate to the city was another building. If the two structures had been built at the same time, anyone coming through the gate would have walked straight into the wall of the building. The more Zorn looked at the plans the more buildings he seemed to find that had clearly been built at a later time period.

In the end, he identified in the plans nine large administrative-style buildings and domestic structures that he dated to the Babylonian period. The Babylonians had chosen Mizpah as their center in order to take advantage of the already existing defense systems such as a huge outer wall and the reinforced city gate. They then had launched a major urban renewal, razing most of the small homes and building a larger, fancier city directly on top. According to Zorn's calculations, the largest house of the predestruction period had been no more than 860 square feet. During the Babylonian period, the average house size was almost 1,500 square feet. The walls in the earlier city had been built at a width of only a single stone. The Babylonians rebuilt the city's walls using a mixture of large single stones and double stones for reinforcement. They put down stone-paved floors and preferred using pillars inside their homes. They widened the alleyways so that men on donkeys or horses could easily pass each other in the streets.

In a list Bade and the other excavators had compiled of the objects they found, Zorn found additional information, small finds that no one had known how to date but that additional research over the subsequent years now indicated belonged to the Babylonian period. There were thirty stamp impressions found on jar handles at the site
that bore the Hebrew letters Mozah, originating from the estates surrounding the village of Mozah near Mizpah. The Mozah estates probably produced wine for use at Mizpah. Other Mozah stamps had turned up at Gibon, another nearby wine-producing center during this time period. Fragments of a Mesopotamian-style, bathtub-shaped ceramic coffin were found. Zorn even tracked down at the Rockefeller Museum in Jerusalem a bronze vase that the 1947 report had mentioned as being located in one of the cisterns at the site. He noticed on the base of the vase a small decoration that hadn't been in the published drawing and was impossible to detect in the small, dark photos Zorn had found in the archives. This type of vase is believed to have been a Babylonian-influenced style.

What struck Zorn most about his study was the prosperity Mizpah had enjoyed during the Babylonian exile. A suburblike settlement had even sprung up right outside the city walls as the flourishing city attracted more people to move there. There were very wealthy people living in the area, and not all of them were Babylonian officials.

One June morning, Zorn strides up the hill to the top of Tell en-Nasbeh, the Arabic name for biblical Mizpah. He is tall and built like a football player, and a straw cowboy hat perches incongruously on his head. He is in Israel for his usual summer job, helping run the dig at Tel Dor, on the northern coast of Israel on the edge of the Mediterranean. He flies a pirate flag over the section of the dig he is supervising and goes swimming in the azure waters of the sea after the day's work ends. But Mizpah remains his first love, and today he has agreed to show me around the site.

No one digs here anymore. In the mid-1990s, a group of Palestinian students studying archaeology at Bir Zeit University in Ramallah conducted a small dig at the site, clearing out a small church dated to the Byzantine era that Bade had partially uncovered on the southern edges of the mound. Just down the road, students from Al-Quds University, a Palestinian institution in Jerusalem, have been digging at Khirbet Shuweyhek, a Byzantine site. Chronologically speaking, Khirbet Shuweyhek starts to pick up just as Mizpah is starting to fade. It is as if some of the people in Mizpah for whatever reason packed their belongings and moved next door.

This historical convergence has not been lost on archaeologists in Jerusalem and in the West Bank, and there has even been a suggestion made to Israeli and Palestinian officials to run a new dig concurrently at Mizpah and Khirbet Shuweykeh, an international expedition that would include American, Israeli, and Palestinian archaeologists. The project would offer a new avenue for reconstructing the entire history of the area, and for making connections between what went on at Mizpah and at other sites. It might also contribute further to understanding why, and exactly when, Mizpah ceased to be inhabited.

Zorn has been approached about the idea too, but remains skeptical of the likelihood of its success. There is very little money available for new digs, he tells me, especially when large quantities of material from Bade's original expedition still remain unpublished. There are also logistical difficulties involved with securing the necessary approvals and permits from various Israeli and Palestinian officials. Most critically, with Jerusalem's political fate still contested by the two sides, Zorn doubts the Palestinians will be able to work up any enthusiasm for helping to dig up Mizpah, Israel's other ancient capital.

Each time he visits Israel, Zorn says, he drives past the Israeli and Palestinian checkpoints that mark the border between Israel and the West Bank to see how Tell en-Nasbeh is holding up. The tenth-century wall built by King Asa, Rehoboam's grandson, has seen better days. Tell en-Nasbeh lies on a low plateau that is now used for grazing and farming by the local residents. The farmers have rolled huge boulders up against the wall in order to prevent rainwater from rolling down the hill. That's been great for their crops, but not for the wall, which is breaking up in places. Building contractors cause further damage, regularly coming to pillage the site, taking away the massive hewn limestone for use in their own building sites. From the side of the hill closest to the checkpoints, downtown Ramallah can be seen in the distance.
Walking around the site, Zorn explains how the early excavators could have missed the Babylonian remains. The last year of the dig and the first years of the efforts to publish the reports had taken place during the Depression, when funds for publishing archaeology reports were particularly scarce. Then a few of Bade's key assistants were called away for military service in World War II and had to rush to finish their contributions to the reports. The biggest obstacle was simply the lack of knowledge about archaeology. Many of the architectural forms that had jumped out at Zorn when he studied the plans, such as a four-room house and a double casemate wall, weren't so familiar or well known when Bade was digging. The excavators had thought the four-room house was a temple. The rock-cut installations Zorn immediately recognized as winepresses weren't recognizable at all to Bade's team. Olive presses were misidentified. They had thought the Mesopotamian burial tub was a household storage box.

He stops to scour the ground, hoping to find more Mozah seals that may have turned up when the farmers tilled the soil on the mound in the spring. Zorn has done a special laboratory analysis on the clays of the seals already found here, and it indicates that all the jars came from the same source, in the greater Jerusalem area. The distribution of the seals conforms closely to the area designated in the Bible as belonging to the tribe of Benjamin, from Tel en-Nasbeh in the north down to Ramat Rahel outside Jerusalem in the south. He walks to the edge of the hill and points down toward the valley below. Now everything is fields and weeds. There is a concrete parking lot, and some small houses with tin roofs. Today the area looks bleak and unpromising, but during the Babylonian period, this whole area was part of a thriving suburb, practically reaching the outer walls of the city.

The most recent expedition to Mizpah, Zorn says, found Judean and Babylonian artifacts mixed together, an indication that the two peoples lived side by side at the site. The story of Mizpah was one of conquest followed by occupation. The Babylonians had been like most conquerors, determined to remake the city in their own image. "There's no doubt that a strong cultural echo from Mesopotamia can be found in Mizpah," says Zorn. But even more tellingly, Mizpah's architecture largely continued to resemble the architecture of the pre-exilic period. The locals built the city for the Babylonians, and they built using the same styles they had been using for decades all over Judah. Pottery forms also remained close to what they had been beforehand. Despite the military superiority of the Babylonians, the local people and traditions remained remarkably resilient throughout the occupation of the site.

As we walk around the site, Nebuchadnezzar's strategy seems clear. It would have made sense to set up a new capital at Mizpah once Jerusalem was destroyed. Even now, the walls built by Asa are massive. The town's defense system was basically in place, ready for Nebuchadnezzar's men to move in. "Nebuchadnezzar didn't want to spend money or time on fortifications. He had to get Judah running again quickly," says Zorn. "So he just razed the old buildings inside the city and built nicer ones on top." Zorn paused for a moment, listening to the howls of the dogs roaming around the Bedouin camps on the outskirts of the site. "This was Nebuchadnezzar's strategy all the time," Zorn says, a note of admiration creeping into his voice. "Always very practical."