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**“Heroes and Role Models:  
The Mythbusters - Adam Savage and Jamie Hyneman”  
by Benjamin Sternhell  
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As part of my bar mitzvah study, I had to pick a hero or role model to talk about. This isn't as easy as it might seem. To me, a hero is someone who is really helping the world in an important way. I thought about this a lot, and many people—like Mom, and my mentor Nikki, and Myrna—made suggestions, but I really don't have any heroes.

A role model is different; a role model is someone I would personally want to follow. A role model could be a hero, but doesn't have to be. A role model can be a regular person who lived, or is living, a life I would want to live.

From the first time I thought about this topic, I wanted to pick the Mythbusters, Adam Savage and Jamie Hyneman, as my role models. But no one but me thought it was a good idea.

The Mythbusters is a TV show; Adam and Jamie prove or disprove urban legends by testing them through science. Two of my major values are humor and science, and I have to say that the Mythbusters follow those two values exactly.

But Mom, Nikki and Myrna said, You can't do a TV show! You have to do a real person! They suggested other scientists, and inventors, and even other mythbusters, like scholars who helped develop the ideas of humanistic Judaism. So I learned about some of these people—but I still really wanted to talk about the Mythbusters. Did I mention that one of our family traits is stubbornness? How about questioning authority?

I did learn about some of these other people. I learned about Copernicus, who was not only a brilliant scientist but a major mythbuster who discovered that the Earth orbited around the Sun instead of the Sun around the Earth—a shocking idea in his time because it suggested that people weren't the center of the universe.

I learned about Galileo, who was brought before the Inquisition because he agreed with Copernicus's theory. He was forced, under threat of torture and death, to deny that he thought Copernicus was right—an example of religion refusing to accept science and even wanting a scientist killed.

Then I learned about a whole lot of inventors, from the Wright Brothers to Thomas Edison to Peter Cooper. After all this research, however, I still feel that my real role models are the Mythbusters. (Did I say something earlier about stubbornness?)

Adam Savage and Jamie Hyneman are real people with other careers who are now hosting the Mythbusters TV show. They're not playing characters; they're playing themselves.

They're very funny when they build insane contraptions and use them to test urban legends. (A quote from Adam: "Five minutes of science and then ten minutes of me hurting myself.") But they're also imaginative and daring and very interesting.

I admire their curiosity and all the crazy things they're willing to do to figure things out. Adam said, "Jamie and I are not scientists. We're not experts in any field. But we have a lot of curiosity, and an uncommon ability to really throw ourselves in just about any corner of science and really seek out what's going on."

Adam Savage was born in New York City in 1967 and now lives in San Francisco. He's also a sculptor and his sculptures have been in more than 40 shows. One sculpture is a stand for his *Oxford English Dictionary* made out of a dolphin's spine.

For the past eight years, he's worked in the special effects industry, making more than 100 commercials and 12 films, including *Star Wars* Episodes I and II and the *Matrix* sequels.

Jamie Hyneman was born in 1956 in Minnesota, but grew up in Indiana farm country. His company, M5 Industries, creates unusual props. One of their recent creations is an enormous remote-controlled 7-Up vending machine that can travel 20 mph in practically any terrain while shooting cans of soda at people.

The Mythbusters investigate all sorts of weird questions. Can a singer break glass just by using their voice? Is it true that a rolling stone gathers no moss? Is talking on a cell phone while driving as dangerous as driving drunk? Does toast really fall buttered side down? Just how hard is it to find a needle in a haystack? Can a penny dropped from the Empire State Building kill a pedestrian on the sidewalk? Is it possible to get your tush stuck on an airplane toilet?

I admit I particularly like the funny ones, and I like explosions and car crashes, but I also admire the way the Mythbusters use real science to answer these bizarre questions.

To test the penny myth, Adam went skydiving and dropped handfuls of pennies from the air. They found out that pennies traveled at 65 mph. Jamie worked on the math while Adam built a wind tunnel and then Jamie fired pennies out of a staple gun to make them go even faster. Then they shot pennies at ballistics gel, which has the same density and elasticity as human flesh. In the end, they found that a penny, even fired faster than it can fall from the sky, isn't strong enough to crack a human skull.

I particularly admire the way the Mythbusters use science to investigate the world. Something can seem really strange and be true, or something can seem really obvious and be false. You never know until you test things for yourself, or at least until you study the experiments other people have done.

A favorite Adam saying is, "I reject your reality and substitute my own." To me that means, I won't accept anything as true until I've tested it for myself (and maybe get hurt or make a fool of myself doing so!).

In an online interview, talking about viewers who post critical comments, Adam once said: “But the best thing is, sometimes someone will say, ‘These guys aren’t scientists, and what they’re doing isn’t science, it’s idiotic.’ And almost always, someone will post after them and say, ‘Actually, I’m a working scientist for the past 30 years. And while it would be nice if their methods were a little more rigorous, what they do is *exactly* science. It’s messy, it’s confusing, they’re willing to make mistakes, and that’s every bit of what science is.’”

So even though they fool around a lot, I think the Mythbusters are doing important work. And I think the work they do relates to my bar mitzvah, even though you may not think so at first.

Busting myths, that’s what humanistic Judaism is all about. Not accepting everything we’re told is true, but trying to find out for ourselves—that’s what I’ve learned in this congregation, and from my family.

Testing our ideas—using scientific methods to see what’s true and what isn’t—is really important, especially in a world in which so many people aren’t willing to do that. The debate about teaching evolution is just one example of what I’m talking about; lots of people think kids should learn what the bible says instead of what science can investigate and prove.

This isn’t so different from what happened to Galileo 400 years ago. Mythbusting through science is a very important idea.

So no, I’m not claiming that the Mythbusters are heroes—but they’re cool and funny and weird, and they have a lot of fun at work, and they invent amazing contraptions and get to blow them up. And at the core of all this fun is a very serious commitment to understand the world rationally, question authority, and test all hypotheses.

Sound like pretty good role models to me.