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 Tammy Jacobowitz is between classes. It is a bright winter day on the University of Pennsylvania campus, and Jacobowitz, a busy Penn graduate student on her way to a Ph.D. in rabbinic literature, is taking time out to eat her dairy lunch.

"I hate labels," says the 25-year-old Jacobowitz, who grew up in an Orthodox home in Teaneck, N.J. "If someone asked,

'Are you an Orthodox feminist?' I would say, 'Yes.' But it's not something I'm touting around."

When she was a Penn undergraduate just a few years ago, Jacobowitz was very active on campus as an Orthodox Jewish feminist leader, pushing the envelope by organizing women's tefillah (prayer) groups.

"At this point in my life, I am who I am," she says. "I'm not an activist. I'm a teacher. That's my activism."

"I try to educate Jewish women and teach people about text and how to make text relevant to their lives. One of my challenges is to take what I'm learning and make it relevant for real Jews," she says. "I'm always trying to help people find more spirituality in their lives."

In a very real way, Jacobowitz is between classes in a much broader sense as well: She is between the classes in Talmud and Bible she took at the Drisha Institute for Jewish Education in New York and the classes she hopes to teach for the rest of her life.

After graduating from Penn in 1997, Jacobowitz studied for two years at Drisha, which is billed as "the premier center of



Photo by Marilyn Silverstein

Tammy Jacobowitz

classical Jewish text study for women," before returning to Philadelphia in the fall of 1999 to begin graduate school.

"I was part of an environment trying to empower women and teach women to be teachers and leaders," she says. "Coming to Philadelphia was a retreat from that."

It was also a retreat from the lively Orthodox Jewish life of New York City, where kosher restaurants and markets abound, and where more than a handful of women are becoming Torah scholars and leaders in Orthodox shuls, according to Jacobowitz. She describes the city as "a hotbed of Orthodox Jewish feminism."

"Living in Center City is definitely a challenge in terms of kosher food. The milkvah is very far away. And there are not as many choices on where to daven, as compared to Manhattan," she says, adding that, in Center City, she enjoys davening at Congregation Mikveh Israel.

Still, says Jacobowitz, she and her husband, Ronnie Perelis, who is completing his Ph.D. dissertation in Spanish literature, have found the Philadelphia Jewish community to be welcoming.

Although leaving New York was perhaps a retreat from the philosophical center of Orthodox Jewish feminism, Jacobowitz has not retreated from her educational goals. Today, she teaches a Talmud class for girls at the Akiba Hebrew Academy in Merion and, in the spring, she will begin teaching an adult-education class on women's issues at Mikveh Israel. As she says, teaching is

her activism now.

"I'm much happier as a teacher, affecting people's lives constantly and slowly," she says. "I find that slow change is more satisfying to me."

"I have the sense that I'm a role model — certainly for the young students at Akiba," she notes. "To have a woman who is well-learned and able to be their teacher who also covers her head and knows the modern world ... I didn't have that, so I'm really happy to be that."

"It sends a message — you can do this, too. You can also spend many years of your life studying Talmud. There's a place for you."

It's easier to reach out toward her goals now that she's married, Jacobowitz observes.

"I look forward to having children very much and creating the kind of home in which my husband and I can translate a lot of our ideas," she says. "We want to have a home where learning and social action and reaching out to other Jews in openness are the environment."

"In some ways," she continues, "getting married has helped me return to a more traditional domain for women. My home is figuratively my *beit midrash* [house of learning] and my *beit kneset* [house of assembly]. We create an environment and include other people in our spiritual growth. I gain strength from my home."

Many of her feminist Orthodox friends have come home to similar feelings after get-

ting married, Jacobowitz notes.

"When you find the right person, it can be very liberating," she says. "You're not out alone fighting. You have a partner."