Carrying ID Cards on Shabbat

Yeshiva University has initiated a new security policy requiring a photo ID Card to enter every YU building on campus during the Shabbat. The letter below, received from Rabbi Yosef Kalinsky by Rabbi Herschel Schachter, authorizes the permissibility of carrying ID cards around campus on Shabbat (within the “Eruv” which essentially includes all the academic buildings, residence halls and the surrounding neighborhoods for the Wilf, Beren and Brookdale campuses). All persons will be required to show a photo ID to the security officer on the Shabbat.

Rabbi Herschel Schachter on the classification of ID cards not being mukta on Shabbat and Yom Tov

In Regard to Moving Identification (ID) Cards on Shabbat and Yom Tov
By Rabbi Hershel Schachter
Translated by Rabbi Matt LeVee

A utensil whose function is forbidden on Shabbat may be moved for use of that utensil in a permitted way (not it’s designated purpose) or the space it is occupying. And a utensil whose function is permitted on Shabbat (rather you have no specific need for the utensil) may be moved on Shabbat from the sun to the shade (a protective measure), it is only forbidden to move when there is no purpose at all (in moving the utensil).

It seems evident that what establishes the designation of a utensil is dependent on its main use. Therefore, it seems (in our case) the utensil’s name proves its designation (ID card) identification cards’ main use is an indication of the identity of the holder. Many ID cards have no other purpose but to act as identification, as such an identification card is considered a utensil whose designated purpose is permitted on Shabbat. The students of the Yeshiva that can use their ID cards to (even) pay for food in the Yeshiva cafeteria, still the primary purpose is as an ID and such a card would be considered a utensil whose designated purpose is permissible on Shabbat.

It is permitted to move (carry) an ID card (in a private domain or a place with an eruv for those who rely on an eruv) to present to the guards of a building to gain access. And to continue to hold onto the ID afterwards so that it is not lost after (access of the building is gained).
And if (an ID card) was considered a utensil that’s designated purpose is forbidden on Shabbat, and consequently the only permissible reason to move the utensil was for use of the utensil in a permitted way or the space it is occupying, but (in reality) it is a utensil that’s designated purpose is permissible on Shabbat, therefore holding onto the ID card so that it will not be lost (after access of the building is gained) is also permitted, this is like moving it from sun to shade (a protective measure).

And even though there are those that might classify an ID Card as ‘muktza’ on account of financial loss, this does not seem correct. In order to be classified as such muktza it would initially have to be considered a utensil whose designated purpose is forbidden on Shabbat, but here it is a utensil whose purpose is permissible on Shabbat, the question of muktza on account of financial loss does not even arise.

This is also apparent from the words of the Pri Megadim, in the case when erev Peseach falls on Shabbat (and eating matzah is forbidden on erev Peseach, and matza is very expensive) maybe matza (on this Shabbat) could be considered ‘muktza’ on account of a financial loss. But on other Shabbatot before Peseach (where there is no prohibition to eat matza) people are (still) careful not to eat matza. It is explicit in his words there is no muktza (in regard to matza) on account of financial loss. Especially according to what is written in the Mishna Burria 308, Shar HaTzion 14, that muktza on account of financial loss is not a real muktza, rather it really is a utensil whose designated purpose is forbidden on Shabbat. One may be careful not to use the utensil for any other purpose, it is not permissible to move it for use in a permitted way or for the space, but, this utensil is not muktza at all (and can be moved).

Hershel Schachter, Tuesday, Parshat Bo, 2 of Shevat 5779