By Michele De Meglio

With the conflicts in Israel at the forefront of their minds, concerned Brooklynites are lending a hand to the children of Israel.

Alan Levitt of Congregation Beth Shalom of Kings Bay, 2710 Avenue X, is leading the synagogue's book drive for the war-torn country's youth.

The religious institution's foray into literary donations began in January 2003 when Levitt read about the Books for Israel Project in a local newspaper.

The Books for Israel Project was started in October 2002 by Rena Cohen, organizer of the Israel Action Committee, and her sister, who is a school teacher in Israel.

Cohen became concerned about the education of Israel's youth after learning that the country's government had begun allocating money previously used for schoolbooks to pay for security and bomb sniffing dogs in response to frequent suicide attacks.

Cohen explained that the Israeli government informed schools that there was no more funding for schoolbooks and that any money issued for educational purposes would go to security measures, such as fences.

"There was a huge flop-down of the general economy and then the schools suffered," Cohen said.

Upon initiating the Books for Israel Project, Cohen learned that "many of the schools we are working with are in areas that are quite poor. Many had nothing to start with."

"All of the schools that we are working with need help. There's not one of them that's doing fine," she said.

Many Americans were surprised to learn of the dismal education tools in Israel.

"When we started this thing last year, people here were like, 'Wait, there's no books?'' Cohen said.

People eagerly signed up to start book drives in their local communities and the Books for Israel Project currently maintains a strong presence in New York, New Jersey, Florida, and has recently garnered attention in California, Denver, Chicago, and Philadelphia.

The Books for Israel Project has shipped more than 15 tons of books, coming to more than 118 school libraries and English rooms supplied with books. In addition, 10 new English language learning rooms have been established in schools that previously lacked them.

One of the local groups that jumped at the chance to participate in the Project was Congregation Beth Shalom of Kings Bay.

Since discovering the Books for Israel Project - "I wrote a letter to Cohen and asked her how to get involved," Levitt said - Congregation Beth Shalom has sent approximately 500 books to Tzora Junior High School.

Congregation Beth Shalom ships the books by boat at $25-40 per box. It takes 23 months for the boxes, each of which holds 50-100 books, to arrive in Israel. The synagogue's first shipment was sent in June and arrived in September. As the books are being sent to help children learn English, dictionaries and childhood favorites such as The Cat in the Hat are popular selections.

"We try to discourage people from donating novels," Levitt explained.

Locals have responded positively to the drive, which collects mostly secondhand books.

"A lot of people clean out their basements and donate their children's books," Levitt said.

"One lady that teaches in Bay Ridge donated 300 books from her school," he said.

For Israeli schools that are participating in the Books for Israel Project, 'you see this whole revival of education. There's more hope," Cohen said.

"It's not just the books. It's the fact that people are seeing a message of support. A ton of books come in and they tell you that people care," she said.

The first time one school received packages of books, "People started crying. They just didn't expect it. They were overwhelmed and surprised that people cared. The mayor even showed up," Cohen said.

Levitt and others who run book drives in their communities have received thank you letters from Israeli children.

With many letters adorned with hearts and smiley faces, all notes began, "Dear Friends." One letter from a 13-year-old girl who lives in Agur ended with the poignant lines, "Shalom! Shalom! I love Israel."

Books for Congregation Beth Shalom's book drive may be dropped off at the synagogue's office from Monday-Thursday, 9-5 p.m. Congregation Beth Shalom may be contacted at 718-891-4500.

The Books for Israel Project is located online at http://booksforisrael.com To learn how to start your own book drive, contact Cohen at israelactionMDSC@hotmail.com